

# **Selling Narratives: An ethnography of the Spoken Word Movement in Johannesburg and Pretoria**

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*“It’s a pity if your bravery is only seen behind mics,  
You want to see a brighter future but fail to become the light.  
Practice what you write. Put to action what you recite.*

*Every script or poem written should have a ‘Camera. Action. And lights’.* “ – Given Masilela

## ABSTRACT

Spoken Word poetry in South Africa is understood as a genre of poetry which encompasses elements of textuality, musicality and performance, and is currently produced and frequented predominantly by a young, black public, according to Molebatsi and D'Abdon (2007). By means of ethnography, content analysis, and interviews with thirteen poets, this study demonstrates that the genre is used for expressing the life experiences of artists and their communities (Sole, 2008), as well as narrating social ills and concerns, including political, religious and other social experiences. In this sense, it is argued that Spoken Word may be termed as being a contemporary form of liberation politics (Judge, 1993) that is employed to serve a social function beyond directly political aims. This is made visible through the narratives, styles and identifications that distinguish members of this movement. This study provides a description of the scene in Pretoria and Johannesburg, drawing out various features of the movement. The social and political significance of the movement is presented by emphasising the poets' perspectives on the Spoken Word movement, and engaging in a thematic content analysis of poems under the themes race and politics, gender and sexuality, and religion. International literature is engaged to demonstrate differences and similarities between South Africa's Spoken Word scene and that of the USA by consulting works of scholars such as Weber (1999), Bruce & Davis (2000) and Hoffman (2001). It is demonstrated that similar to the genre in the USA, South African Spoken Word stresses performance to be an important distinguisher of this type of poetry. Also, in both contexts this art form has links to identity politics of previously marginalized groups. The study presents a similar finding to D'Abdon's (2014) argument that the narratives presented in the post-apartheid Spoken Word movement greatly reflect Black Consciousness ideology, yet also importantly stresses that the movement also presents discontinuities with this discourse, allowing for a much broader array of narrative to permeate the performance poetry scene. This study makes an additional contribution to the existing literature through its key findings. Firstly, the study argues that although there has been a significant increase of women into the scene, Spoken Word remains a gendered space. Secondly, this study demonstrates that narratives produced by this movement contribute to experiences of community, but also play an exclusionary role to certain groups. Finally, the study illustrates that poets of the present day Spoken Word scene have begun a move towards commercialisation of the art form,

subsequently also aiming for the valuation of African literature. In essence, it is argued that the present day Spoken Word poetry movement has great social and cultural value, and presents great potential of being a vehicle through which political and social consciousness can be both created and sustained.

*Key words: Spoken Word, poetry, South Africa, oral literature, slam, open mic, post-apartheid, literature, narratives, Black Consciousness, politics, social change, art, liberation poetry, liberation politics, culture, hip-hop, conscious art, resistant political art*

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I hereby declare that this mini-dissertation is my own original work. Where secondary material is used, this has been carefully acknowledged and referenced in accordance with university requirements. I understand what plagiarism is and am aware of university policy and implications in this regard.

*“Only the very weak-minded refuse to be influenced by literature and poetry.”* – Cassandra Clare, *Clockwork Angel*

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## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

#### Setting the Scene

During my high school years (between 2004 and 2008), Lebo Mashile was visible on television screens reciting poetry that was very different to the poetry I had been introduced to at school. Her poetry was vibrant, performative, and she was able to capture attention through the nuances in her voice, and the way she used the movements of her body to tell the stories of her poetry. Lebo Mashile moved on to present an anthropological television show called *L'atitute*, and after each episode she would recite a poem inspired by that day's journey. For me, these poems birthed an interest in poetry and its ability to capture everyday experiences in a way that is vivid, emotional and imaginary. This was the 'magic' of Spoken Word Poetry. Many learners at school then began to mimic this type of poetry and recited during afternoon breaks at school alongside hip-hop heads. Nova, an influential female poet on Johannesburg's Spoken Word scene at present also attributes a great deal of her love for Spoken Word poetry to the 'magic' of Lebo Mashile's work. In the quote below extracted from an interview I conducted, Nova highlights that although the sharing of stories is altogether beautiful and important; there was a peculiar beauty in the way these stories were told through Lebo's poetry:

*So, one of my favourite poets, one whose work showed me that this is something I'd love to venture into is Lebo Mashile. I used to watch L'atitute when I was younger and every time... it was a travel show obviously, very anthropological, very sociological. And she would travel around the country basically and look at various parts of Africa and people who lived in there and their stories and she would end off every episode with a poem she'd written about her journey and it was magical. It was magical because people had been speaking the whole time during the episode but it was magical because something different came out when it was time to do her poetry.*

Despite my limited knowledge of such a poetry genre at the time, I was unaware of the movement behind it. When I began my studies at the University of Pretoria in 2009, I was introduced to the Spoken Word movement through a student organization called *Writers Write*. I became involved as a small-scale performing poet in Pretoria in 2010. It became noticeable to me that the Spoken Word movement on the campus attracted a dedicated crowd as the same faces would be seen on a continual basis, and new faces that emerged would usually come to stay. Over the years, I have noticed that the movement has begun to attract more attention on various sites as well as on a number of media platforms such as radio, television and magazines. I have, since my introduction to the scene, questioned the reasons for this increase in attention and participation. In more recent years, I noticed a move towards commercialisation of the art form, and increasing the scope of the audience it reaches. This research study thus flows from my personal observations on the scene. I seek to explore the Spoken Word movement as an art form and question its significance, particularly in terms of its features and the narratives it produces. To a lesser extent, I give brief consideration to the potential of this art form to create revenue for its poets. This latter sub-question is partly influenced by a statement in the work of D'Abdon & Molebatsi (2011: 58) referring to an all-female poetry show titled *Body of Words*: “Due to lack of official support from funders and consistent media buy-in, it was more financially viable for the four artists to pursue individual careers travelling, writing, performing and facilitating workshops amongst other activities.” Two factors are important to note. Firstly, one must notice the different products and services that are produced and offered by performing poets which, apart from stage performances, include producing literature in the form of books or anthologies and the training or mentorship of others. Secondly, concerning the pursuit of individual careers, funding for such an endeavour may not necessarily be possible for a number of upcoming, talented performers when one considers the prototype of the South African performing poet. Following the motivation presented above, my research problem is centred on investigating the nature of the current *Spoken Word* movement in the two major cities of Gauteng, Pretoria and Johannesburg, and to a lesser extent exploring the manner by which poets conceptualise its cultural significance and economic potential.

### **The Spoken Word Movement in Scholarship: A Brief Overview**

The Spoken Word poetry movement can be described as a contemporary form of performance poetry; its roots can be traced back to North America in the late 1960s. Whereas

performance poetry was previously conceptualised as a defiantly avant-garde genre, it has come to receive wide-scale attention in America's popular culture. The genre has brought with it the re-emergence of popular poetry in the USA such as RAP, cowboy poetry and poetry slams (Gioia, 2003: 25). Hoffman (2001: 49) links the roots of Spoken Word to the validation of cultural minorities in the USA. D'Abdon (2010: 28-30) too, traces the movement back to the late 1960s as emerging from the Black Arts movement (1965-1975) and its urgency to address issues pertaining especially to racism. Artists such as the 'Beat Poets' made important contributions to the emergence of this genre by the deliberate revoking of the requisites of conventional written poetry as advocated for by academia, and becoming involved in instigating a move towards oral poetry by performing poetry out loud in open public spaces.

Despite the poetry's high visibility on various forms of electronic media and the general press in the USA, Spoken Word poetry has not been very successful in attracting the attention of academia (Gioia, 2003: 25 and Gregory, 2008: 63). Hoffman (2001: 49) suggests that this may be because slam is perceived by intellectuals as being "commercial, rowdy, does not necessarily have artistic merit or promote progressive politics". Nonetheless, Ellis et al (2003) and Low & Callahan (2004) demonstrate that in the USA this new form of poetry has been effective in not only attracting the public, but has also become an effective means by which to teach poetry and literature in schools. Spoken Word in the USA is thus a popular genre amongst youth groups, attracting and involving youth across racial and ethnic groups (Hoffman, 2001: 49).

As is the case in the USA, Spoken Word poetry has also not received much academic attention by South African scholars (D'Abdon, 2010). Existing South African research on the genre largely focuses on the content of the poems performed and published, as well as the musical and performance aspects of this performance poetry. Scholars that have made notable contributions to the South African Spoken Word scene are D'Abdon (2007, 2010, 2011, 2014), Molebatsi (2007, 2011), Schutte (2011, 2012), Sole (2008), Khan (2013) and Gqola (2011). A paper produced by Molebatsi & D'Abdon (2007) describes the aesthetics of South African Spoken Word by considering the influence of musicality on the art form. By providing an outline of the profile of present day poets, Sole (2008) draws attention to the continued role of poets in public affairs, similar to that of poets prior to liberation. Gender in Spoken Word poetry and in South African literature has received attention by Boswell (2010), D'Abdon & Molebatsi (2011) as well as Gqola (2011) who explore the role and

inclusion of women in literature and also give consideration to black feminist writing including the context of Spoken Word poetry. Khan's (2013) paper explores the contributions of the 'new generation' of black writers, focusing on the anthology, *Sardo Dance*, of Spoken Word artist Natalia Molebatsi. However, of the scholars mentioned above, Raphael D'Abdon has made the most notable contribution to the study of the Spoken Word movement in South Africa. As a literary scholar, D'Abdon focuses much of his work on the content of Spoken Word poetry. In addition to the publications mentioned above, he has made a notable case for the recognition of these contemporary liberation poets as politically engaged and influenced by the ideologies of the Black Consciousness movement. He has also explored issues of women's poetry and the contribution of women to poetry that reflects spirituality and partnership. However, the body of work with which my study converses most is his unpublished PhD thesis titled *Features of the post-apartheid Spoken Word movement: A critical analysis*.

For his PhD studies, D'Abdon (2010) engaged in a four year study, 2006 – 2010, of the underground Spoken Word poetry scene in Gauteng by conducting fieldwork, mainly in Johannesburg, but also in Pretoria and neighbouring urban areas. He attended a number of poetry events from which he selected poems to be used in textual analysis. Throughout the study, I remark that his focus is predominantly on the linguistic play and aesthetics of the poems, as well as the value of the content thereof. The objective of this study was to explore the manner by which oral poetry continues to be a central factor in cultural production of post-apartheid South Africa. In summary, D'Abdon (2010) finds that the post-apartheid Spoken Word scene is birthed from a legacy of resistance poetry and praise poetry. In his work, I point out three main features he identifies as important contributions of Spoken Word poetry to cultural production (D'Abdon, 2010: 130-135):

1. Although academia has not begun to engage in a critical analysis of the Spoken Word movement, the movement is highly esteemed by its urban audiences and is perceived as being both relevant and successful;
2. Through their poetry, poets are able to synthesise a number of poetic and musical style, bringing to stage (and at times the written page) a new form of poetry and language; and
3. The poetry produced in the movement addresses a variety of themes, ranging from abstract to more concrete themes.

D'Abdon (2010) makes a valuable contribution to South African discourse on Spoken Word with this thesis by situating the poetic work of black, South African urban youth within a broader literary framework, divorcing it from the label of it being merely 'street art'. Sole (2008) too illustrates that these poets make statements concerning the contemporary realities of black South African youth through an art form that is associated with poetry music and hip hop. Sole's writing stands in agreement with the writing of Schutte (2011) and Gqola (2011), illustrating the role of advocacy towards gender equality in the movement. Importantly, Sole also highlights that the older generation of poets demonstrate a concern regarding the extent of American influence on this poetry culture, and further assume a loss of political awareness among the youth.

The South African Spoken Word scene has notable similarities to that of the USA, as well as visible differences. In the first instance, the youth dominate the Spoken Word scene in both contexts (see Weber, 1999 and Molebatsi & D'Abdon, 2007). Secondly, both scenes stem from and continue to speak to issues of liberation for minority groups (see D'Abdon, 2010 and Hoffman 2001). Thirdly, both scenes emphasise performativity and it is this aesthetical value that makes significant contributions towards its popularity (see Molebatsi & D'Abdon, 2007 and Gregory 2008). Fourthly, the content of poems reflects pluralism in their themes and content making it a powerful movement (see D'Abdon, 2010 and Hoffman, 2001). However, unlike the scene in the USA that represents a wide racial and ethnic range (Weber, 1999), South Africa's Spoken Word movement is the terrain of black youth (Molebatsi & D'Abdon, 2007; Sole, 2008 and Khan, 2013). Also, despite the appearance of Spoken Word poets on radio and television, and the use of poets by the state and businesses (Sole, 2008: 158), in South Africa the movement is still somewhat of an underground poetry movement (see D'Abdon, 2010: 3) and does not receive the mass attention expressed by Gioia (2003: 36).

Given the thin availability of academic literature on the topic of Spoken Word poetry, few scholars such as Gioia (2003) and Gregory (2008) provide an in-depth description of the poetry scene. This is especially so in the case of the South African Spoken Word scene. There is therefore a need for a critical exploration of this scene by academia. D'Abdon (2010: 13) identifies the absence of critical academic analysis on the subject and highlights that most texts available have been written by those within the movement. In this study, I make a contribution towards an academic analysis of the Spoken Word scene despite my previous direct involvement in the movement.

## The Research Objectives and Research Question

Having highlighted the need for academic contributions to the study of the South African Spoken Word scene, I identify that the objectives of this study are to:

1. Provide a thorough description of the Spoken Word movement in Pretoria and Johannesburg;
2. Deliberate on the narratives produced by the Spoken Word movement, and explore the social and cultural value thereof; and
3. To a lesser extent, consider a case for the recognition of *Spoken Word* as part of the cultural industries.

For the purposes of this study, I explore the Spoken Word movement from the location of Johannesburg and Pretoria, in the Gauteng province and recognize that my findings are relevant within this given context. I also note that as D'Abdon (2010: 49) has said, "The pace with which the Spoken Word movement continues to expand and transform is simply too fast for the researcher to keep up with". My study acknowledges that the post-apartheid poetry scene has experienced a number of waves; I thus locate my findings to be relevant to the post-2010 poetry scene. Therefore, the research question I pose for this study is: *What are the key features of the contemporary Spoken Word movement in South Africa and what are its contributions to broader cultural and social processes?* In order to achieve my research objectives and provide a response to my overall research question, I set to explore the following sub-questions:

1. What is the Spoken Word movement and what does it entail?
2. What are the demographics of its performers and audiences?
3. To what extent can Spoken Word poetry be considered as forming part of the cultural industries?

## Rationale

I began this chapter by pointing out my own involvement in Spoken Word poetry, highlighting my curiosity concerning the reasons for the increasing attention the movement has begun to attract over the years. In order to understand the reasons for this, I am convinced

that we ought to begin by painting a picture of the movement itself, thus highlighting the social and cultural significance it could have for individuals and groups alike.

I have already indicated that most of the available literature on the topic is set within the US context (see scholars such as Weber, 1999; Bruce & Davis, 2000; Hoffman, 2001; Ellis et al, 2003 and Gregory, 2008). Because of South African Spoken Word poetry's ties to that of the USA, such literature is valuable in framing the history and description of this movement in South Africa, as well as for providing a point of reference for the sake of comparison. In the introduction I remark that although there is academic literature on the South African Spoken Word movement by the likes of D'Abdon (2010), Schutte (2011), Sole (2008) and others, this literature is thin. I identify a gap in a thorough description of the movement. I consider D'Abdon's (2010) thesis to be the closest to my study as we both base our work on studies undertaken in the Gauteng province. However, while we are both attempting to fill gaps in existing research, our emphases differ. My research study thus explores these gaps by describing and exploring the Spoken Word poetry movement of Pretoria and Johannesburg. D'Abdon's (2010) study considers the works of poets active in 2006 – 2010, which I demonstrate in Chapter 4 as being the previous wave of poetry to the current scene I explore. Finally, the central focus of D'Abdon's (2010) work is the ways in which Spoken Word artists convey messages of liberation and emancipation in their poetry. My study thus fills the gap by giving an overall ethnographic description of the Spoken Word movement, its culture and its social processes from both the perspective of the researcher as well as the poets. Because the poems are central to the movement, I also engage in a thematic content analysis. Finally, the purpose of the study is to set the scene of the South African *Spoken Word* movement by exploring its social value, as well as the value placed on it by the performing poets. In doing this, I argue a case for the recognition of *Spoken Word* poetry as a valuable art form that both creates and sustains awareness on an array of social and political issues, whilst providing entertainment to its audience. In this respect, I also consider it worthwhile to give consideration to its location within the cultural industries in South Africa.

## **Research Design**

A qualitative method of enquiry is used to formulate an in-depth understanding of the subject under study. Within the interpretive tradition, the analysis of qualitative data is interpreted by the researcher through his/her own impressions. This implies not only that the method is

subjectivist, but also that it applies relativist ontology. Reality is thus constructed through inter-subjectivity through socially and experientially created meanings and understandings. Gioia (2003) and Gregory (2008) are scholars who studied the Spoken Word movement in the USA, both using ethnography, which is a qualitative approach. Other scholars of the movement (see for example Ellis et al, 2003; Schutte, 2012; and Khan, 2013) have also made use of various qualitative data collection methods such as participant observation, interviews, and content analysis.

For the purposes of this study, I employ three data collection methods namely; ethnography, in-depth interviews and thematic content analysis. In this way, I make use of the technique of triangulation as a means by which to validate the outcomes of this study (see Sandelowski, 2000: 336 and Neuman, 2006: 87). The use of these three data collection methods allows me to draw a sense of the scene, giving a personal account whilst allowing me to verify my own observations by considering the perspective of the poets. An analysis of the poems on the scene allows me to capture not only the narratives on the scene, but also explore the social and political significance of the movement.

### Data Collection Methods

#### *2.3.1 Ethnography*

In this study, I understand the *Spoken Word* movement as consisting of a community of artists, organisers (who often are the poets themselves), together with an audience, and in some respects even a culture of its own. These compartments are understood as making up the movement that I sought to better explore and somehow locate within the broader umbrella of the cultural industries. Considering the movement as a community, it therefore makes sense to employ ethnography in order answer the main research question which is centred on attaining a description of this community. Fetterman (1989: 11) explains the ethnographic method as “the art or science of describing a group or culture”. The aim is thus to investigate the group in question, making use of existing biases and preconceived ideas about the group, yet maintaining an open mind.

A number of features of ethnographic studies as pointed out by Hammersley & Atkinson (2007:3) make ethnography a suitable method for studying the Spoken Word movement. Firstly, the researcher studies the phenomenon as it occurs in its natural setting, without deliberately influencing the setting. Secondly, ethnography allows for data to be collected

from a range of sources e.g. documents, participant observation, and informal conversation. Thirdly, data collection does not entail a fixed research design from the start, but allows for flexibility depending on the context. Finally, data analysis involves interpretation and meaning-making of actions and practices. To this end, I was able to attend a number of Spoken Word sessions and events as they occurred, without influencing their occurrence or content. I have also made use of data collected from secondary sources such as YouTube clips, online magazines, and informal conversations. These have been useful in forming the arguments presented in this body of work.

Nonetheless, as my research method is ethnography, the central element of my research design was fieldwork which allowed for the exploration of the scene and group under study. Ultimately, this led to the discovery of themes, problems as well missing links in the knowledge that exists on the group. Fieldwork places a high reliance on participant observation and the use of interviews to obtain data that can be used and turned into information by means of cross-checks, comparisons and triangulation, according to Neuman (2006:396-404). Participant observation refers to the immersion of the researcher into the culture and context of the group under study. Following Neuman, the normal duration of this immersion is six months or more, in order to fully participate in and understand the happenings and beliefs of the group whilst remaining at a professional distance (Neuman, 2006:396). For my study, I was not particularly concerned with the number of months spent conducting the research, but rather the number of events I could attend, and the differences and similarities observed across different Spoken Word poetry scenes that could inform this study.

### *2.3.2 In-depth Interviews*

Interviews are an essential data gathering technique as they allow for an explanation of what the researcher observes in the field. These also facilitate an understanding of the group or culture under study from the perspective of its members. Semi-structured interviews were formulated in order to generate responses to the research questions stated for the study. Semi-structured questions are open-ended and thus have the benefit of asking detailed questions whilst allowing the researcher to explore and confirm participants' responses. Open-ended questions also allow for interpretation by interviewees (Fetterman, 1989:47-54). I made use of an open-ended interview schedule to obtain the views of poets on the value and significance of Spoken Word poetry, its features, and the extent to which they consider the

movement as forming part of the cultural industries. Responses were used to derive comparisons as well as common themes that were used to inform Chapters three and four. However, I also include notes and transcriptions from informal conversations with poets as well as meetings attended on the subject of Spoken Word poetry.

### *2.3.3 Thematic Content Analysis*

During the development of this research, I had not anticipated to engage in an analysis of the poems presented on the stages. However, as the research progressed, I realised that the significance of the Spoken Word movement lies greatly in its content, and therefore this is an aspect of the movement that merits consideration. Chapter 5 is based on an analysis of poems I observed on site during my fieldwork and is thus a representation of poems from both Pretoria and Johannesburg's stages. Bryman (2001: 189) suggests that as a research method, content analysis is useful in understanding the values and beliefs of groups under study, whilst being both unobtrusive and non-reactive. In this regard, including content analysis to my study assisted in attaining greater depth in understanding both the culture and values of the Spoken Word poetry movement, as well as considering the value of the narratives produced by it.

#### Selection Criteria

When conducting research, issues of selection and sampling are important aspects to consider as this is highly deterministic of the extent to which the results of a study are considered to be representative. This is especially true when operating from a quantitative research paradigm. Given the interpretative approach deployed in this study, issues of selection are less important (Burns, 2000: 389). Nonetheless, it is still useful to reflect on the methods for inclusion to open up the broader process through which research decisions were made and to account for a softer form of 'representivity' appropriate to this research tradition.

In selecting Spoken Word events to attend, as well as poets to interview I relied on a non-probability sampling method. This sampling method was chosen because it is not feasible to derive the parameter of the sampling population of all poets who identify themselves as Spoken Word artists. Therefore, poets could not all have had an equal chance of being selected for an interview. This is also not a requirement of an interpretive tradition. Similarly, events were attended based on availability of events and of the researcher. In essence, I

employed a purposive sampling method which entails the use of my own discretion in selecting participants and events considered to be informative (see Neuman, 2003: 218). Annexure A provides a table of poets interviewed, events attended which were used to develop field notes are listed in Annexure B.

In order to obtain sufficient data from which to make deductions, I attended a number of poetry sessions and events in Pretoria and Johannesburg between March 2014 and August 2014. I also attended meetings and discussions on the topic of Spoken Word. Fifteen of these events yielded a body of field notes that was used as a primary source of data to answer the sub-questions regarding the nature of the Spoken Word poetry movement and its audiences.

The poems discussed in Chapter 5 were selected from poems observed at the poetry events mentioned above. At these poetry events, I compiled notes indicating the themes of poems performed and noticed that the poems were mainly centred on three themes; race and politics, gender and sexuality, and religion. The poems analysed are thus a reflection of these themes.

#### Data analysis methods

I identified ethnography, in-depth interviews, and content analysis as my main sources of data. From my ethnographic fieldwork, I made use of field notes as a record of my observations of the scene; these were later transformed into qualitative data. This data was then used for description, analysis and interpretation as explained by Wolcott (1994). Description involves giving an account of interviews and observations that is as close to the original words or practices of the participants as possible, descriptive data is thus treated as factual data. Analysis thus flows from descriptive data in that it is an expansion on description by drawing out the key factors, and the relationships that exist between them.

Finally, interpretation is the act of making sense of and explaining what has been analysed. Because I make use of a qualitative research method, the iterative nature thereof allowed for the process of data analysis to commence prior to completion of data collection (Bryman, 2001: 389). The analysis of these notes is provided in Chapter 3.

The field notes mentioned above were further used in identifying the main themes of the poems presented at the scenes visited. From these themes, I identified poems to be used in the thematic content analysis. Bryman (2001: 189) suggests that as a research method, content analysis is a relatively unobtrusive and transparent, and is useful for understanding the values

of the group under study. Seeing that the narratives produced are important to understanding the social and political significance of the movement, I chose to focus on content and not the aesthetical value of the poetry.

Finally, in-depth interviews were also analysed through the identification of key themes. Having transcribed the interviews conducted, I proceeded to identify major and minor themes in the responses of the poets. These are used to provide, from the poets' perspective and in their own voices, a description of the spoken word movement at present as well as that of wave before it, the perceived importance of spoken word poetry, the location of spoken word in the cultural industries, and consideration towards building a way forward for the genre.

### Strengths and Limitations

The greatest strength of this research project is that makes a contribution to a narrow field of research in South Africa. Although research on the Spoken Word poetry movement does exist, most of the research is focused on the international Spoken Word scene and not the South African scene specifically. Furthermore, I explore the scene from both the perspective of a follower of the movement, as well as give consideration to the custodians of this movement's opinions as well.

However, as the research project is a mini-dissertation, I am limited in the scope of the work I can cover. It would have been interesting to consider how people outside the *Spoken Word* poetry scene view this genre of poetry, and whether or not they consider its inclusion in the cultural industries at all a worthy pursuit. As it stands, my research is only able to account for the views of those already members or followers of the movement.

The chosen methodology also presents with limitations of its own. As I conducted ethnography, I was only able to observe what is currently occurring in the *Spoken Word* scene. I am therefore not able to make any accurate deductions on the history of the movement, apart from what could be drawn out from interviews and conversations for instance. I am also unable to give a holistic view on *Spoken Word* in South Africa as a whole as my findings cannot be generalized and are relevant to the Gauteng province in particular.

As this is a qualitative study which relies on my own biases as a researcher, the findings cannot be completely objective, neither is the information provided by the participants fully credible, in the narrow sense of the word. Qualitative studies have been critiqued for being

too subjective, and not yielding data that can be easily confirmed should the same study be repeated elsewhere. As ethnography is itself a qualitative approach, it possesses the same limitations. However, I am confident that I satisfactorily curb these limitations through the depth and richness of this study, and the variety of research methods used to obtain the data used herein.

### **Ethical considerations**

When conducting research, ethical conduct is an essential responsibility of the researcher as it ensures the rights of the participants are protected, facilitates communication when in the field, and allows for the possibility of conducting future research. Researchers are expected to ensure that the participants are protected from the risk of harm whether physically, emotionally or otherwise. It is also a commitment to ensure work of high quality and professionalism (Neuman, 2006:269). The ethical considerations I employed during this study are as follows:

- **Informed consent:** All respondents for my interviews were made aware of the research study and the purpose thereof. Permission from respondents was requested, and in the case of formal interviews with poets an informed consent form was signed.
- **Permission:** Depending on the context of the study, researchers are usually required to seek formal, written permission to conduct research in a particular setting. However, according to the context of the study the nature of requesting consent may change. For this particular study, the context was informal and I required no written consent to study the Spoken Word scene, especially considering that my research was non-intrusive. In terms of participants, however, permission was requested before conducting interviews, whether formal or informal, with respondents. Permission was also granted by the respective poets to make use of the poems are featured in Chapter 5.
- **Recording:** Permission was requested before taking video recordings of the poets, and this aspect was also accounted for in the consent form. I did not take any video recording of any of their performances or creative work, however these are featured in written format for content analysis purposes and poets are acknowledged as the owners of this work.

- **Honesty:** By means of brief explanation the participants in my study were made explicitly aware of the study I shall be conducting, as well as the manner by which I intend to conduct the study.
- **Confidentiality:** As this research study does not seek to explore issues that are of a sensitive or confidential nature; I foresaw no problems regarding confidentiality. However, during interviews and informal conversations minor issues were mentioned that could to some extent be tainting to the artistic image of some of the persons mentioned. In such cases, pseudonyms are utilized in place of real names.
- **Anonymity:** As mentioned above, because the study does not deal with information of a confidential nature, it was in most cases not necessary to maintain confidentiality of poets or audience members. Furthermore, allowing the names of the poets, organisations and events to be known would be beneficial to the poets and their organisations by granting them exposure.
- **Reciprocity:** As I would be taking information from the people and organisations that form part of the Spoken Word movement, I plan to give back by disseminating my findings with the people involved as far as is possible.

## **Chapter Outline**

In Chapter 2, I embark on an in-depth exploration of the Spoken Word poetry scene by perusing through existing literature. In this chapter, my focus is on the South African Spoken word scene, however due to the link between the Spoken Word scene in South Africa and the USA, I also consult literature from scholars of the USA scene. In addition, literature on the cultural industries, popular culture and publics is provided as a theoretical framework within which this study is framed.

Chapter 3 provides a description of the scene in Pretoria and Johannesburg, drawing out various features of the movement. In this chapter, I give consideration to the culture of Gauteng's Spoken Word movement, considering aspects of performance, poet-audience engagement, and efforts placed by poets toward improving their skill in the art form. I conclude by providing two case studies as examples of Spoken Word poetry events.

Chapter 4 emphasises the perspectives of the poets on the Spoken Word derived from thirteen face-to-face interviews. By using the poets' own words, I provide a description of the Spoken Word scene in Pretoria and Johannesburg, and stress various elements that poets consider to

be important contributions of the movement. I also present the efforts of poets towards ensuring a space for Spoken Word in the cultural industries, and conclude by giving remarks on a way forward for this genre.

Chapter 5 engages in a thematic content analysis of six poems under the themes race and politics, gender and sexuality, and religion. This chapter gives consideration to the social significance of the narratives presented in the movement.

I conclude the study in Chapter 6 by giving an overall summary of this research project and highlighting the key findings. I also provide suggestions for further research relating to South Africa's Spoken Word movement.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although the Spoken Word poetry movement has attracted mass attention in the USA and is gaining an increasing following in South Africa, there is a gap in academic literature on the subject. In this Chapter I have identified a few international and local scholars that have explored the Spoken Word movement and given a brief exposition on their contributions. I also identify D'Abdon's (2010) PhD thesis as the scholarly contribution closest to the study I have conducted. In so doing, I have identified the gaps in this field of study and explored how this research project is able to make a contribution to the dialogue of Spoken Word poetry.

Employing an ethnographic method allowed for the research process to be flexible, with the use of multiple research methods namely observation, open-ended interviews and content analysis. To select samples of events as well as poets, the purposive sampling methods was used. Overall, a total number of thirteen poets were formally interviewed for this study, and informal conversations had with a few more.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Literature Review

When one thinks of modern poetry the imagery of books and written poetry are often brought to mind. It is typical in our conceptions of pre-modern poetry that we think of poetry as an oral art. In modern culture one would typically associate poetry with written verse. In his work *Exploring the oral-written interface*, Kaschula (1997: 174) stresses that “oral and written literature are literature in their own right – interacting at some point, remaining autonomous in many ways, backed by the same culture and society, and performing the same function of commenting on that society and the world in general”. Despite both forms being literary forms respectively, Kaschula (1997: 174) argues that Western eurocentricism perceives oral literature as being inferior to written literature, associated with societies which are uncivilised. However, Kaschula (1997) suggests that it is no longer viable to conceptualise oral and written poetry as clear-cut binaries. Instead, he argues that the oral and the written exists on a continuum, and South African poets, depending on the levels of literacy or orality at different time periods in their lives, have begun to operate at varying points of this continuum. The implication is thus that traditionally oral poets, such as the *imbongi* (praise poets) have moved beyond producing purely oral poetry to writing down their poetry. Alternatively this poetry is also transcribed into written form (Kaschula, 1997:173-174).

However, over recent years technological advancement has brought with it a significant decline in the print culture. In light of such changes, Gioia (2003:23) questions the use and place of poetry “in a society that has little use of books”. In response to this question, Gioia (2003) proposes that attention should be drawn to a new form of poetry that has re-emerged in American society over the past few years in the form of RAP, cowboy poetry, poetry slams and performance poetry. This ‘new’ poetry is understood as drastically changing the orthodox view of poetry as an art form. Consequently, in the USA, the amount of attention this ‘new poetry’ has attracted from electronic media and media is enormous; however it has not been as successful in capturing the attention of academia (Hoffman, 2001:49). Gioia (2003) suggests that the reason for the lack of research into this field by academia stems mainly from

reluctance to engage with this art form due to the idea that performance poetry has very little in common with conventional forms of poetry which are regarded as being more worthy of study. Gioia (2003) argues that although media and culture critics have caught on to the new poetry culture, it has missed the most interesting aspects of new performance poetry, namely the manner by which radical innovation is fused with traditionalism in how the poetry is structured, its modes of performance, how the poetry is transmitted and received (Gioia, 2003:23-26).

In order to gain a clearer understanding and description of this new poetry, I draw from the work of Gioia (2003:28-29) who considers a number of features that distinguish performance poetry from literary poetry.

Firstly, hearkening to the oral roots of poetry, this new poetic art form is predominantly oral, and is often recited from memory. The oral nature of the art form further allows for poets and audiences to communicate directly without the use of text. The resurgence of the oral nature of poetry has also been attributed to the pull away from print due to television and the telephone.

Secondly, as opposed to literary poetry that produces the written text as a primary output, text in the context of ‘new’ poetry is produced as a secondary product (if at all) by transcribing a recorded performance from audio or video.

Finally, this new form of poetry makes use of the apparatuses used by the musical industries to transmit their art. This includes live performances, recordings, festivals and the like. Use of such apparatuses has allowed this form of poetry to reach a national audience no longer accustomed to the conventional use of books and other forms of print media. The transition away from written to oral poetry has had significant implications for this art form. It has allowed for the forms of literature to be altered through electronic media. For artists, this transition has allowed authors to switch identities from an invisible writer, to that of a visible entertainer with a physical presence and an audible voice (Gioia, 2003:29).

The Spoken Word movement forms part of this ‘new’ poetry. The Spoken Word movement may be understood as a genre of poetry that encompasses elements of words, musicality and performance. Molebatsi and D’Abdon (2007: 172) define this genre as “a new level of poetry, which escapes definition and borders, by belonging somewhere in between word and song”. This quotation clearly illustrates how *Spoken Word* as an art form permeates different aspects

of culture and art by producing a new rich art form. Because of these elements, Molebatsi and D'Abdon argue, *Spoken Word* has acquired the title '*floetry*' perceived as a genre that breaks away from the ideology that poetry is for the learned, or for academics, making poetry accessible to broader members of the community. However, the authors point out that criticisms have arisen concerning the value of this poetry if the aspects of musicality and performativity were to be removed. According to Molebatsi and D'Abdon (2007: 172-175), this criticism however, emphasizes that *Spoken Word* is a different style of poetry which should not be considered as a replacement for literary forms of poetry.

According to Weber (1999), a component of the Spoken Word movement that has been 'slammed' by traditionalists for lacking the etiquette of art is slam poetry. Weber (1999) adds that slam is condemned for implying that the value or quality of the art of poetry can be quantified by crowning winners and losers, however Bruce and Davis (2000: 123) argue that slam poetry has nonetheless gained enormous popularity, even finding its way into the classrooms of the USA. Gregory (2008: 63) explains slam poetry as "a kind of oral poetry competition in which poets are expected to perform their own work before a live audience. Then they are scored on the quality of their writing and performance, by judges who are typically randomly selected from the audience". I highlight two important aspects to slam poetry. Firstly, it is a poetry form in which poets compete against one another, in most cases there is a prize, or simply a title to be won. Secondly, poets are judged by a live audience, or a live panel of judges based on two core criteria; content and performance. An aspect worth considering is the very aspect that has received much criticism – how does one measure quality? Furthermore, what value is there in scoring poetry? Literature shows that in the USA, the population that makes up the 'slam culture' is young, mostly high school or college students, and cuts across a wide ethnic and racial range (Weber, 1999; Bruce & Davis, 2000: 119). The rise of slam poetry amongst the youth has been attributed to three main factors i.e. the rise and influence of RAP music and hip-hop culture, the boom of stand-up comedy and the spread of stage monologues (Weber 1999). Ellis et al (2003: 45-47) demonstrate that the energy and engagement present in slam poetry gives a fresh, interesting perspective to poetry, more appealing than traditional 'classroom poetry'. Slam poetry requires effort for wordplay, adding texture to language through intricate rhyming schemes, punchlines, sounds and above all, performance. All these factors culminate in certain poets being awarded the title of 'winner'. Naturally, debates surface amongst traditionalists about how one is able to quantify the quality of art, but as is demonstrated by Weber (1999), scoring is merely a means of

giving credit to artists for their work and the execution thereof. Ultimately, the competition is not entirely based on determining who the better poet is, but for one's voice and narrative to be heard as is highlighted by the following quote in the New York Times (Weber, 1999):

*“I feel like what we're competing for is space, the opportunity to speak, just the way every poet does when they try to find a publisher.”*

In addition to affording poets an opportunity to display their work, and a platform on which to share their narratives, Spoken Word has been successful in opening up a new experience of poetry amongst the youth (Bruce & Davis, 2000: 121). According to Ellis et al (2003: 44-47), in the USA, Spoken Word poetry has been brought into the school setting for its success in bringing in renewed understanding of and connection to poetry. Traditional forms of teaching poetry in English classrooms were typically received with boredom and an overall sense of disinterest. Performance poetry has managed to bring in a new dimension by emphasising the human experience over the technicalities of traditional poetry stressed by the curriculum.

In South Africa, Johannesburg and Pretoria, the two major cities of the Gauteng Province, are recognized as being the heart of the *Spoken Word* movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (D'Abdon, 2010: 3). It is currently a young, black movement, a fusion of poetry, music and hip-hop. A key element of this genre is that it is performed live for an audience (D'Abdon, 2007). Sole (2008) indicates that many of these key elements have been adopted from African-American culture, yet there has also been considerable effort placed into refuting Americanism in favour of a more African poetry. This is reflected in the movement's usage of elements of 'loxxion culture' that encompass this youth culture's (an educated, middle-class urban stratum) strife for the establishment of a new version of Africanism (this cultural form is explained in the work of Nuttall, 2009). Nonetheless, according to Hunter ((2009: 156) its close ties with RAP (Rhythm And Poetry) and musicality create an association between *Spoken Word* poets and more popular hip-hop artists. The origins of this art form in the USA have been traced back to the tradition of stand-up poetry, blended with aspects of comedy (Weber, 1999). In recent decades, Spoken Word poetry has been linked to the validation of identity of minority groups (Hoffman, 2001:49). Usually, this art form is used as a means of self-expression typically centring on social ills as they affect, or are perceived by the youth (Sole, 2008: 157). In this sense Spoken Word can be understood as being liberation politics that is employed to serve a social function (Judge, 1993: 12). More than being mere performance or self-

expression, this genre has been effective in putting on stage the life experiences of artists and their communities on stage (Sole, 1983: 68).

The *Spoken Word* movement has been described as:

*“characterized by the styles of writing and performing, which presents words in a tone and manner of “higher standard” – capturing the imagination and emotion of the reader and/ or listener. Poetry is about conscientising the reader or listener, building meaning and memory, or opening some locked up knowledge”*  
(Molebatsi & Abdon, 2007: 173).

Styles of writing and performing bring out three elements of this genre. Firstly, although the central aspect of this genre is live performance, performers tend to produce physical material in addition to their poetry such as books, DVDs and audio CDs. Secondly, there is variation in the performance styles presented by these artists. It is not a homogenous genre, but one that is versatile in style, language and content. Finally, by means of writing style, poets deliberately produce poetry that is able to elicit vivid imagery and emotion that resonates with the audience, and thus foster audience-poet engagement.

Based on the literature above, my view is that the elements of performativity and musicality are utilized as a means to emphasise the messages and narratives drawn out in their poetry by creating an emotional response. In Nuttall’s (2009) work on the Y-culture, we understand that this subculture is highly dominated by black, middle-class youth in the Johannesburg suburb of Rosebank. I argue that the element of class is also reflected in this poetry scene as followers of the movement are most commonly university students, or began as such and thus are already part of a somewhat elitist institution. South Africa’s youth dominate the Spoken Word poetry scene in the country; especially those that can be labelled as the ‘black bourgeois’, belonging to the urban youth culture known as Y-culture (see Nuttall, 2009). According to D’Abdon, this group has placed musical styles such as hip-hop and R&B, and their personal identities as tightly interlocked with their poetry, and through this find ways of increasing Black Consciousness ideologies (D’Abdon, 2014). Molebatsi and D’Abdon argue that the words used in their literature and stage performances are deliberately reflexive and proactive with clear elements of theatre, which are performed with background music. This allows the genre to create a new appeal to literature lovers by adding an element musicality and theatre (Molebatsi & Abdon, 2007: 171-173). Sole (2008: 135-154) argues that as it was

during the epoch of apartheid, present day poets continue to be the spokespersons of public affairs. Poets thus carry upon them great ethical and ideological responsibility to present the general public with ‘truth’ pertaining to politics and analysis of social issues. Nonetheless, I argue in this study that there has been a general shift away from the notion that poetry should solely serve a political function and a liberation-oriented agenda. New discourses on contemporary African realities have become central topics in present day performance poetry. As mentioned earlier, one cannot deny the influence of popular Y-culture on Spoken Word over the past twenty years.

### Historical Precursors

Although the present day Spoken Word scene in South Africa takes place within a different context to the form of performance poetry about which Cronin (1988) writes, it is useful to consider the features of performance that Cronin (1988) expanded on in his work *Insurgent SA Poetry*. This allows for understanding the aspect of performativity in South African poetry. In the performance of their poetry, Cronin demonstrates that poets make changes to their tone of voice, change outfits to suit the poems being performed, make use of alliterations and so forth. The forms of language used shift between being agonistic and political, to being playful and relaxing. Cronin highlights three poetic features of South African poetry. The first refers to the gestural which includes performance, bodily presence, clothing and political gestural expressions. The second is verbal stylistic features, these are the verbal styles used such as alliteration, assonance and repetition. Finally, South African poetry contained an agonistically toned feature to bring across a strong depiction of black people’s struggle. Although Cronin wrote in the late 1980s, the aspects of performativity present in his study persist today. The performance and gestural features may to some extent be likened to theatre. An element that seems to have emerged later as it is not analysed in Cronin’s work is that of musicality as is described by D’Abdon & Molebatsi (2007), and the role of music and sound in the presentation of poetry.

I argue that the history of the movement is interesting as it illustrates the changing nature of protest performance poetry, in terms of its objectives, content and presentation. The Spoken Word movement demonstrates strong ties to liberation politics and the poetry thereof which Sole illustrates were tied to the socio-economic and socio-political lives of the black working class (Sole, 1983:54).

Various forms of liberation poetry sprouted in the 1980s and found resonance in a number of institutions such as universities, trade unions, Black Consciousness movements and so forth (Cronin, 1988: 14). Contemporary forms of poetry in the 1980s rose from social movements that were aimed largely at liberation politics such as political strikes, consumer boycotts etc. Thus, the Spoken Word poetry movement's presentation and reception may to an extent be aligned to this context. I suggest that other important influences that appear to have influenced the presentation of South African Spoken Word poetry that include the traditional oral and verbal practices inherent in African cultural custom, their forms of song, slogans, and political speeches amongst others about which Cronin (1988: 12-17) writes. These cultural forms of the 1980s were taken from both the rural and the local peripheries of the country, and shaped these to best suit the needs of the particular situation. Poetry was also linked to issues of identity, especially among Basotho men (Coplan, 1986: 29-33).

In his work on *Black South African Poetry*, Coplan (1986) adds to the dialogue of black, South African poetry. He suggests that youth poetry groups began to sprout in black townships after the 1976 Soweto uprising alongside new forms of art that spread throughout the country. This new poetry McClintock describes borrowed the sounds of jazz and jive, township 'totsi-taal', performativity from African oral traditions and elements of black American culture. From my work, one may remark that township 'totsi-taal' no longer has a notable presence in contemporary performance poetry. Instead, we are witnessing a stronger manifestation of African-American hip-hop culture, and the predominant use of English.

Drawing from the work of Sole (1983: 54-68), art and literature were utilized as central tools for the raising of social awareness on societal ills and promoting means and ideas for change. Therefore, when considering the oppressive conditions suffered by the black population in South Africa during the apartheid era, it becomes clearer why such an art form would rise among this population as a means of self-expression and increasing experiences of black control. Sole (1983) states that during the 1970s, organisations began to sprout advocating for the interests of black, working-class workers, most of whom were men. These organisations reiterated Steve Biko's Black Consciousness ideology and pushed towards a progression that is non-racial. In alignment with these objectives, the period experienced a rise in black literature and black cultural initiatives aimed at spreading the Black Consciousness ideology in townships. As a result, black theatre, poetry and music gesturing at a utopian pre-colonial past were promoted. Performers and writers were at the frontline of these movements, projecting themselves as the voices of black people. These spokesmen emphasized art that

was politically relevant, frowning upon publishing such works as politically suspicious and strongly denouncing the commercialization of ‘liberation art’ (Sole, 1983: 55-56). Instead, it was essential to directly communicate with audiences on issues concerning their oppression through literature and performances. Art and poetry more specifically was thus a method of the mobilization of black people for support in the struggle for democracy. Culture thus had to be a reflection of this hope for democratization of the population of South Africa (Sole, 1983: 65-68).

Considering the link between Spoken Word poetry and contemporary liberation poetry, it would be amiss to attempt to fully understand the nature or grasp the content of the Spoken Word movement in South Africa without examining the Black Consciousness movement and its resonating influence on Spoken Word. Pityana et al (1991:143) posit that the Black Consciousness movement of which Steve Biko was one of the best known advocates, is understood as being one of the most significant developments in South Africa for reasons relating to the active protest and rebellion against the apartheid regime, and the questions it posed about oppositional politics and society in South Africa. Ultimately, according to Pityana et al, the goal was to transform the narrative of what it meant to be black, to refute the portrayal of the black race as being essentially and innately inferior to whites especially intellectually, overly sexual and promiscuous, violent and lacking in cleanliness. In summary, blackness was equated to all things depraved, contrasted to the symbol of intelligence, beauty, purity and goodness embodied in the white race. These narratives combined with the apartheid regime of the time inevitably produced self-hate within black persons (Pityana et al, 1991: 143-144).

Following Pityana et al (1991), springing from such narratives, the likes of Steve Biko realised the need for the formation of exclusively black organisations, identifying the black race as an interest group of its own considering the differential material and political circumstances faced by black people. The objective was thus to redefine blackness, and instil an ideology of hope and liberation, emphasising the importance of solidarity of the oppressed regardless of salient race. The term ‘black’ thus defined any person, regardless of race who was denied privileges by whites and extended to include those who consciously rejected white domination in its various forms. This transformation of the ‘black’ label allowed for the negative discourse on blackness to be transformed into a discourse for positive identification. Black Consciousness was thus a deliberate move towards throwing off colonial humiliation,

aimed mostly at students regardless of their political influences (Pityana et al, 1991: 144-149).

As far as its cultural significance is concerned, Pityana et al (1991:181-183) show that Black Consciousness left a deep imprint on culture by igniting a black ‘cultural renaissance’ in which the assertion of this new black identity was emphasised alongside the retrieval of black culture. New forms of literature, performance art, and poetry emerged; borrowing elements from jazz as well as African beats. As with the focus of *Spoken Word* today, this new form of poetry carried in it Steve Biko’s legacy of narrating the political aspirations of the black population. It is this legacy that would place upon this new poetry the label of protest poetry. However, this label may not be a completely accurate description of this poetry scene as Pityana et al (1991:183) highlight; “Protest literature is writing by the underprivileged and exploited which is primarily addressed to those who wield political and economic power, or ones close to the seats of such power, in an attempt to elicit their sympathy and support against discriminatory laws and practices... Their aim was to liberate their people as much from white oppression as from their own selves...” The main contrast between protest poetry and Black Consciousness poetry from which *Spoken Word* has adopted a number of features, lies in the persons to whom the poetry is addressed. Although in some instances the poems may be addressed to persons in power, most often these are addressed at the oppressed themselves, giving shape and meaning to the hopes and aspirations of black/ oppressed persons, creating social awareness within the group, and creating a sense of unity (Pityana et al, 1991: 146-189).

Gqola (2001:31-33) suggests that *Staffrider Magazine*, established in March 1978 was one of the Black Consciousness movement’s most significant literary contributions. Aimed at providing a platform on which to attain social transformation, the magazine publicised and broadcasted literary and visual art. Through this magazine, cultural groups aligned to Black Consciousness were provided with a publishing outlet for their work. Because of the affiliation to Black Consciousness, work published in *Staffrider* met the criteria of ‘relevant’ art, as there was poor tolerance of art created for art’s sake in light of the struggle for freedom faced by the Black population. The content of the work produced demarcated to its audiences what was considered appropriate behaviour for psychologically-liberated Black individuals. In the quest for liberation, Gqola (2001) demonstrates a failure of the publication to recognise Black Consciousness’ negligence in considering additional factors of social classification apart from race such as class, geographical location, and importantly, gender. The forms of

blackness that were portrayed and advocated for pertained to black masculinities, and were thus not useful in deliberating on the particular locations and exploitations of black women. Apart from sprouting at a time when the quest for Black social and political liberation was central focus, this was also a time and environment where women, regardless of race were perceived as unimportant. Women's participation in Black Consciousness organisations was solely on the premise of their race, affording no attention to the politics of gender.

### Gender and Spoken Word

Gender has played an interesting role in the Spoken Word movement. Prior to the onset of democracy in 1994, the voices of black female writers were excluded and marginalized being labelled as writing about 'soft issues', and not on the pressing issues of the time namely liberation from the apartheid regime (Gqola, 2011:6). This was especially so for female poets. Black women's poetry was particularly seen as problematic as protest literature was perceived to be the territory of Black men. Years later, we have witnessed a rise in black feminist writings in South Africa which was accompanied by an explosion of female writers in South Africa. The insertion of female poets has allowed for new narratives to enter the poetry scene such as those pertaining directly to women's issues and sexuality. Such a platform has also allowed for women's voices and narratives to be de-marginalised, thus throwing off 'otherness' (Gqola, 2011:6 and Schutte, 2011: 42-51). Accordingly, Lebo Mashile, one of the key female poets at present was quoted referring to the Spoken Word scene as "...the one art form where black women have emerged as leaders when it comes to creating space, producing new work and setting the agenda for content" (Schutte, 2011: 49). A number of female writers and editors such as Mokhosi, Natalia Molebatsi, and Phillippa Yaa de Villers have emerged from this Spoken Word poetry scene. However, as the movement is somewhat underground, such names are not always familiar to audiences of mainstream poetry or those from the academia. A key work that has emerged from female writers was the all-female poetry show, *Body of Words*, where women's bodies were addressed by presenting narratives on things that have happened to women's bodies, things learnt from women's bodies, self-love and activism for the rights of women (D'Abdon & Molebatsi, 2011: 56).

### The Contemporary Spoken Word Movement

When considering the origins and initial purposes of oral and/or performance poetry, as well as its ties to Black Consciousness ideology, it is not surprising that in South Africa the movement is predominantly a black movement (D'Abdon & Molebatsi, 2007:174). Linking up to this observation, I quote Schutte (2011: 49) who states “African people have an identifiable appreciation of poetry....contributes to understandings of identity, spirituality and politics. Poets serve as interlocutors between leaders and the people, between the spiritual realm and the physician, between the past and the future”. Schutte (2011:50) also identifies the poetry scene as a highly accessible platform, allowing for the visibility of women in increasing numbers.

Present day narratives within the Spoken Word movement carry within them strong elements of race, Black Consciousness as well as a strong leaning towards Pan Africanism. There are clear links between Spoken Word today and the influence of Black Consciousness, visible in the styles, language and identifications present in the movement in the Gauteng province (D'Abdon, 2014). The continued use of simple English language in poetry, references to freedom from oppression (especially that of government and racial oppression) remain at centre stage, and members of the Spoken Word movement, especially in Johannesburg, have strong visible identifications to the Spoken Word as well as the Black Consciousness movement that is seen by manner of dress (D'Abdon, 2014). Furthermore, Spoken Word also bends to include current social issues such as those of gender and sexuality, as well as more recreational topics like romance for instance. The stance of non-commercialism (see Pityana et al, 1991) has since seemingly been rejected as entrance fees are charged at Spoken Word poetry shows. One can thus understand the movement as having moved away from merely being a means of mobilizing ideas of liberation politics into encompassing broader issues of daily lives. Furthermore, an increasing number of Spoken Word artists are visible in the arena of published literature which was frowned upon during the epoch of the struggle for liberation (see Gqola, 2011 and Khan, 2013). In addition, the forms of performance poetry we witness today internationally demonstrate a powerful aspect of entertainment and commercialism (Hoffman, 2001:49). Due to this aspect of commercialism, it is useful to give some consideration to the cultural industries and the place of Spoken Word poetry therein.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Although one does not conventionally place social theory at the centre when doing ethnography, I consider it useful to loosely locate this study within the framework of cultural

industries, the notion of popular culture and the idea of publics. This assists in understanding poets as artists working within an industry producing work for a public, resulting in and stemming from social and cultural factors. Therefore, this study is located within the parameters of the three conceptual sets discussed below, but is in no way restricted to or made to fit perfectly into these.

### Cultural Industries

Throsby (2001: 110-111) defines the cultural industries as comprising of cultural goods and services that involve creativity in their production. In contemporary understandings of the term, the cultural industries denotes potential for economic output, employment, revenue, supplying to the demands of consumers, and so forth, as can be achieved through cultural production. To many artists the focus placed on the economics of the cultural industries and its emphasis on the market-place robs the understanding of creative work from some of its meaning and do not address the purposes of art with sensitivity. However, in order for culture and artwork specifically to be taken seriously, it is essential to understand their economic credentials, in the words of Throsby “what better way to do this than by cultivating the image of art as an industry, bigger ... than beer and footwear” (Throsby, 2001: 111).

If using Throsby’s definition of the cultural industries, Spoken Word fits in as providing cultural goods primarily in the form of poetry shows, and secondarily through the production of books and audio-visual material. Services are provided in instances where workshops regarding the art form are provided. Literature at present does not comment much on the level of revenue generated from this genre of poetry. Nonetheless, one cannot deny that Spoken Word does indeed have the potential for economic output (see Gregory, 2008). This potential is further evident in that a few poets are pursuing Spoken Word as a full-time career, which for sustenance would require the art form to generate a significant amount of revenue.

It is important to understand the cultural industries in order to assess the manner in which the *Spoken Word* movement fits in, or fails to fit in with the cultural industries. Throsby (2011) provides an insightful account of artists as creative beings, and the role of industry in their production of artwork and the quality thereof. His discussion provides much insight into my topic, considering the economic marginalization experienced by poets.

Throsby (2001: 93-95) places great emphasis on the role of creativity on human behaviour, and its centrality in innovation and technological change. To understand creative work, he

gives consideration to the process of value creation that is manifest in the generation of economic and cultural value. This economic and cultural value is considered as being and incentive of the creative process. The argument is that artists such as poets, music composers, actors and so forth place primary importance on their creative work, and are not mainly motivated by money.

Following Throsby (2001: 96-96), as an artist, the aim is to increase and maximise the cultural value of the product he or she intends to present to the world as the perceived cultural worth of the product equates to its cultural value. To achieve this, the artist is to engage in choices and actions that yield an increase in the cultural value of their work. Amongst these choices is the factor of time. Throsby presents an equation that illustrates that the more time is spent on tasks that create the cultural product, the more cultural value can be yielded from the product. This is because the time allocated to tasks encompasses the elements of thought, imagination, skill application and so forth. However, it would indeed be amiss for us to assume that the formula is as simple as an increase in time resulting in an increase in cultural value. There is an important aspect that distinguishes the value yielded in light of time spent – creative genius. Artists who possess creative genius yield more from time than mediocre artists (Throsby, 2001: 96-97).

Although it is cultural value and not money that pushes artists to produce creative products, Throsby (2001:97) clearly points out that one cannot deny that money is important for sustaining the livelihoods of these artists. Therefore the element of economic value is an important aspect of the process of creating cultural products. Therefore, Throsby (2001:97-99) emphasises that we ought to explicitly specify the income generated from artistic work as a variable in the process. There are a few ways by which income can be generated such as royalties on sales, for performing artists an option is wages obtained from the sale of their services, salaries, fees, commission etc. Looking at revenue alone would be a lopsided endeavour. Throsby warns, as artists suffer expenses when producing their products such as the cost of materials, venue and the like. Therefore, to calculate the artist's nett income, we must subtract operating costs from income generated. From this view, it becomes clearer as to how income can be a constraint as economic circumstances influence production. Income can therefore also have an impact on the production of goods of cultural value as artists may decide to move away from producing a certain cultural product to another that yields more in terms of income. Also, efforts are put in reducing operation costs by using inputs that are less expensive, negatively impacting on the cultural value of the product.

According to Throsby, income, for all persons including artists is about more than mere sustenance, and meeting basic needs. Persons generally strive for a higher standard of living. Therefore, the fact that their creative efforts can yield financial reward is key. Because money is directly related to improving one's standard of life, as well as meeting their basic needs, it is not surprising that Throsby states that money takes more prominence than producing quality cultural goods or practices. Money thus plays a role in determining which lines of creative work artists are most likely to go into, those that produce more money, and as a result the quality of work is likely to be affected. The popularity of artists also impacts on the prospects of generating revenue alongside being able to produce goods of cultural value. Furthermore, a typical trend to counter low returns on artistic work is to engage in non-artistic income-earning activities to generate income, and leave some time to engage in their art work. Artists thus have the choice to produce artwork that results in cultural and economic value, or to engage in non-artistic work that results solely in products of economic value (Throsby, 2001: 100-102).

In the case of Spoken Word, artists usually perform as an activity that is 'secondary' to their more conventional careers. It would thus be interesting to consider whether or not these poets would desire the opportunity to pursue a full-time career as a poet/ artist as Throsby suggests would be ideal for most artists. Moreover, it would be of interest to explore what formal 'careers' most spoken word artists are pursuing and to what extent this work supports or detracts from their artistic work.

Throsby states that placing value on work in the creative industries involves transforming creative work into an embodied form. This embodiment may refer to the physical work itself, to the work in terms of its existence as an idea, or to the rights to the work in question, with copyright as a declaration and symbol of economic worth (Throsby, 2001: 102-103). To obtain an indication of an artistic work, the price the work acquires through market exchange is considered. Economic value is thus determined on the physical market, and cultural value on the market for ideas. Artistic work can therefore be understood as fitting into a dual-market (Throsby, 2001: 101-104) that Throsby explains as follows:

[an] "artist's vision springs from the complex conjunction of the creative process, drives the production of ideas, his or her technical skill enables the realization or embodiment of these ideas into actual works. These works will hopefully realize an economic price through

market exchange, and hopefully a cultural price through the reception, processing, transmission, and assessment of the ideas which they convey” (Throsby, 2001:104).

As artists, poets participating in the Spoken Word movement engage in the ‘industrial’ component of the world of art by supplying poetry performances to audiences. A number of these shows charge an entrance fee, thereby creating revenue. In addition, poets also create material that can be purchased as a secondary product which includes books, audio CDs and DVDs. The costs incurred in producing their artistic work, such as venue hire, publishing of books and so forth are usually self-funded (Molebatsi & D’Abdon, 2007: 176). D’Abdon and Molebatsi (2011) offer a case study of one such a production and the implication of the cost model. *Body of Words*, the all-female poetry show is but an example of the on goings of the poetry scene. The works performed for the show were self-written self-funded and self-produced by the female poets, and allowed for them a platform to make a meaningful contribution to the growth and relevance of the Spoken Word movement. The show was funded by the poet’s own savings, as well as small independent grants. Efforts were also made to attain publicity for the show by making use of social networks, the media and the press. Unfortunately, as opposed to music concerts for instance, poetry shows are not afforded as much interest from the masses apart from the Spoken Word community and literature lovers. Consequently, in the particular case of *Body of Words*, this resulted in a lack of official buy-in and support from funders and the media, making it unviable for the poets to continue making such productions. Instead the poets opted for individual careers (D’Abdon & Molebatsi, 2011: 57-59). However, it is not all doom and gloom for the movement.

In the USA, poetry has made its appearance at a number of events such as military and sporting events, advertising, corporate events, in religion and so forth (Judge, 1993: 6-8). In South Africa, we are also presented with growing evidence from Sole (2008: 158) that the state and big businesses are also making use of poetry as a medium. Poetry is used increasingly as a powerful tool for implicitly influencing the subjectivity of individuals and influencing social behaviour, and advocating for national as well as cultural issues of identity. SABC 2 had also launched the *Lentswe Poetry Project* in an attempt to stimulate political awareness in the population. Poetry has thus gained more of a presence in the media, thereby reaching more interest groups from various tastes and cultures. Persons have become familiar with poets such as Lebo Mashile, Mosoja Msiza, and Antjie Krog. Poets are also visible in political parties, such as Vusi Mavimbela, Matthews Phosa and Lindiwe Mabuza. However, a

problem has arisen from this as it is particular messages that are rewarded by companies and the state, messages that are intended to create the ideal individual for the state and capitalism (Sole, 2008: 136-161).

For poets, freedom of expression and the ability to freely voice one's ideas, and to be the mouthpiece of the communities for whom they speak is key. Signing up with large recording companies, distributors or being linked to companies and the state may require them to compromise their messages to suit the conditions of the contract. (Molebatsi & D'Abdon, 2007: 176). I therefore consider it imperative that performing poets are allowed a sustainable voice by allowing funding for this genre of art. However, the challenge that arises is deriving a means to do this without compromising the message of these poets.

### *South African Cultural Industries*

According to the Cultural Strategy Group Report, in South Africa, the cultural industries were historically a neglected aspect of industrial economy for a good while, considered as being insignificant in comparison to more prominent areas of the economy. Furthermore, the cultural industries were perceived as being a fragmented sector; this perception led to the idea that the individual sectors were small, yielding little revenue. With the exception of major players i.e. film and television, revenue from the cultural industries was thought to be minute resulting in insignificant economic impact. In the years shortly after democracy, government perceived this sector as being a cost to the fiscus, rather than an asset to the economic wellbeing of the country. Consequently, the industry was poorly organized which duly fed into the idea of low economic impact. Fortunately, according to the report this school of thought has now shifted. The cultural industries are now seen as comprising of a number of integrated sectors that account for a significant cut in the economy (The Cultural Strategy Group, 1998: 8-14).

At present, the South African Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) have begun taking strides in boosting the stakes of the cultural industries in the country. A strategy has been developed, *Mzansi Golden Economy* (MGE), a strategy aimed at repositioning the cultural industries in South Africa. It holds at its core using the cultural industries as a means of boosting the economy by creating employment and encouraging entrepreneurship in this sector. Although Spoken Word artists are not explicitly included in the strategy, one may justifiably place these artists within the category of performing arts and the publishing sector.

I took the liberty of perusing through the MGE in order to identify a programme that would be suitable in incorporating Spoken Word artists. One such programme that exists within the MGE is the Public Art Development Programme (PADP). The implementation of PADP is aimed at strengthening and growing the arts, culture and heritage sector, with preference given to the youth, women and children, and persons with disabilities as beneficiaries. The programme's key objectives involve "creating decent work for artists, designers, researchers, storytellers, crafters, performance artists and a range of workers involved in the realization and presentation of public artworks". The programme is set to assist a range of local organisations to boost public art within their communities. In effect, exit employment opportunities are expected to be created in the following areas (Department of Arts and Culture website):

- Life skills
- Visual arts, performance art, storytelling, and design skills
- Research skills
- Entrepreneurial and business skills
- Community participation, community liaison and appraisal skills
- Problem solving and creative solutions skills
- Presentation skills
- Skills in applying/bidding for commission

By making use of the data collected in this study, I argue that the areas mentioned above already play an integral role in the Spoken Word movement at present. In Chapter 3, I illustrate that performance art and effective storytelling are key components of this form of poetry, ensuring that the poetry is entertaining, yet also captures clear, interesting stories in its presentation commonly concerning the lived experiences of poets and their communities. In telling these stories, poets are able to foster feelings of community and engagement between themselves and members of the audience. The content of these poems, many of which are centred on various social issues contribute to life-skills in the form of self-help dialogues. In Chapter 5, I demonstrate that as a creative solution to the legacy of apartheid on the cultural and financial inheritance of black youth, Spoken Word poets have begun to use entrepreneurship and business skills as a means of creating livelihoods from their art, whilst also exploring a number of avenues to promote African art and African literature.

Furthermore, I regard Spoken Word to be most fitting within the PADP for a number of reasons. Firstly, the flexibility of the art form allows it to easily blend into public space as is demonstrated by poetry sessions that take place in public areas such as parks and universities. Secondly, the youth is targeted as one of the main beneficiaries and partakers in the programme. As both the poets and the audiences of this movement are predominantly youth, this target group is easily reached through Spoken Word. My final reason concerns the key objective of the programme, the creation of decent work for artists. As I have expounded on earlier, decent work and decent pay plays a significant role in the production of quality art. Furthermore, considering the high rate of youth unemployment in the country, it would be beneficial to explore the extent to which this art form can flow into decent work and prospects of entrepreneurship. Therefore, I argue that for the Spoken Word movement, incorporation into such programmes would yield benefits beyond that of employment creation. Considering the history of performance poetry in South Africa, investment in the Spoken Word movement is likely to make positive contributions towards the goals of the development, protection and promotion of arts, culture and heritage. For the artists and other active contributors i.e. organisers, the exit employment opportunities mentioned above would be beneficial to harnessing existing skills. One vital question remains to be asked however, to what extent are artists aware (if at all) of such programmes, how to plug in to them, and how they would best benefit from and contribute to them?

Barrowclough & Kozul-Wright (2008: 18-19) argue that in the same way that strategies are useless if not known by relevant parties and beneficiaries, it is also exceedingly difficult to promote the overall wellbeing of the cultural industries in the absence of enabling policies. In developing countries such as South Africa, the cultural industries consist predominantly of the informal sector. In the absence of regulation, raising funds and improving labour conditions becomes challenging. In order to improve efficacy, literature suggests that specialized sector policies ought to be situated within the broader framework of capital accumulation policies in order to aid in the development process. However, such regulations and strong links to the state may nonetheless lead to different challenges.

Having given thought to the location of Spoken Word within the cultural industries, I now proceed to consider Spoken Word's location in popular culture.

### Popular Culture

The term as well as the terrain of popular culture is contested. Harrington & Bielby (2005:3) use four criteria to define popular culture:

1. The cultural object or practice should be enjoyed by a number of people
2. The cultural object or practice should not be deemed as highbrow culture
3. The cultural object or practice should be explicitly commercial, intentionally produced for consumption
4. The cultural object or practice should be made by the people, for the people.

The Spoken Word movement matches these criteria in that it is divorced from the label of being highbrow culture – although the movement has attained some popularity in South Africa, it remains an underground movement (D’Abdon & Molebatsi, 2011: 56-57). I argue that Spoken Word’s focus on live performances for an audience, and the explicit intention to be consumed by the people for whom these poets are the mouthpiece, which demonstrates intentionality for consumption. However, I stress that it is important to recognise that direct commerciality is not a defining feature of the Spoken Word movement. In this sense there is to a degree an overlap with highbrow culture. Also, the poets typically emerge from and speak for groups that were a historical ‘minority’, thus adding the element that it is made for and by the ‘people’. But as was the case with the Black Consciousness movement, although Spoken Word poets speak on behalf of the masses, the masses are not directly involved nor associate themselves with the Spoken Word movement. The notion of Spoken Word poetry being made ‘for the people, by the people’ is further complicated in that this movement attracts a large university-based crowd, indicating that it is somewhat of an elite movement.

For a cultural object or practice to be classified as such, Harrington & Bielby (2005:4-6) name a number of variables should be brought into consideration. Firstly, the more a cultural object or practice is highly accessible to the persons, the more the likelihood that it does not form part of highbrow culture. Secondly, emotional proximity to the cultural object or practice is an indication of lowbrow culture, as opposed to the rationality and emotionally distant cultural objects that characterize highbrow culture. Thirdly, a cultural object or practice is most probably highbrow if the ‘work’ in question is traceable to the author, and can be deemed as being unique or different. Below I consider the application of these considerations to Spoken Word in South Africa.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrate that the degree of accessibility of the Spoken Word movement is high because of the location of sessions in public areas for instance, and the relatively low cost of tickets to shows. This allows for Spoken Word audiences to access the events at locations that are fairly convenient, and at a price that is suitable to the public to which it is directed, which is often a scene dominated by students. Poets and audiences also demonstrate emotional attachment to the movement, especially when considering topics that are central to the movement. As Molebatsi and D'Abdon (2007: 173) suggest, poets thus place deliberate effort into eliciting an emotional response from the audience. I illustrate in Chapter 3 that race and shared social experiences contribute greatly to the emotional attachments to the poetry shared in Spoken Word spaces. However, in contradiction to the third feature listed by Harrington & Bielby (2005:6) Spoken Word artists take great care in ensuring that they are the identifiable authors of their work. This is especially important, and in fact more feasible considering that as Gioia (2003:29) states, poets' identities as a visible entertainer begins to dominate.

According to Harrington & Bielby, popular culture results from an interplay of production and consumption, including the aesthetic valuation of the cultural product or practice in question. Consumers, although to a limited degree, are those who popularize the object or practice. This popularity is also dependent on a process of dialogue and meaning-making (Harrington & Bielby, 2005:10).

Yet, based on a consideration of the Spoken Word movement, clearly popular culture is more complex than Bielby & Harrington suggest. For example, popular culture is also in some contexts a cultural form that allows subordinated groups a means to resist their subordination. In the next section I consider this claim in relation to the notion of producing publics.

### Publics

In order for popular culture to be consumed, there needs to be a public to whom this popular culture is presented. In Chapter 2 of Warner's book *Publics and Counterpublics* (2005), we are introduced to the difference in conceptualisation between *the* public and *a* public. Whereas *the* public refers to a social totality, a population in its entirety, *a* public in contrast refers to a specific, concrete audience Warner (2005: 65-124) takes care to explain seven features of a public, which I list briefly below.

1. A public is self-organised;

2. A public is built from relationships forged among strangers;
3. A public can be addressed in a manner that can be both personal and impersonal;
4. A public is established by virtue of attention being rendered to that public;
5. A public is a social space created by engagement with past and present discourse;
6. Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation;
7. A public is a ‘poetic world making’ – it is the performance of interaction that determines expected or agreed upon modes of behaviour and engagement

We have now established the various features of a public and understand that a public refers to a particular audience addressed at a particular time. Warner (2005:128) continues to present to us the problem of audience by posing the question “For whom does one write or speak to, where is one’s public?” Although Warner in this chapter particularly considers the audience of intellectuals and scholars of the humanities, this work is useful in establishing the problem of audience. Warner suggests here that at any given moment, even in one’s private space, by creating dialogue through writing one has already begun to engage with a public. However, this public is understood as being imaginary, a social entity that exists only because it is addressed. Furthermore, this ‘imaginary’ public is not newly created, it exists within a sphere of discourses that have been and continue to be in circulation, and it is within this existing discourse that one formulates one’s own work (Warner, 2005:125-129).

Warner (2005:131-142) proceeds to tackle the notion that for human heritage to be carried, requires the ability to achieve readership or audibility by as wide a public as possible. This ability, in turn, as this logic states, is influenced by the role of style and reason. This is to say that the language and style used in the writing ought to resonate with the masses. This is also the approach utilised by producers of mass culture who place effort in ensuring that their commodities are comprehensible and relatable to as broad an audience as possible. In turn, this influences tastes and ideas that form the power of dominant norms. The assumption thus leans towards the perception that to achieve a popular audience and political engagement, writing requires a clear style in order to attain an extensive audience. Warner’s argument, however, postulates that although one may write clearly, this differs from writing accessibly. In this sense, style of writing determines accessibility as even a difficult style can still be said to be written clearly, however it would be accessible only to audiences with whom such a style is able to resonate. Furthermore, accessibility alone is futile should the ideas presented not be appealing to the public to which it is directed.

The core of Warner's argument thus appears to be that contrary to the notion presented above, the carrying of human heritage is not dependent on reaching a wide audience. Instead it is more important to create a public with whom the discourse in question is able to resonate. Warner perceives the public to be a cultural form that does not require the presence of a widespread culture of rational discussion. Instead, what is needed is the presence of a public, an imaginary entity comprised of strangers engaged in discourses in circulation and addressed impersonally. In place of the presence of mass audience, publics essentially share commonalities (Warner, 2005: 144-147). In summary, Warner argues that "Publics do not simply exist along a continuum from narrow to wide or from specialist to general, elite to popular. They differ in the social conditions that make them possible and to which they are oriented" (Warner, 2005: 147).

Molebatsi and D'Abdon (2007) illustrate that the youth involved in South African Spoken Word poetry present their poetry in such a way that it is "capturing the imagination and emotion of the reader and/or listener". In this respect, we can appreciate that this art form through the styles of writing and performing are able to resonate with the public to which it resonates and to whom it is accessible. This is achieved despite the fact that Spoken Word poetry is not a popular art form and does not attain as widespread an audience as music concerts for instance. It seldom attracts attention beyond the scope of literature lovers and the Spoken Word community (D'Abdon & Molebatsi, 2011:58). Congruent with the argument of Warner (2005), a public thus exists for this art form; although not extensive, it is a public that shares commonalities and spring from the social conditions that make them possible.

We have established that Spoken Word as an art form succeeds in creating a public which its poets are able to address and engage with impersonally. Although to a lesser extent, this study also considers that this poetry is 'sold' to the publics to whom it is directed. I now proceed to considering the cultural industries and the role of the Spoken Word artist therein.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this Chapter, I have considered Spoken Word poetry as a new genre of poetry which can be located on a continuum spanning two poles, written and oral literature. This new genre is a fusion of words, performance and music, and is written primarily for the stage with the aim of eliciting emotion and imagination in the audience. In this sense, poets possess the identity of both poet and performer. We have considered South African Spoken Word poetry as

stemming from a heritage of African oral tradition, liberation politics and poetry, as well as from the influence of Black Consciousness ideology. Although I did not expand on its role in depth, African-American poetry, hip-hop, and hip-hop slam culture has also played an influential role in current presentations of Spoken Word poetry in South Africa. Consideration is also given to the role and contributions of women in literature, and the implications this has for this genre of poetry. The aspect of commercialization and Spoken Word's place in the cultural industries was investigated. Springing from these various strands, I argue that contemporary performance poetry plays a role in addressing contemporary social issues in a way that is affective, yielding emotional responses within the publics to which it is targeted. Poets furthermore deliver messages that are inspirational and allow for reflection on issues of the past and present. However, I stress that the narrations on the scene are not limited to such issues. I conclude the chapter by placing Spoken Word within the theoretical framework of the cultural industries, popular culture and publics.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE SPOKEN WORD POETRY SCENE IN JOHANNESBURG AND PRETORIA

To open up this chapter, I am compelled to begin with a disclaimer that no two poetry scenes are alike. Each organisation creates its own particular Spoken Word culture, and the different types of Spoken Word scenes themselves are different. I began following the Spoken Word scene in Pretoria in 2009, especially visiting and participating in sessions held at the student centre at the University of Pretoria hosted by a society called *Writer's Write*. However, it was not until I began this study that I began to truly see the depths and the differences that exist between the different poetry sites, as well as their similarities and their particular attractions.

The data collected for the purposes of this chapter was obtained by following a number of Spoken Word events in Pretoria and Johannesburg, especially those organised by *Word N Sound* and *PenseedPoets*. I attended a number of events and discussions about the Spoken Word scene, and have selected a few of these as case studies. I also include data obtained from interviews I conducted with a number of poets, as well as interviews with poets obtained from secondary sources. Through the use of the selected case studies I hope to provide an outline of an image of the Spoken Word poetry scene, its culture, as well as the different key narratives that characterise the scene.

I start off by taking a look at various forms of Spoken Word poetry events including open mics and slam poetry sessions in order to present an idea of what it feels like to engage in such a poetry scene. To begin understanding the culture of the movement, I argue the importance of considering the history of protest poetry and the influence of Biko's Black Consciousness movement as it continues to impact the scene at present (see Sole, 2008 and D'Abdon, 2014). I also demonstrate that as a result of South Africa's history, the Spoken Word scene is a gendered (Gqola, 2011) and racialised space (Sole, 2008), and that this is visible in the narratives it produces (D'Abdon, 2014). Finally, I stress that although scenes are different, performance, audience engagement and constant efforts to improve the craft are common features of the Spoken Word poetry movement.

In Spoken Word circles, one comes across the use of the term ‘sessions’ and ‘events’. Although the distinction between the two differ fairly thinly, it is still worthwhile to distinguish between the two kinds of Spoken Word gatherings. Sessions are typically informal and held in open or public spaces. These are either pre-planned such as the monthly poetry sessions, *No Camp Chairs*, held at the Union Buildings hosted by Vangi Gantsho in a ‘picnic style’, or what appears to be seemingly spontaneous gatherings that take place outside the State Theatre. At a session, the space is usually open for all who are willing or feel prompted to share their poetry to do so. Such spaces are typically not restricted to poetry and thus commonly attract a number of musicians and rappers. In this sense, sessions appeal to a number of other spoken art forms and usually have an atmosphere that lies somewhere in between poetry, jazz and hip hop. Most often in my experience, people gathering for spontaneous sessions usually hear the poetry whilst passing by, or notice a gathering of a crowd, usually in a circular form, responding to the poetry recited. It is this buzz and excitement that entices people to gather and listen, and for those who have the courage, to participate. Recitals take place in no particular order, whoever feels urged to recite a poem would go in the middle of the circle and do so.

Apart from ‘sessions’, one can also attend a Spoken Word event. The term ‘event’ usually refers to more formal Spoken Word gatherings that are usually pre-announced and advertised either on social media and/or various other media, held at hired venues, and usually a cheap entry fee is charged at the door. Such venues are commonly lounges, restaurants, halls and at times even small theatre halls. In most cases, the venues are not extravagantly decorated; they are simple, usually furnished with the basic minimum required for hosting a good show such as microphones and a sound system. At times, one finds painted artwork at the venues or other forms of art and craft being sold outside to audience members. Depending on the set a poet intends to perform, or alternatively on the theme of the event, one may find stage props used in order to boost the message behind their poems and performances. The events themselves carry a chilled, calm and relaxed atmosphere, usually with soothing ballads, slow jams and/or jazz in the background. This adds to the already intimate setting produced by having fairly small venues and close proximities between poets on stage and audience members. Such a venue setting make sense when considering the high levels of interaction between poets and audience members, as will be discussed later in this chapter. On average, Spoken Word events draw in between 70 – 150 audience members per session. I was able to

recognise a number of familiar faces present at different Spoken Word events which hints at the presence of a committed following.

Arriving at a Spoken Word poetry event, it is common to find audience members socialising at the event venues prior to time of commencement. Poets are usually also visible on the scene typically rehearsing their sets, or busy with sound checks and other event preparations. Audience members and poets are also able to interact before the commencement of the shows. At a number of events, especially those held in Johannesburg, one can quickly remark that there is a sort of culture that characterises the Spoken Word poetry movement. This is suggested by the styles of dress visible in these spaces, the language used, and also the types of behaviours that are repeated at different events. One such behaviour is the late commencement of shows. Although both poets and audience members are visible on site before shows begin the majority of audience members arrive approximately an hour after the stipulated time. Also, organisers themselves tend to not be prepared fully for the event to begin on time. One often finds that by the time the show is ready to start, poets are still busy with sound checks and other show preparations. This has become so engraved in the culture of the movement that although poets and organisers may be prepared by the time the show is expected to begin, audience members tend to arrive late because of the expectation that ‘the show will begin late anyway’. Another interesting feature of the Spoken Word culture is the use of pseudonyms by a number of poets, an occurrence that is also highly visible in hip-hop culture. The final interesting cultural feature I consider here is the use of English as the primary language for recital and communication on the scene. Judging from its links to the Black Consciousness movement, the use of English as the official medium of communication may have been influenced by this history considering that the use of indigenous languages under the Bantu education system was seen as reinforcing divides amongst Black people, thus reinforcing apartheid (Gqola, 2001:140). I am careful, however, not to overstate the influence of this history as English is for some South African youth a comfortable language of communication. Most poets therefore comfortably recite in English, however on the rare occasion one may come across poets reciting in their native tongue in a style reminiscent of African praise poets. However, Masai, a Spoken Word poet, does remark in the quote below that although the use of English in this poetry is not perceived as problematic, it has been brought to his attention that efforts should be placed on reciting in indigenous African languages:

*'We've learnt that through conversation and we're thinking of throwing a slam, it's a native tongue slam where everyone is gonna come through, you hit like your Tswana poems and stuff like that. But I don't know because to me it's like [whispers 'my dad is gonna kill me'] language is just a medium at the end of the day, but I do understand the magic within my tongue because I know that when I write a poem, when I add my Xhosa and Zulu there's a magic that comes into it. And I would love to add more but I was never given a chance to actually learn Xhosa or Zulu, my, my, my tongue. I was never given a chance to do that you know, it was kinda like pushed aside. So I'm actually now doing that myself, getting Xhosa books, Zulu books and a little bit of Tswana and stuff. So I'm trying to get into that, learning how to write and articulate my emotions uhm perfectly using my tongue. I think it's also been a problem that we should, not a problem per se but a challenge that we should, that we need to look at and come up with creative ways around it..'*

Although the overall Spoken Word poetry movement has strands that signify a unified culture, the Spoken Word scene Pretoria and Johannesburg have different feels respectively. I remarked that both the poets and the audiences in these cities have varied expectations of the scene. The narratives in Johannesburg tend to be a lot more political and a lot more aggressive than those one finds in Pretoria. Another example of these differences for instance is that Johannesburg appears to be a much 'harder', a much more competitive stage than Pretoria. This observation was confirmed to me during a discussion with *PenseedPoets* where it was stated by Donald 'Neosapian' Mokgale and affirmed by fellow poets that:

*"Joburg is just evil! Evil!...'.. Jo'burg is extremely critical... It's the best place to sharpen your craft almost"*

It is then evident that tough stages such as those found in Johannesburg are critical to improving the overall craft of poets, especially as pertaining to articulation and performance, aspects essential especially when partaking in slams. The Jo'burg crowd can be said to also be a lot less forgiving than Pretorian audiences when it comes to reciting poems from memory without error. During a group conversation with *PenseedPoets*, a scenario was given

by Dee of a time when a poet was introduced as the winner of the previous slam, unfortunately when he was called to perform he had completely forgotten his set:

*'The last time I was at Word N Sound, Poet X\* [laughs]. Afurakan mics it up, he's like 'next up we have winner of best newcomer wara wara from 2012. He was king of the mic neng neng neng. Poet X\*!' Everybody goes crazy! He gets on stage, blank. He blanks out... He did like 10 lines and then 'S-bomb, f-bomb, f-bomb, can I start again?' And the audience is just on some 'you see this nigger right now?' But in Pretoria they'd be like [cheering]... In Pretoria, when you choke people are like 'come on!' [encouraging], but in Jo'burg people are like' [\*Pseudonym]*

*Donald: 'We paid money for this shit!' [Completing her sentence in response]*

Pretorian stages are thus a lot more receptive, and more welcoming. From my observation I would go as far as to say that its stages would serve as a good, receptive incubator for new, inexperienced poets - a safe haven for self-expression. I have also noted that although it remains a very strong feature, the emphasis on strong performance is less in Pretoria than it is in Jo'burg. In fact, one may link the overall package, performance and good literary content, to a perception of giving audience members value for money, especially in cases where renowned poets are showcasing their work. Nonetheless there are platforms on which less experienced poets are able to recite freely on stages, such as open mic events.

At an open mic, poets from the audience are given an opportunity to share their poetry at the given platform. These can occur at sessions or can take place at more formal, paid events as a segment of the show. Open mics give poets that are not featured as artists on the programme at an event, or are not recognised as poets belonging to a particular organisation the opportunity to showcase their art. At times, poets are required to pay a fee to partake in open mic sessions.

The next type of Spoken Word gathering one can find is a slam poetry event, or a slam poetry open mic. As mentioned in Chapter 2, slam poetry refers to Spoken Word performed for competitive reasons. In most cases, a prize is won or at the very least contestants walk away with a title. I have selected two examples of slam events attended in Johannesburg and

Pretoria as case studies, one of which is presented in detail at the end of the chapter. The first case, *Shifting Paradigms Open Mic Awards Evening*, is one I considered particularly interesting for my study, the reason being that it somewhat defied the conventional idea of slam poetry. A discussion I had with the organiser, Given ‘Illustrative’ Masilela, highlighted the crucial point of the show – to appreciate the various strengths each artist has respectively, and to acknowledge their skill and talent in that particular area. The idea was thus to move away from the idea of slam poetry as merely a competitive stage, where a particular type of poet – one with strong performance, good presentation and punchlines, commonly emerges victorious. Instead, performance poetry was measured from a holistic perspective, considering the various aspects it’s comprised of. The score sheet used at this event thus reflected this aim by scoring poets based on items such as Conceptualisation, Dramatisation, Delivery and Performance, and Content. Each poet was then awarded a certificate corresponding with their particular strength. This type of slam differs greatly from the norm. In slam competitions, both locally and internationally the emphasis is largely on its competitive nature and not on highlighting the strengths of participants. It is for this reason that slam poetry has been criticised greatly by academics (Gregory, 2008). I have chosen a slam competition hosted by Word N Sound, *Slam for Your Life*, as a case study for this section as it is a more common example of slam poetry where the winner obtained both a title and a prize, this is presented later in this chapter. Despite the academic controversy surrounding the value (or assumed lack thereof) of slam poetry, slam poets contend for the recognition of slam as a valid art form that both entertains and has social significance (see Gioia, 2003 and Gregory, 2008) . During his interview, Masai stressed that competition is but a minor feature of slam poetry. In addition to competition, Masai argues that slam poetry has a social function of liberating both the poet and the community of restrictive ideologies by opening up a platform for dialogue on a number of social issues, as demonstrated in the quote below:

*“So everything that we do at this certain moment is so that, we want to show people that in poetry there’s this competitive aspect that people love but you should look at also the undertone. So slamming is no longer just slamming, it’s kinda like you’re slamming against those walls that keep you confined to your own township or environment, you’re slamming against your fears, you’re slamming against stereotypes, stigma, you’re slamming against rape, you’re*

*slamming against everything so slam is, is, is like, I keep saying slamming is a weapon, for me poetry is a weapon. If you can get people saying ‘whoa, ok, he opened up dialogue, he’s talking about this shit. He’s talking about this and that, he’s talking about that’ you know.”*

Although no other poets expressed similar sentiments regarding slam poetry, I am of the view that the emphasis on issues of liberation and open dialogue is not restricted to slam poetry but is a general feature of the Spoken Word poetry movement. Clay (2006: 105-118) in his analysis of hip-hop culture and hip-hop slams demonstrates a similar notion of political and social consciousness amongst black youth. According to Hoffman (2001), hip-hop culture is utilised as a tool of activism, as a means of meaning-making of their own contexts, as well as a means of resisting structural oppression. Black South African poets, as illustrated in the quote above, employ slam as a means of challenging culture and various forms of oppression in a manner similar to the slam in the USA.

If I could handpick a site to name the hub of mainstream, allow me to even say stereotypical Spoken Word culture, it would have to be Newtown, with its Market Theatre. I feel it is of paramount importance to note that this very site was dubbed as the heart of resistance to apartheid and the stage to political messaging in the 1980s (Masland, 2004: 42). Today it the one site I visited that I feel continues to present a vivid, yet somewhat subliminal tone of politics and Black Consciousness, two ever-present themes in the Spoken Word movement in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Newtown brings to life a number of different art forms such as music and graffiti, as well as markets where various crafts and clothing items are sold. At these markets one finds a reasonably large number of fashion items with strong African and political connotations ranging from beads and traditional attire, to Steve Biko and Thabo Mbeki T-shirts. These are the very kinds of apparel one typically sees and expects to find both poets and audience members dressed in at Spoken Word events. It is an appearance that has been labelled in street talk as ‘looking deep’ or as ‘conscious’, women wearing earthy colours such as browns, yellows and reds, ‘rocking’ natural hair, dreadlocks or even thick braids to create an afrocentric look. Such appearances and styles of dress are understood to be directly linked to preferred modes of appearance advocated for by the Black Consciousness movement (see Pityana et al, 1991). However, it should be stressed that these are just stereotypical images that have come to mark the movement, and is a far cry from the standard style of Spoken Word culture. As a matter of fact, this style is less commonly found in

Pretoria. Nonetheless, this representation remains strikingly strong and sometimes serves as a form of exclusion to poets that do not fit in to these appearances, this issues is further addressed in Chapter 5.

Almost as soon as one enters Spoken Word circles, one quickly remarks that its audience members and its poets are predominantly black. Because of the historical contribution of Black Consciousness that continues to be reflected in the movement, one continues to see race as being a key factor in the narratives presented. I therefore argue that these racial narratives not only produce but to a certain extent sustain racial spaces. But more than being a merely exclusionary practice that works against persons belonging to other race groups, black poetry circles allow for solidarity of black people around social issues that concern them directly. Nova narrates in the quote below her interpretation of black poetry circles in Johannesburg:

*“And I know that in Jo’burg we rally around social issues, and I know that we are majority in black there because we feel that when we’re speaking, we’re being heard and that’s not something we feel just generally existing in this country. We don’t feel like we are seen, we don’t feel like we are heard and so poetry is the safe space that we go to to experience those things.”*

As can be deduced by Nova’s statement which reflects the views of the majority of poets on the subject, these racialized spaces allow for uncensored narrations of the black social experience. As can be expected, such conversations, considering the history in which they are embedded, can be extremely uncomfortable to persons belonging to other race groups. On the scene I observed that in a number of instances where there were white persons present at shows and issues of race were narrated in the poetry, these white people left soon afterwards. This idea of sustaining racialized spaces through racialized narratives was further confirmed to me when I attended a show hosted by poetry organisation *Spoken Sessions* in Hatfield, Pretoria by chance. I took an immediate interest in the peculiarity of the event. There were none of the trends I had remarked at previous events. No afrocentricism, no Steve Biko T-shirts, a predominantly white crowd with, (admittedly stereotypical of me) a small black audience that seemed to belong to the middle or upper-middle class judging from their dress code, and use of language. One important observation concerns the content of the poetry. Although life experiences and social ills were addressed e.g. rape, family crisis such as

terminal cancer, none carried the strong political tone found on Spoken Word stages I had visited to date. There was no reference to race or oppression, the content was thus politically ‘lighter’ although it carried messages relevant to the social contexts this particular group of people. It made me wonder about what sort of narratives are permitted in certain circles. Do our narratives on the struggle, and black oppression drive away a white audience that would otherwise be interested in participating in the movement? It is without doubt that race is still a heavy, hard to speak of topic in South Africa, and certain utterances would only be accepted in certain circles and contexts.

It is important to note that the topics on which the poetry is centred continue to reflect liberation politics, although the struggles from which poets today seek liberation differ from those of old. At Spoken Word events, it is common to hear poets refer to their poetry as a tool or weapon in poems themselves, or in casual talk that occurs before a performance. As is stated by Nova, poetry is also perceived as a manner by which persons are able to address persons in positions of power in the country. In this sense, one is made acutely aware that the influence of liberation politics persists to this day. Poetry is considered by poets, and arguably by the audience alike considering their responses to the poems presented, as a creative weapon against social ills. This observation was confirmed by Masai stating that:

*‘So the main objective now is to push out, fight this with poetry because at the end of the day it is a weapon. If you look at our struggle, or if you look at our country we come from, yes we come from apartheid, but we tend to forget about the creative revolution that happened at the time. If you look at your creative people like Hugh Masikela they were fighting a revolution, they were using their horns, Miriam Makeba was singing her heart out, you know, she got banished from her country. So I think that part you don’t look at it but there was a creative struggle, and there still is a creative struggle. People are talking, people are showing things through art so I think our art is reflecting where we are as the people right now and it is decayed, it is politically corrupt, and we are fighting with this poetry to have another world. We are hoping to use this poetry to change certain perspectives.’*

Nova expresses poetry as being a vehicle allowing for self-expression in saying that:

*'When you feel like you cannot be heard it gives you a voice and even when you're speaking to the establishment or the power at any given time it feels that you're able to express yourself is what matters at all. So these platforms give vehicle to that.'*

Although the intention brought forward when linking art to protest appears noble, one ought to note that poets are not always received in such a manner. During one of my site visits to the *No Camp Chair Poetry Picnic*, two poets stated during the conversational aspects of the session that at times they have been treated with animosity because of the narratives they present. One such poet recalled that she had been labelled as 'anti-revolutionary' by state officials at a government event to which she had been invited to perform after having recited a poem reflecting dissatisfaction with the current state of South Africa. Another had experienced similar animosity after having published a 'protest poem' in a local magazine, subsequently being labelled as a British spy. Consequently, such narrations have influenced the extent to which these poets are welcomed on corporate or governmental stages. Considering the significant role of protest poetry in the liberation struggle, and its usefulness in bringing to pass the ideologies of the present ruling party (Pityana et al, 1991), it appears alarming that present day 'protest poetry' is to a degree, unwelcomed by the state. Vangi explains the complexities of this phenomenon as follows:

*'I think that [laughs], well obviously you know, not everybody is gonna be ready to hear the truth, and it's not gonna sit well with everybody especially if it paints you in a bad light or it exposes your stretchmarks to the world. Uhm, so I understand that not everyone is gonna receive it well and that if you want to maintain a status quo then you're gonna fight for that status quo. And everything that kind of challenges that you're gonna want to kind of squash, or remove, or silence. And... don't get me wrong, I think this is the nature of all states, not just the South African state because it is uncomfortable to have your people publically revolt, or publically protest or publically speak out against you. Especially if you look at how emotive poetry is. I mean people held on to Mzwake Mbuli for a reason, he moved and shook people around the world, shining light on the South African situation for a reason. Poetry is emotive so it's understandable, it's not even to say that we have it as bad as they had it 'cause we don't.'*

*We do have it much easier. It doesn't mean though, that it's acceptable, because it's not.*

Although the Spoken Word poetry movement is greatly influenced by protest politics, the poems presented are not limited to this. In fact, as is common with Spoken Word poetry in USA (Hoffman, 2001:50), comedy manages to seep into this art form, albeit at times in a satirical form. In this sense, entertainment, which is an important aspect of this art form is not lost, as is stated by Vangi:

*'Oh yes definitely! There's a lot of protest politics... There's a lot of protest Spoken Word but not all Spoken Word is, has to be protest. Not all Spoken Word has to be revolutionary. Just like it does not all have to be entertainment. But there is definitely a strong political voice, a strong revolutionary voice that you will hear from young people especially regarding the growing frustrations concerning the political situation.'*

Putting issues of contestation aside, Spoken Word stages in Gauteng are important because they have been greatly influential in producing some of our most well-known and well-respected female Spoken Word poets, the likes of Lebo Mashile, Natalia Molebatsi, Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, Myesha Jenkins, Vangi Gantsho and a number of other familiar names in the movement. As illustrated in Gqola's (2011) work, the presence of women has allowed for the infiltration and ownership of women's stories and women's perspectives in the discourse on society. It has furthermore given a space in which women are permitted to present uncensored narrations of their struggles, their pleasures, and their truths. On site, I found that in many instances women would share their unique experiences of the female body, give emotional accounts and descriptions of violence against women, as well as celebrate the joys found in the ownership of their sexualities. As Gqola (2011:8) remarks, the private spheres of women's worlds are brought forward as legitimate forms of dialogue and foster aspects of sisterhood. Nova's interpretation of the value of her contribution of 'feminist poetry' reflects the views suggested by Gqola (2011) in the following quotes:

*'I'm trying to advocate a feminist agenda when it comes to poetry. I think that is important because the collective self-esteem of young women in this country is at a shocking low so I think that the women that are progressive, subversive, really pushing the boundaries in*

*terms of, in terms of their autonomy, and self-determination and who they are, those women are the minority, you know. And those are women that I know or that you might know, you know what I mean? Very few of them. So I think that poetry is also an important vehicle to get young women into, to get them understanding that they own themselves, you know. And that this society does not own them at all so ja, feminist agenda, yeah.'*

A similar sentiment is echoed again by Nova who states:

*'I noticed that there are women who I have helped through their issues and that's important to me because there are women whose poems have gotten me through, when I felt I couldn't get through that's what I needed to get out of bed and get through the day and if I can do that then that's remarkably special and important.'*

However, in spite of this influence and this representation, I remark that the Spoken Word scene in Gauteng remains a male-dominated terrain. In the face of the fact that most of the audience members are female (even though the difference in numbers is not always greatly significant), the poets are most often male, especially those who manage to achieve celebrity status. As expected, the natural result which sprouts from this occurrence is that the majority of narratives produced are delivered through a male-lens.

One of my most interesting observations on site is best captured through the Women's Month Open Mic event held by *Shifting Paradigms* in Hatfield, Pretoria. It being an event dedicated to women as one can clearly remark from the title of the show, I anticipated finding a strong female representation, which I did, but only in the audience. The stage was greatly male-dominated. However, there was a strong articulation of gender issues, women's issues in particular. Most of these poems stressed the importance of ending the epidemic of violence against women and children in South Africa, an important utterance for our society. Nonetheless, it was fairly disturbing to find that a few male poets narrated women's issues as though it were their own. This is the unfortunately the norm in the Spoken Word scene, one whose origins must be traced back to the patriarchal ownership of stories, as is explained by female poet, Nova:

*'Like all the public spaces in South Africa, poetry spaces are also gendered and like all public spaces in South Africa, men, males feel more... they feel safer in public spaces. They feel safer to exist in public spaces and they feel safer to express themselves in public spaces. It's, it's something that I think via patriarchy every space is their space to own. And this goes into the poetry scene as well where mostly your performers will be men and most of the time it really does intimidate women to get on those stages. And I remember when I started off at Word N Sound, there were women, but there weren't women who were good. And I was the first person to be the queen of the mic when they started out having that competitive edge to it. And my, my, my observation there is that it got me lots of women who supported me, but it also got me lots of men who did not support me, who were very upset that I had come and I had upset the status quo where the men were the people whose stories were received better and who were kinda outperforming the rest and I kinda disturbed that balance. And men feel the need, because this is a space that they feel so free, that they exist so freely in they decide to own all the stories and therefore they decide to tell the stories of women as well. So you have men on the stage speaking about how, how it feels to be a girl who was raped, how it feels to lose your virginity for the first time, how it feels to be a single mother. And although the narrative has no limits to it, seriously, you can write a persona poem, you can decide that you are a chair and write about how it feels to be a chair, that's true. But when it comes to the specific nuances of what it means to be a black woman in South Africa, to what it means to be a black man in South Africa then we can't just dismiss it as being persona, or as it being a style of narration, there's something, there's something at work there that tells you that men do believe they own women's stories to the point that they can just tell them. Uhm, so yeah. The poetry space is very gendered, uh, women are still finding that place of comfort in telling their stories and being so vulnerable with the audience as well.'*

Gqola (2011:7) indicates that “South Africa’s gender landscape is characterised by a fraught range of silences and disruptions”. When considering the silences that exist regarding issues of masculinity, one is obliged to agree with Gqola’s statement. I was fortunate enough to witness two performances of poem by men that focused on issues of masculinity and their own experience thereof, these poems are included in Chapter 5. I consider it to be important that more of these stories be brought out by male poets, as this is at present not the norm. Not much is known, and it has been said that not much attention is given to the issues and challenges of masculinity (Morrell, 2000:100-102). Spoken Word can therefore be a platform on which this is changed, where the issues of gender are narrated as they are experienced by the respective counterparts.

With regards to gender and race, one would agree that the demographics are reflections of disparities that exist within the movement. However, with regards to gender, there is evidence that efforts have been and continue to be put in place to ensure that the patriarchal nature of the Spoken Word poetry scene is done away with.

I saw it fit to explore, too, poets’ views concerning the racial demographic of the poetry scene and whether or not this ought to change. The majority of poets remarked that because the South African demographic is predominantly young and black, the Spoken Word movement is but a reflection of this demographic. Nova suggests that as Spoken Word poetry is a marginalised art form, this could be the reason that it remains the terrain of the young, black population – black persons remain in less privileged positions, even in the arts. Nonetheless, as poetry reflects the truth of a people’s experiences, she indicates a curiosity in the narratives that would be presented by white people in such an art form:

*‘No [laughs] aah I sound terrible. Uhm, this country is majority young and black so it only makes sense to me that... and it’s a damn shame that more industries aren’t predominantly young and black. And that just speaks to the fact that the thing that’s less desirable in society which is Spoken Word and some other forms of art which is not supported by the government, that’s where the majority of young and black people are, uhm... and the fact that this is kinda a quota in poetry, this really needs to reflect all over the country ‘cause it just makes more sense that way. So I have no issue with changing the demographic, though, however, I am interested in hearing from...*

*'cause for me I go to poetry to hear people's story, to hear the history, to understand a little bit about themselves and about their people a little bit better. So I'd love to hear a young white child... child? A young white person on a poetry stage telling us who they are and how they came to be on this earth, it's very important because poetry also creates a mirror for you to introspect and for you to realise who you are and who your people are so I'd like to see more indian people, more coloured people, more Chinese. Because what I notice with the Spoken Word scene in America is that everybody's slamming! Every, everybody's slamming, you know? And everybody's telling their story whether it be 'I woke up with a pimple on my face today' or 'I come from a history of slavery, I come from a history of pillaging', you know. So those stories are important... Like we go through the most ridiculous micro-aggressions, racial micro-aggressions as well from like white people. So it's a matter of survival for you to like keep quiet, and once you get to a safe space of poetry you can talk about it. So those people who do not experience that, who do not experience this like uhm, repression where you have to be like politically correct all the time, I do wonder what life is like for them. I wonder what kind of poetry their writing and if it's really important in the literary canon of South Africa because I don't think it would be. But I'd still like to see it myself...*

Kurt, who is a white Spoken Word artist, would disagree with the final sentiment presented by Nova as he also hints that the narratives produced by different racial groups can differ significantly, but are important in their own rights:

*'The kind of poems that myself, a middle-class, Caucasian South African would be speaking about, I have issues, like they're not as dire to my basic needs but there are issues in my culture that are hectic. And so I will be speaking about those in my Spoken Word. But if there's a guy from Zone 6 in Mamelodi in the moment where there's crazy, crazy factions between Somalis and South Africans, it's crazy at that township at the moment. The kind of stories he is going to be putting out is about his context. Uhm, so like I said it's about*

*communicating your context in a way that makes people aware that things are going on outside of theirs.'*

Although racial groups differ in the narratives produced, the role of performance and audience engagement is a constant factor on the Spoken Word poetry scene. In the previous section, one remarks that a lot of effort is put into the performative aspect of Spoken Word poetry, this is done in order to emphasise the messages contained in the poetry. As I will demonstrate in the case studies towards the end of this chapter, performance calls on a number of aspects and can be considered important for creating the mood for one's poetry. I consider it interesting to explore the thoughts of poets on the issue of performance in Spoken Word poetry. I begin by considering Mutle's perspective on the influence that performing a poem has in comparison to when a poem is merely read:

*'There are people who have gone on stage and uhm, I think the way they presented their work in comparison, in comparison to when you read it, I think there is a lot more that happens when they're presenting it, and a lot less happens when you just reading their work, you know? So like uhm, I don't know there's, there's... For me it's in the detail, it's in the projection, it's in the articulation, it's in the feel. I feel like it's, it's one thing to memorise a poem and another thing to feel your way through every single word triggering an image in your head and you are feeling it, by the time it comes to uhm, vocal format, it feels so layered and its thick, you know'*

Much of the literature, although predominantly set in the U.S. context, clearly describes the centrality of performance to Spoken Word (see Bruce & Davis, 2000; Hoffman; 2001, and Gregory, 2008). Though this remark carries truth, it is difficult to fully agree with it in the context of Spoken Word in Gauteng. Although performance is considered as an important, non-negligible part of the package, it is important to remark that good writing is stressed and highly promoted (as will be discussed later in this chapter), nonetheless performance is considered as a medium through which the message of the poem is effectively delivered. When referring to performance, audience members and poets usually refer to the theatrical aspects of poetry which include but are not limited to the use of hand gestures, transitions in the nuances of the poet's voice, and movement of the body. As can be expected, the intensity thereof usually depends on the personal style poet. Therefore, some poets are evidently

stronger performers than others, and it is this performance that commonly elicits a strong, positive response from audiences. To an extent, the centrality of performance has also proven to be a cause of insecurity in poets, and as was highlighted during discussions with poets, the pressure to perform is one of the reasons why less strong performers then shy away from the stage. However, some poets devise strategies to curb this, such as the method used by Johannesburg-based poet, Frank Meintjies,

*‘And the cup half-empty side is that many poets and rappers invest in performance – and that investment in performance gives audiences experience and expectation that I can’t live up to. So at all readings, I always ask the Master of Ceremonies to go first... But also because there are often poets who are skilful performers coming after my reading, and then I don’t have to live up to them... This is because the audiences develop these set of expectations of what a poem is and what it should do’ (Alfred, 2014: 21-22).*

Although performances do not always carry the dramatization of theatre, one of the most remarkable performance sets I observed on the scene was the performance of the poem ‘Amina’ by Mandi Poefficient at the 2014 *Word N Sound: Slam for Your Life* (performance is detailed in Slam section of chapter). In this performance, stage props such as condoms and signage created the scene of sexual exploitation, the imagery of which was enhanced by the singing of Ring-a-Roses at the commencement of the poem. She proceeded to polishing a large male shoe in a childlike poem, then carried on to recite this poem on child-marriage and the dangers of sexual economies in poverty stricken spaces. The nuances in her voice moved from playful to angered, creating emotions by the use of her voice. This poem managed to earn her a standing ovation from the audience. It does, however, require practice and skill to effectively deliver a performance poem such as that of Mandi. Afurakan stresses that in order to perform poem with which the audience can engage with and relate to, poems presented cannot be too abstract and should be able to have personal resonance with the audience. He also indicates that the competitive challenge of slam can foster growth in this direction. Therefore, in order for the performance to have effect, the content ought to be relatable, as Afurakan indicates below:

*‘There’s people who have come on the stage, have literally died on the stage and never come back. There are people who come to the*

*stage, have died and literally took it as challenge and went home and... Kagiso Tshepe, we can take him as an example, he was a very introverted writer, he used to write about spaced out things which were more about his own personal dialogue, but he was not connecting with the audience. But then he got on to slam and now he's got Manufacturing Kings. Like how do you top Manufacturing Kings?!'*

One of the most exciting aspects of the Spoken Word scene is the strong interaction between audience members and poets. It is this interaction that sets the pace and determines the levels of enjoyment experienced by artists and audiences alike. I have remarked and have heard it said that for the poets a 'dead' crowd ultimately results in a dull show. It is important for audience members to 'come alive', this includes cheering, snapping of fingers, screams and cheers when poets come onto stage, as well as during performances. I noticed two ways that bring a crowd to life fairly easily. Firstly, many popular poets have managed to attain a form of celebrity status; their presence almost automatically sets the crowd alive. This status is usually achieved by attaining a sturdy presence by performing at numerous events, having good poems with good content, and being a strong performer. The second method is by performing a 'crowd pleaser', a poem that is populated by punchlines and/or humour, a poem that commands attention. Such forms engagement persist during the course of the show. During recitals, it is common that in the event that a poet forgets his or her lines, audience members snap their fingers as a sign of encouragement to the poet to remember and to press on with the performance. Therefore, one may say that the show is as much about the audience response as it is about the artist's performance, and it is very seldom that the one may be divorced from the other. In the same breath, the content and value or relevance thereof also cannot be separated from performance and audience-interaction, and this overall package is important to poets. Illustrative states this is the quote below

*'I've been told many times before that I'm a very good performer so I, I... it worries me but I do hope people don't like my performance more than they do the message. But I have gotten a lot of feedback that what I say, the lessons I teach, the messages I convey basically, that's what people value.'*

It has become evident to me that the gatherings of Spoken Word artists are foremost a platform on which poets can share their art, but similarly it is a stage on which poets are able to sharpen their craft primarily through performance, but also through the discussions and opportunities for workshopping and learning from one another. Audiences, because of their vested interest in the movement, also make contributions and hold strong opinions on how the art form itself can be improved.

Occasionally, at Spoken Word events deliberation takes place on how poets and the movement in general can improve. One such example is a show hosted by *Word N Sound* in March 2014. The *Word N Sound* team facilitated a discussion after the show interval aimed at deliberating on ways to improve the shows. It was explained that *Word N Sound* evolved from being a poetry series to a competitive stage. The team has recently launched *Word N Sound Extra*, targeted at various campuses, under the vision of including poetry workshops, thus opening up a platform to discuss poetry and grow poets, allowing them to tap into their talents. The workshops are intended to incorporate the Top 5 contenders of *Word N Sound*, as well as other persons who are available to assist new emerging poets to enhance their creative writing and performance techniques. They are further organising platforms as well as venues at which poets can sell their products, especially for self-published artists. Two aspects grabbed my attention during the discussions. Firstly, great effort is being placed into improving the skill of the artist, especially in terms of creative writing and the aspect of performativity. Audience members themselves showed most interest in the aspect of performativity, especially those who identified themselves as writers without the skill or confidence to present their art on stage. Secondly, existing and emerging writers were encouraged to pursue making physical products from their art, especially in the form of books. Most poets within the Spoken Word movement are self-published, thus a platform at which to sell their books or other products is a great incentive towards grooming artists whose literary art work continue to exist beyond the stage.

Another example of efforts towards improving the craft took place in Pretoria. A contact of mine had informed me that there was a poetry session at a coffee house in Sunnyside, Pretoria called The Love House. Upon arrival that evening, I realised that it was in fact not a session, but rather a discussion on the state of poetry and the Spoken Word movement in South Africa. The discussion was attended by some renowned poets as well as scholars of the Spoken Word movement within the area of Pretoria such as Vangi, Natalia Molebatsi, Raphael D'Abdon and Given Illustrative Masilela. The mandate of the discussion was to have

an interactive platform for the sharing of ideas on poetry once a month. These would include workshops on poetry, writing skills and such without neglecting the aspect of entertainment. It became known to me that these conversations have been happening for the past five years, but the momentum somehow grows then dies out. Attendees were thus requested to deliberate on ways by which we can sustain such discussions and workshops. It was noted that one of the reasons that the momentum dies out is because the audiences are too ‘regular’, meaning that the same crowds attend these sessions and thus become overly familiar with poets’ works. It is therefore important that they reach a much larger audience outside the borders they are accustomed to as poets. The *Word N Sound* organisation was used as an example of a Spoken Word organisation that has managed to build and sustain a reputable organisation. The organisation was able to accomplish this because they are supported by a dedicated team of marketers that advertise the sessions as well as the organisation itself through posters, blogging, posts on social media networks, and also by constantly sourcing out new talent. *Word N Sound* has managed to grow a generation of consistent writers. It was noted that, even more importantly than growing individuals, we need to grow artists as a whole. It was therefore decided that the plan would be to publish an annual anthology compiled by Pretoria-based poets. The aim would be to encourage good writing as opposed to simply good presentation.

The discussion then escalated to the topic of whether or not to charge for these sessions. The price determinant was based on the questions: What are you charging for? Or what is it that you are giving or exchanging with the audience? One of the poets present remarked that audience members frequently asked why poets always charge so little for their shows, whereas the quality of the work is so high. It was emphasised that it is important for the quality of the shows to be taken into consideration, as well as a financial appreciation of the poets (which appears not to be common practice). *Word N Sound* was once again mentioned as an organisation that is able to give financial appreciation to their poets because they are sponsored. The group thus committed to taking initiative into finding sponsors.

It was remarked that the group ought to deliberate on ways to draw in a crowd on a consistent and expanding basis. To do this, one would need to encourage audience participation (such as through open mics) and draw in “big names”. To draw in recognised poets, the issue of payment once again becomes an issue. It was further emphasised that artist will need to get paid, and that in them getting paid poets will be encouraged to bolster the art presented on stage. Also, it is important to generate some form of revenue (whether through ticket sales

and/ or sponsorship) to account for costs incurred for venue use, marketing and the likes. It is thus essential to determine the cost of producing these shows in order to give an idea of the value of the shows. However, this becomes problematic when taking into consideration the fact that most followers of the movement are students, and therefore pricing becomes a sensitive issue. It came to light that the City of Tshwane has an art budget that they are looking to spend, and should be approached for sponsorship.

Having provided a detailed description of the Spoken Word poetry scenes in Pretoria and Johannesburg, I proceed to reflect on two case studies as examples of the various features mentioned throughout this chapter. The first is an open mic event that took place in Pretoria, and the second a Slam poetry competition hosted in Johannesburg. Both are examples of Spoken Word events and present features thereof mentioned in the descriptions provided throughout this chapter.

*14 September 2013, The IcebreakerRapture Lounge Café, Hatfield*

The ‘Icebreaker’, a show advertised mostly through an event page on Facebook as an open mic platform intended at achieving comic relief, did not draw in a crowd as large as anticipated considering the numbers I had observed at previous shows. This was especially surprising considering that it had been stated on social media that there was a possibility of media coverage by the SABC at this event. However, a number of reasons can be assumed for this, the most important of which in my opinion was that there were a number of alternative shows at the University of Pretoria on that particular day. Furthermore, this show had not received as much advertising in terms of the length of time given for the visibility of the adverts as well as the numbers of posters put up, which evidently played a role in the small outcome of the audience. Evidence for this was presented to me during the course of the show, as people stood outside the venue, asking about the show and why they knew nothing of it. Entrance to the show was at R25 per person, paid at the door. The show was intended to begin at 17:00, but began 45 minutes late as the organisers were waiting for audience numbers to increase. In total, 34 audience members attended who were predominantly female and black, a demographic common at such events.

Inside the venue, seats were shifted to face the open space used as a stage. The seating setup was thus very intimate, with poets being at a close proximity to audience members. Attendees

were able to enjoy calm, relaxing music and order refreshments as they waited for the performances to begin.

‘Metamorphosis’, a black male poet from Johannesburg frequents a number of open mic events I have attended, and on this day he was the first performer. He presented two poems, the first poem *With Love* being received more warmly than the second, *The face*. The reason for this, as I have noted and as was remarked during my interviews with poets and talks with audience members, is that poems that are too abstract, or too complex, tend not to be received with much enthusiasm because they are not easily understood. Preference is thus given to poems that are direct in meaning and purpose, that are easy to understand and relate to. The second performer, ‘No Face’, presented an interesting performance. His composition included an aspect of theatre in that the poet had covered his face with a scarf, depicting his pseudonym. He further explained through a poem that he has no face, and thus emotions are never shown. He spoke of poetry as “*the washing away of ignorance*” and as “*a mixture of laughing and crying*”.

A total number of ten poets presented poems in the open mic session. Of the ten, nine poets were black males. The most popular theme this evening were accounts of romance, as well as personal experiences of love and heartbreak. Nonetheless, the evening was not absent of the common themes of race and refuting the ‘white ideal’, a rejection of common ways of thought and acceptable ideology, as well as biblical references (some in honour of their religious beliefs, others acquiring a more blasphemous tone). It became more and more noticeable that the common means of attaining applause was by putting forward punchlines and catch phrases that would grab the attention of the audience. Also, performativity played a large and important role in capturing the attention of the audience and successfully drawing out the desired emotion.

After the open mic segment, a 15 minute interval was taken, followed by performances done by *PenseedPoets*, a poetry organisation at the University of Pretoria which has over the years gained great popularity as a Christian Poetry Organisation. They began with performances of their ‘icebreakers’, standing in a row, poets being randomly selected by the audience to perform their poems. The debut poem was performed by Steven, who recited a poem titled *Protest Poem* on blackness and its persistent negative association. The twist in this poem was a reference to the idea that the black race has grown to love their oppression, leading to the notion that blacks “are a cursed race”. He remarked towards intra-race fragmentation linked

to issues of class visible in the geographical and social divide of blacks living in Alex and those living in Sandton. The general feel of this poem was centred around the idea that the biggest downfall is the current lack of protesting blacks, and a lack of drive towards social justice for their own people that existed before “...*wronged because there is no recital of freedom songs..... We want our blackness back!*”. Naledi, a black female poet followed by performing a monologue on black space. She narrated through her poetry that due to housing conditions and familial set ups, black persons are seldom afforded the space to experience privacy. The notion of privacy only surfaces after exposure to other groups who have been afforded such a ‘luxury’. She further spoke of the dangers present when living in a shack, and how in some instances, the unfortunate event of shacks burning down speeds up the process of getting a house from government.

The following six performances were themed around love, romance and heartbreak. Two of these poems stressed the role of God in romantic relationships. Flex, in his *Love is a Drug* poem ushered in musicality by having a live keyboard player and singers accompany his poem. These poems were followed by poets’ contributions from other poets on issues of pursuing one’s goals and visions, religion, and the purpose of poetry as a tool for healing, inspiration and positivity. Another popular theme arose once again, that of violence against women. Mantombi presented a poem, with a mellow, sad tone based on the day she “*realised my [her] mother cries*” titled *Mama, I heard your cries*. Her poem tackled the issue of domestic violence, especially regarding intimate partner violence stressing the point that “*Men ought to love their wives like they love their own bodies*”. Steven’s returned with a poem on violence against women, which projected the idea that such violence is evidence of societal degradation. “*Men must not fear the act of violence, but the very thought of it*”. The grand closing poem was a duo on masculinity performed by two black males, Mwamba and Theist. The poem placed emphasis on being men of substance, men gelling into and proposing solutions for societal issues. It spoke against the pressures of trying to fit-in, and a searching for identity. “Let’s take society back”.

From the case study above, we remark that advertising is an important component if one would like to ensure a good turnout at events. We are also confronted with common demographics of such events, high female turnout within the audiences, yet a male-dominated stage. As is the norm, the majority of attendees were black, and a bulk of the narratives produced on these stages considered issues relating to blackness. Importantly, open mic

stages allow poets to perform their poems freely without a competitive edge, a difference important when comparing open mic events to slam poetry events.

*6 October 2013, Word N Sound: Slam for Your Life, Market Theatre, Bus Factory – Newtown, Johannesburg*

The common thread of poetry shows in both Pretoria and Johannesburg seamed its way into yet another event, the show was delayed. Having experienced some trouble with transport and locating the venue, I feared I would have missed a significant portion of the show. However, although I was an hour late from the advertised starting time, I arrived before the show had even started. It is common knowledge amongst Spoken Word fanatics that Word N Sound never begins on time. In fact, it commonly commences an hour or two after the stipulated starting time. However, as mentioned earlier, this is not uncommon to the Spoken Word scene.

The event took place at the Market Theatre Bus Factory in a small and intimate theatre venue that could fit about 100 persons. The large foyer contained artworks showcasing stories of South Africa's history, especially related to apartheid. Most attendees paid their entrance fees of R60 at the door, and received a 'Word N Sound – In Word and Sound We Trust' stamp on the arm as proof of payment. Approximately 60 audience members were present, the majority of which were female. Not surprisingly, the audience members, as well as the poets participating in the slam were black with the exception of an Indian couple who attended the show. A number of audience members attending this event were dressed in an 'Afrocentric' style, i.e. a modernised-African look typically noticeable by African-print attire, beads, natural hair and long skirts make the audience members identifiable.

Six poets, five black males and one black female competed in *Slam for your life*. The slam was divided into three rounds, each with a different set of rules. Each poet performed a single piece for each round, complying with the rules as stipulated for each round. A panel of judges was appointed to judge performances, and decide on the overall winner based on criteria. Due to error on my part, I missed the first two performances. The stage and entire venue was completely dark during the first round, apart from the spotlight placed on the performer. An attempt was made to use lighting and stage equipment to create a full theatre-like production, but it lacked the expertise one would expect at a professional theatre production. All poets

incorporated an element of musicality in their performances for the first section of the slam by playing background music that set the tone and projected a corresponding emotion to the piece they were performing. Between each performance, the emcee would introduce the next poet and provide entertainment in between performances. Mpho Khosi presented a piece on racism in South Africa. He began his performance by playing an Afrikaans history-laden song, *De la Rey*, and proceeded to recite the first half of the poem in Afrikaans, as if taking on an Afrikaner perspective of *kaffirs* stating that all they are good for is to drink, reproduce and such. Through the poem, the message that was being conveyed was that at times the black race does indeed behave in such a manner, thus resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. The song chosen and the harsh manner in which the poem was delivered were nothing short of emotional, evoking a strong response from the crowd. It became evident that delivery and props chosen to deliver the poems are deliberately strategic in gaining the desired reaction from the crowd. This poem is used in Chapter 5 as part of the content analysis. The next poet, Kagiso Tshepe (also known as Elysium) gave a piece on time, evolution, and the purity of spirits. A line that won the applause and roaring of the crowd was “It’s only bones that this world can claim, spirits are eternal”. The body language used was somewhat cosmic, as though he were an extra-terrestrial being giving advice on life. Kagiso also incorporated a number of lines used to mock or ‘diss’ his fellow contestant, Andrew Manyika, which demonstrated both creativity as well as the egotistic aspects of competition one generally finds in a slam. ‘No Life’ began his piece with a news broadcast clip playing in the background. The poem addressed issues of commercialism, the agony of free labour, and call on activists to return to Africanism.

Round two was introduced by Afurakan. A new set of rules was presented: no music, no microphone, and poets were expected to make use of a theatrical aspect. The order of the poets was switched. Poets each presented poems in which they were dressed in attire that represented the persona they took on, or better illustrated the image or story they delivered through their poetry. Furthermore, poets made use of stage props which corresponded to the poem being delivered. The props and introduction sections of the poem were usually the aspect that best set the mood and emotion for the poem being presented. Voice projection and the ability to deliver emotion by change of voice tone was thus especially crucial considering that no technological assistance could be used to achieve this. Furthermore, I felt that due to the restrictions presented by the rules for this round, the actual content of the poems and how these were presented to the audience was of paramount importance. In this round, two poems

stood out for me. Firstly, Poefficient (also known as Mandi), a female poet, delivered a poem on early marriage by taking on the personhood of a girl child named Amina promised in marriage to an older man referred to as ‘the monster’. Mandi’s use of stage props included large male shoes belonging to the monster, boards placed on the chairs, condoms on the floor, and a chair on which she sat as she recited the poem. The scene began with her skipping happily onto stage as a little girl singing ‘ring-a-rosey’. The young girl then proceeds to telling a story about a girl child, Amina, sold to a monster who then became her husband. The poem was effective in creating a scenario of fear from the perspective of a young girl, fear of the possibility of being taken by a monster. Through this poem, the poet illustrated a number of instances that would result in families being coerced into accepting such practices, or actively engaging in processes of avoiding them. The final message however was clear, the evident atrocity that *“little girls [are] transformed into playgrounds for grown men”*. The second poem was presented by Mpho Khosi. The mood was created by the onset, with the lights completely off with the spot light later being placed on the crime scene. Mpho Khosi was supported by a woman on stage explaining the story of how she’d been raped, crying as she saw the man (Mpho Khosi, on the floor, reciting his stanzas as the deceased) laying in a pool of his own blood. As I had noticed in previous shows attended, the issue of abuse against women and girls has and continues to receive much attention. This is frequently accompanied by the emphasis that women should be allowed the element of choice over their lives and bodies as a whole.

Round two was followed by a fifteen minute interval. Round 3, the final round, commenced with an ‘enegiser’ performed by Aisa, a featured poet from Botswana. The poem was recited in Tswana vernacular in a humorous style, centring on Pan Africanism and the role of the poet. Following this performance, the competitive round began with a religious themed poem by Kagiso Tshepe, walking in from the back of the room onto the stage bible in hand, singing an altered version of a vernacular Zulu hymn “Igama le Nkosi Malibongwe”. He proceeded to act out a charismatic church scene, religious music playing in the background, taking on the role of a pastor. He read from his book of life the names of the poets entering into heaven. The interesting alteration was that this is not a gathering of ‘the saints’, but the church of the ‘douchebags’, ‘drunks’, and ‘lazy and tired people’. In this church all are welcome, and the only commandment is to do what makes you happy. I have included this poem in Chapter 5 as a demonstration of how religion is used as both sacred and profane.

The next poet recited a poem that stressed the idea that the present day poetry movement has become more about applause than content. The poet emphasised the seriousness of his writing and poetry through the words “I bleed for the words I speak”. In his poem he recalled that in February 2011, to prove that people don’t give attention to the content, he recited a poem that made no sense, and landed in the top 5 of a slam. He closed with the words “ Don’t applaud when I get off stage until you’re certain that you’ve listened to my words.” The poet following him presented a complementing poem to this theme, stating that poetry is slowly losing its essence. “This is not a game, not about fame. Some have given up their 9 – 5 for this cause...”. Poets thus demonstrate a sense of despair and loss when reflecting on the state of Spoken Word at present. Poems performed by the other poets covered topics including racism, colonisation, the trap of routine, and the importance of building a legacy.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I note in this chapter that there is a distinction between Spoken Word sessions, and Spoken Word events. As with poetry slam scenes described by Gregory (2008), I also stress that it is important to keep in mind that although there are similar threads between different Spoken Word scenes and organisations, no two scenes can be said to be identical. One does however come across a Spoken Word culture that encapsulates modes of performance and audience engagement, as well as constant efforts toward exploring with, and thus improving the craft. I note here that similarities exist between the findings of this chapter and the work of Gioia (2003:28-29) and Somers-Willet (2005:51-70). In the South African scenes I visited during this study, I remark that the movement is founded on an oral culture, although poems are pre-written and recited from memory. The poet, in both senses, is given a strong obligation to perform their poetry whilst presenting narratives that are able to resound with the particular contexts of the public to which the poetry is presented. In this sense, the role of the poet moves from writer to one of an entertainer simultaneously.

Because of the history from which the Spoken Word movement has inherited some of its features, one remarks a strong presence of protest poetry and reflections on Black Consciousness ideology. These forms of poetry influence the occurrence of racialized spaces, as I have illustrated by contrasting *Spoken Sessions* to more typical types of Spoken Word events hosted by other organisations. The differences presented by the case of *Spoken Sessions* and more conventional, Black Spoken sessions present us with the dialogue on publics and that of popular culture that constitute the theoretical framework used in this

study. Clay (2006) locates hip-hop slam within popular culture, stating that popular culture is a valuable place within which individuals are able engage with a process of meaning-making, self-identification and a sense of community. Similarly, a public is formed when amongst factors listed in Chapter 2, strangers are provided with a place (physical or not) in which to relate. A public is also created through being addressed in a social space created by reflexive circulation of discourse. A public is further able to create their own world in which they determine the manners in which they speak and behave amongst other things (see Warner, 2005:65-125). Spoken Word as a form of popular culture provides its members with a sense a community, as well as platforms on which to address or be addressed on issues with which they are able to identify with and make meaning of. Communities thus determine the scope of their discourses informed by the social and political contexts of their members. In the Spoken Word movement, we witness how this may also demarcate which circles or publics particular race and class groups would be more comfortable participating in.

We learn from the work of Gqola (2001) that links to protest literature and the Black Consciousness Movement have also allowed for the infiltration of female poets and narratives pertaining to gender issues. However, in this chapter I demonstrate that Spoken Word stages remain gendered spaces. Links to protest also present certain hindrances to the opportunities available to poets, this makes one wonder upon the extent free speech can exist in Spoken Word, especially when funded by or presented to audiences belonging to seats of power. However, poets demonstrate a vested interest in their art. In the following chapter, I thus seek to explore the poets' own perception and experiences of the Spoken Word movement in Pretoria and Johannesburg.

## CHAPTER 4:

### THEIR MOVEMENT, THEIR WORDS: INTERVIEWS WITH SPOKEN WORD POETS

In this Chapter I attempt to draw out as far as possible the voices of the poets and stress their experiences. To obtain the data used in this Chapter, I conducted face-to-face interviews with 13 poets using an open-ended questionnaire. I also captured a conversation amongst poets which I considered helpful and was fortunately permitted to record. Unfortunately, some of the poets interviewed do not have their voices directly recorded in this Chapter due to technical difficulties resulting in the loss of data. For enrichment purposes, I further considered interviews obtained from internet articles, YouTube recordings, as well as a book titled *Twelve + One* that contains interviews with a number of Spoken Word poets, as well as those who do not identify themselves with the Spoken Word movement. These interviews were solely used as a means of confirming similarities in the voices of the poets I interviewed personally to those of other poets, but I do not reflect these voices in this chapter.

The following Chapter outlines the views of poets from both Pretoria and Johannesburg on the Spoken Word poetry scene by highlighting their descriptions of the movement and also illustrating the reasons or the features of this movement that render the art form important to them. Central to this chapter is a consideration of these poets' experiences of the economic aspects of the Spoken Word poetry movement and also a consideration of the extent to which they consider Spoken Word poetry to fit into the cultural industries. I conclude by looking at suggestions given by poets themselves on strengthening their stakes in the cultural industries.

#### **Describing the scene(s)**

##### A break with the past?

In Chapter 2 I illustrate through literature that the South African Spoken Word movement sprouts up, at least in part, from a heritage of African oral poetry, as well as liberation poets who advocated for democracy. The performance poetry scene of the 1980s thus reflected a great deal of the Black Consciousness ideology that gained popularity in that period. Later, poets emerged that incorporated aspects from Black Consciousness-led theatre poetry, jazz,

and tsotsi-taal which blended with African-American styles of Spoken Word poetry to birth the style of Spoken Word poetry we encounter in South Africa today.

Based on the interviews with poets, I argue that there is an understood shift between the Spoken Word scene today, and the protest or liberation poetry of old. Below, I explore Afurakan's, founder of Word N Sound, account of these two moments in poetry, as someone who experienced and actively participated in both scenes:

*'When I got into it, it was going through [mumbles] uhm... it was going through an interesting phase because we were coming out of protest poetry so we were Mzwakhe Mbuli, Kgafela, and your academia, your Matera's, Kgosi Tlela's, you Lefifi Tladi's. And you know, with the whole reclaiming blackness, reclaiming Africaness primarily driven by Thabo Mbeki, Spoken Word sort of moved into the Rasta space, sort of the 'conscious' space where it was like seen as a conscious thing to be a poet, you know, uh. I remember the first sessions at horror café were very Rasta heavy which made it awkward for other people to get on stage. If you were wearing heels or had a weave it would be like, 'now what' but it was progressive, it was exciting. Yes, there were different voices uhm but it was not progressive. One, the setup was not attractive to non-traditional artists or producers, so it felt like a clique, it felt like a religion. Investors did not see value in it, if it was just for people of a certain mind-set, how do we get our returns on it? Sponsorships for show, for productions, for anything like that, and also because we were sort of redefining what literature is in South Africa, there weren't a lot of, uhm, opportunities. So for the poets who were relevant then, who were prominent, it was easier then to get into the corporate sector, so your Kojo's went into publishing, your Lebo's went into television, Nabo went into productions, Tumi started his own record label, that time it was still called Flower Pot before he started Motif. Kabomo went into music directing, HHP you know, uh, went and started recording, pushed his career. Ntsiki went into beadery. So people started patching themselves up because the reality was that yeah we're performing, we're dope, but we're not paying the bills. And see*

*people they were getting older, starting families, so for them it sort of became real to put bread on the table. And when that happened it left this sort of pseudo, preaching to the converted sort of congregation that was going on there and it slowly, you know, died out with Horror Café getting shut down, I think that was sort of the last nail in the coffin. A lot of voices that mattered were not on the scene anymore.'*

In Afurakan's exposition of the poetry scene of old compared to the poetry scene we are currently experiencing in Johannesburg, there are a number of interesting points. In the first instance, he indicates a transition phase from protest poets which comprised of performance poets who drew greatly from traditional African praise poetry and oral traditions; the likes of Mzwakhe Mbuli and Kgafela and poets belonging to academia, such as Don Matera and Lefifi Tladi. This transition involved a move away from that moment of poetry into a moment that retained the aspects of protest poetry by focusing on the dominant discourse of the day which centred on reclaiming Africaness, African liberation, and Blackness so much so that it began to resemble a religion. This was reflected by an almost Rastafarian culture, referred to as being 'conscious' (a term derived from Black Consciousness) which became visibly apparent through styles of dress and personal appearance i.e. dreadlocks and the shunning of weaves. Failure to comply with the expected projections of consciousness thus resulted in covert sanctions. Secondly, the poet describes the scene as both progressive and 'unprogressive'. The former moment of poetry, according to the poet, was progressive in the narratives it produced, and its alignment to the Pan African ideal. However, that moment is also considered not to be progressive due to the limitations of its narratives and the focus on Africaness, therefore this poetry scene was unattractive to funders and not particularly suitable for commercialisation. Furthermore, as this moment was "redefining literature" by doing away with restrictions to the written page by considering oral verse as literature, there were limited opportunities open for poets. As a result, important voices of the time ventured into more lucrative and sustainable career paths and projects. Ultimately this scene slowly died out along with some of its dominant voices. In the following quotation, Afurakan highlights important ways in which the present day Spoken Word poetry movement differs from that of old:

*'But then [referring to the previous wave of poetry] there was still separation, your academia was still there, your protest was still there but there was never really space for more of a consolidated scene that*

*allowed for anyone who is anyone from anywhere to come up and be, and be a part of it. Compared to now, we've managed to swing that around and primarily by letting it die out pre-2010, I think it was a good thing because it allowed for like fresh ground. Because when I came back from Malawi there was nothing happening, there was nothing happening so we started Word N Sound and it was like a conscious decision that we don't fall into the same trap as the previous... and especially because I lived through the previous cycle, I knew it inside out, I knew the people involved so like how do we make it different, you know? So opening it up and making sure that it's non-biased, it's non-sexist, it's apolitical. It's a space for anyone from all walks of life to come through.... So I think the scene now is completely different, its more vibrant, its more diversified, the people involved in it are professionals and for the first time we are able to make a living out of it but by diversifying your writing.'*

Because the previous poetry scene was dominated by narratives of liberation, it was difficult for those who did not fixate their poetry on this topic to enter the scene. The present day scene is considered as being “completely different” because it eradicates the exclusivity generated through narratives of liberation and the expectations it creates by opening up the stage to diverse people, and thus diverse narratives. Consequentially, one may thus assume that since a lack of diversification in narratives and a fixation on the pressing issue of black identity and liberation were considered as impediments to funding, the present day Spoken Word scene should be more conducive to commercialisation. Afurakan states that this is possible, however, to the extent that one is able to diversify their writing, a topic we shall explore later in this chapter. It is also interesting to consider that the scene is described by the speaker as being apolitical and non-sexist. Although the scene may be described in those terms, this by no means indicates that the present day Spoken Word scene is void of unequal gender relations or strong narrations of a political nature. I mention in Chapter 3 that although Spoken Word platforms allow space for both men and women to share their stories, the Spoken Word scene is gendered. Furthermore, political and racial content continue to dominate the scene, contributing to the scene being predominantly black, with hints of racial and class divides.

## A glance at the present

As we have briefly explored the Spoken Word scene of the past, I consider it relevant to consider the poets' own descriptions of the Spoken Word scene and what makes this particular moment of performance poetry in South Africa significant. My first point of departure is that the Spoken Word movement belongs to a variety of people across the nation and it would thus be gravely inaccurate to make too broad assumptions over the Spoken Word scene in general. This is a perspective shared by a number of poets, making it difficult to give a concise description of the movement and its objectives, as stated by Given Masilela "*the Spoken Word movement belongs to so many people*". However, I use the views of these poets as a guideline into the different perspectives of what the present day Spoken Word movement is, and is characterised by. In essence, I hope to draw out an image of the current Spoken Word culture. I begin by taking a look at the various types of Spoken Word as posited by Vangile Gantsho:

*'I think that there are different types of Spoken Word that we're experiencing. We're experiencing the slam Spoken Word culture, and we're experiencing the... sort of... I see a hard-core Spoken Word culture and we're also experiencing the political activist sort of like rally Spoken Word movement. And then we're experiencing the soft, purist kind poets who don't necessarily follow the Spoken Word culture in that they recite but because they share their poetry through speaking it becomes classified as Spoken Word.'*

Vangile differentiates between different types of Spoken Word poetry through the aspects of its content, as well as aspects of its style and performance. From her explanation, one may deduce that there is a competitive Spoken Word culture (slam poetry), a Spoken Word culture that is 'hard-core' assumedly focused on hard issues, and a Spoken Word culture that rallies around political content. Important to note is that although poetry recitals and purist poetry may be classified as Spoken Word because they are verbally recited, this form of poetry does not form part of the Spoken Word poetry culture because it lacks a crucial aspect of the Spoken Word poetry movement, performance in place of mere recital. This point is further emphasised by Vangile in stating that:

*'I think this, I think if you talk about the Spoken Word culture itself uhm, it tends to be a lot more aggressive, it tends to be a lot more uhm... what's the word? Performance oriented. It tends to be about remembering your words and then performing it, giving a full show, showcasing your words as an entire experience. Whereas reciting and sharing is just about releasing the words from the paper to the ears of the receiver.'*

These alterations in the types of poetry that exist cause, to a certain extent, a level of confusion regarding which poetry may indeed be classified as Spoken Word. Although I concur with the view as presented by Vangile above because of literature and my own personal deductions through this ethnographic study, there exist other ways of conceptualising the Spoken Word movement and poetry itself. Cornelius Jones, in the following quote attempts to explain this:

*'Well I mean, I was reading up on the history of sl.. of slam and, what, what the guy that studies slam poetry was saying basically is that, umm [pause] he wanted to make poetry exciting by putting, by incorporating, performance. Umm, so I think, I think that's the difference between... between... People get confused that there's poetry, then there's Spoken Word and then there's slam. Think Slam is the competitive err [sound to emphasise aggression], part of poetry. And then Spoken Word is basically getting on stage and performing your poem. And then, there's, there's uh... there's also umm, the poetry that is written, you know? Not everyone that's a poet has to get on stage or does get on stage. So there's that poetry as well, where people just write for, for people to read, you know, and not necessarily get on stage and take it in that way.'*

We have established that there are different types of poetry that fit into the category of Spoken Word, the common feature of these being a strong emphasis on performance and thus on the aspect of entertainment itself. We have also noted above that the former wave of performance poetry created a sense of social solidarity amongst its members through its narratives and the culture that came to embody it. I argue that in the present Spoken Word movement there continues to exist a sense of community, although the scene is more

diversified than before. The movement is successful in providing its members with a sense of culture, as well as a sense belonging. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, racial solidarity in demographics and in content contribute to this sense of community. However, even at poetry circles not bound together by race such as *Spoken Sessions*, a racially diverse poetry session in Pretoria, a sense of community is shared as explained by Kurt:

*'Uhm, with all due respect to Pretoria, I think it is difficult to, culturally we need something new. When your only alternatives are Hatfield Square and Loftus [sighs] it's just sad. And I think that there's a desperation here to find something culturally stimulating, and Spoken Word is that. It's just this beautiful product of community, and cultural stimulation and enjoyment. I think that there's a large entertainment factor especially these guys dropping line after profound line where the crowd is going 'whoa!! What did you just say?'*

Despite solidarity and feelings of community found in the Spoken Word movement, there are certain cultural features that serve an exclusionary function, albeit unintentional. One such examples is the style of dress and appearance that has its roots in the former wave of performance poetry and may be linked to Black Consciousness ideology, which continue to influence the Spoken Word movement as mentioned above. The ideology of Black Consciousness advocated for the display and admiration of 'black beauty' and a renouncing of Western ideals of beauty (Pityana et al, 1991), although to a limited extent these ideals of beauty and appearance seep into the poetry scene. Below I cite the experience of Nova as a demonstration of how preconceived ideas on image may to an extent influence who is seen as a legitimate member of this community:

*'And when I started writing poetry actually, when I started slamming in 2012 as I said, I used to get to venues where slams were being held and everyone would look at me funny, you know, because I'd be given that kind of cold 'why are you here' stare 'cause I'd have a weave on, you know what I'm saying? So... and I wouldn't be dressed in... I love African print, well not African print but I love the various African textiles that everyone else wears, I love 'em, I love braids, I have an afro but sometimes I'll wear a weave and sometimes I'll look*

*however I wanna look and so that was met with animosity. When people first saw me before they knew I could even, you know... and that made me feel like an outsider in the space because the narrative has to be coming from struggle and strife and poverty in order for anyone to hear you and I was made to feel like my voice wasn't legitimate because I wasn't outwardly inculcating of what that is. And so I was met with a lot of animosity.'*

### **Why it matters**

We have established that the Spoken Word movement has made notable transformation with regard to its culture as compared to the previous wave of performance poetry, however threads still remain that link the two cultures. I now proceed to consider the poets views on the importance of the present day Spoken Word poetry movement. I illustrate that poets consider five elements of Spoken Word as significant and important, not only within the Spoken Word community itself but also because its effects are able to permeate the broader society as a whole. The five elements considered here are (1) the advocacy for the advancement of black literature, (2) a focus on the need for social change, (3) creating a platform for feelings of community, (4) artistic improvement, and (5) creating a sustainable legacy for future generations.

As indicated in Chapter 2, Spoken Word favours oral poetry and live performance over the written poem. In fact, the production of conventional poetry literature and even audio productions of poetry are considered as secondary outputs. However, during interviews poets labelled this style of poetry as 'oral literature'. Surprisingly, it was stressed that the written poem still has an important place in the Spoken Word movement. I consider extracts from an interview with Masai to further illustrate this point:

*'Currently, I'm gonna be blunt about it, as black writers that we are not taken seriously at some level. That we are from the township, you know and stuff like that. So at this certain moment our objective is to show that we can write, you know, and there's far more beyond than this medieval play that says 'this is poetry', there's much more beneath [laughs]. But yeah, truth be told, eish, the objective at this certain moment is to take African literature to another level using*

*slam poetry because so many people are not particularly taken by slam poetry, you know. I've heard people telling me we're selling out to competitive aspects of slam poetry, it tends to lead people astray, it's about egos these days, it's about punchlines, but they're forgetting one thing – people are talking about poetry which is like real, people are engaging with poetry, interacting with poetry, because it's like now it has brought a whole new breed of kids on the block who are largely passionate about the art form.'*

From this extract, one notes that it is important that poets be recognised not as much for their ability to perform poetry on stage, but be recognised and acknowledged as black writers who are skilled in their writing. The aspect of performance, competitive performance more specifically in this instance, is utilised as a vehicle through which this objective of recognising African, black literature may gain greater appreciation. Slam poetry is considered as being a suitable means to attaining this aim because of the amount of attention and engagement this art form receives, particularly from youth, despite the fact that slam poetry is considered a questionable art form. This attention is not peculiar to the South African situation as slam poetry has become a means by which learners have begun to engage with poetry, a subject that was previously considered by youth as irrelevant (Ellis et al, 2003:45). Such engagement with the art form has potential to elicit enthusiasm for poetry in the classroom by incorporating the aspects of orality and performativity, as has already begun in the USA (Ellis et al, 2003: 44-47). With this taken into consideration, one can begin to appreciate the significance of Spoken Word poetry as an art form that adds value to Africa's creative economy, thus also making it a creative way of addressing Africa's low contribution to world art, as emphasised by Masai:

*'...because I read some statistic that said that Africa as a whole is contributing a percent to world art and it's appalling. We're not talking about South Africa itself, we're talking about Africa as a whole and contributing a percent to world art is appalling. So we need to come up with creative ways as to how we can try to curb that.'*

One of the creative ways used to curb the problem of poor contribution to world art, as well as attempt to address the issue of increasing appreciation and availability of black literature

has been to involve youth in the production of poetry and encourage the production and publication of books. Referring to an initiative by Word N Sound, Masai demonstrates in the quote below that communities that still suffer the effects of the apartheid regime and are still at present disadvantaged are targeted not only to produce literature, but also to begin to engage with literature. Competition is considered by Masai to be fuel that will encourage engagement through reward. Central to his position, and reflected in the quote below, is the idea that it is not only the poets that contribute to this initiative, but assistance is provided from the Spoken Word community at large. In this way, the Spoken Word community is able to use poetry and literature as a solution to problems within their communities:

*'like there's a high school in my neighbourhood, like when we got there they were like 'no, we don't have a library but we have space that was supposed to be a library but we have no books'. So I was like ok, let's challenge the audience, our audience, let's challenge the audience from last year to collect books. So we took these books and sent them to the library to interact with, with the kids there to interact, to shape their own paths through literature. So I think we're also trying as poets to say ok fine, how do we take these group of kids, groom them up to read for themselves? Because I think if I had a person who was like me when growing up then things were gonna be like slightly better. And that's like what I think we're trying to do, like getting into schools and helping out with those programmes and then pushing them to second levels with their lives. Because of like, they should be publishing like books and people might say that I'm being ridiculous, but in like high school, it would be cool to publish your own book, not have a trophy of soccer or a trophy of rugby but have a book, and say 'kids in this school published a book'. And my thing with that is it becomes, it's also competition because if kids this year would publish a book, next year when the other kids come into the poetry society they wanna do better than these ones of the previous year, so then there's that competition element to it. So that, that's what I liked. I feel like even that could play a large role so that's how I feel we can use poetry, use it to interact with our societies, let it solve our problems'*

Building up the reputation of African literature, and raising a generation of black writers is identified as important contributions the Spoken Word movement can make. This links up with the objective Afurakan highlights in the quote below which is building a nation of writers that write beyond poetry. The aim is thus to demonstrate to society broadly and also to poets themselves that writing is a valuable skill across domains. Through building the skill of writing, poets seek to broaden the spectrum of opportunities they are able to create for themselves, and expand their contribution to the creative industries amongst others. This aspect shall be explored further later in this chapter:

*'To build a nation of writers, primarily. I think that's been our objective from the beginning, to build a nation of writers. Uhm, and where then that grows into is God's speed because one, every single industry needs writing. I think the minute we can start understanding that concept, every single industry needs words. No matter how technical it is, no matter how specialised it is, no matter how academic, in fact the more academic it is the more words they need. So as writers how do we build a new industry, a new economy out of words. Because if you look at TV, TV is a multi-billion dollar industry and it's based around words and visuals. If you look at media, newspapers, TV, if you look at music... so how do we take the industry of words and make sure that we are the raw material, we are the feeders to each and every industry. They take... words are the raw material that can get converted into anything. I can get it converted into motion picture, get it converted into music, gets converted into business presentations, into products, right down to uhm... You know somebody writes that, a copywriter, right down to slogans for your brand to TV, right down to sport. Every single industry at some stage it needs identity, it needs words, it needs some sort of an explanation of what it is, and us as writers we can take advantage of that. And the beauty of it is that the raw material is in your head, you don't need an office you don't need... you just need a pen and a computer and you can create work. I think primarily for the movement that's what we're trying to do, to get Africans who understand that creativity is the last economy we'll ever own, and the last industry we'll ever own. There's*

*still that. Even if they take everything else, we still have our own creativity.'*

An important aspect that reaches into writing and performing is found in the content of the poetry. In Chapter 2, I posit drawing on literature that Spoken Word poets rally around social issues, and are perceived as being spokespersons of their communities, narrating their experiences and social conditions. This function is considered by a number of poets as an important objective of Spoken Word poetry; the ability to narrate various social ills as experienced by themselves and their communities, as well as advocate for an agenda of social change. The narratives addressed can also be said to be aimed deliberately at being relevant to the audiences that build this community - Black youth that have and continue to experience the adverse effects of apartheid yet aspire towards more progressive socio-economic conditions. In these narratives, poets at times directly address persons perceived as having power to influence these issues. Nova explains this as:

*'Whereas there are people who want to create the kind of art that speaks to power in this country; that speaks to the status quo and the objectives that I see is just yeah, social justice, social issues. Lots of people are dealing with the realities of what apartheid was and what it continues to be, you know, and people... We have this rainbow nation that tells us that everything is fine, you know. And that tells us that everything is fine and that everything has reformed, and that really isn't the situation for people on the ground. And that comes with many frustrations, and I think that that's what, that's one of the things. Each person has a truth that they carry inside of them and that's just one of the objectives that people rally around.'*

Although not all Spoken Word artists rally around social issues, those who do communicate the realities of their respective publics, this is the point made by Kurt who says:

*'But I feel that Spoken Word artists are more, many of them, I think myself included are interested in what they want to say and what they want people to hear about politics, about sex and drugs, about, uhm, the human experience. And it's a, it's a, it can be a very serious thing. There's guys who do Spoken Word pieces that are just beautiful and entertaining and lovely and help you escape from it all, much like*

*music would as well. Uhm, but there's guys who have a strong message. They have strong messages about society, about what's going on, the serious issues, the sad issues, the unspoken issues that maybe a lot of popular art doesn't, popular music rather, doesn't cover. And so I'd say one of the objectives I would say is communicating the realities of their context within a community.'*

In addition to narrating the lived experiences and realities of their communities, Illustrative suggests that the poetry presented is also useful as a tool to challenge preconceived ideas and cultures. In this sense, poets are able to steer at the very least mind-sets and attitudes towards change, setting a foundation for a change in behaviour:

*'I think I value the fact that my work is there to shape societies and challenge society's way of thinking, basically. Cultures that we never dared to challenge, traditions that we never dared to challenge. So it's very valuable in the sense that it's something that I think can contribute to the growth, and society taking a certain shape.'*

Whilst addressing important social issues, poets are also able to create feelings of community amongst followers. Whereas other art forms are perceived as allowing persons a form of escapism from the troubles of the human condition, Spoken Word poetry directly tackles these issues and it is in the sharing of the human condition and personal experiences that a sense of community is created. Therefore, Afurakan suggests that as compared to other art forms, hip hop presented as an example, Spoken Word is an art form that should be perceived as a more respectable, and socially responsible career projection:

*'If you listen to house music, you listen to hip hop, you listen to jazz, you listen to RnB, Rock n Roll, whatever it is, there's words in there. So why is poetry, which is the purest form of all of those genres [laughs], you know, suddenly side-lined. The one form that speaks to the human conditions sort of side-lined and everybody is busy entertaining genres that help us forget about the human condition. If you look at house music, it's primarily for you to forget about the human condition, to escape your reality, go into a trans, hip hop does the same thing you know, live in this fantasy bubble where there's everything. There's champagne flowing, there's money, there's loose*

*women, uhm, everything is just hunky dory and that's the illusion the genre now drives you into. Where poetry more than anything bears your soul, it strips you down and says lets deal with the fundamentals of being human, let's not shy away from issues whether its religion, whether its sex, whether its gender, politics, you know. We all have these little things that connect us, we all love we all go through heartbreak, we all cry we all laugh, we all have insecurities, we all have fears we all aspire to something, we're all inspired by something and I feel like poetry is the one genre that highlights all of these things and does not try to put fluff, and put cotton and candy around it, around the thing and so I think for us if people can see writing as a respectable career, and as something they would like to do and to go out there and preach, that's the long term objective.'*

Masai likens the sense of community created above as an addictive energy that, like religion, gives one a sense of belonging. Nova concurs with this notion by explaining the relevance of poetry as the “*Same reason why people go to church, you wanna go there feeling that there's a bigger power than you moving in your life, that's exactly what poetry does*”. The emotional reactions brought on by the sharing of human experiences is described by Masai as both addictive and necessary:

*'We're all human and we're all addicted to this energy, it's kinda like a unisen, like it brings us together. I've been looking at people going to church and taking pictures of them and there's this addiction we have when it comes to energy, that one energy when we share a moment together. There's something special there and we can't just let it go, even in clubs its felt when people are dancing together to one song there's union, its spiritual its somewhat deistic, some people will just go crazy over it. Where you can recite a poem and a person will cry, and two people will cry, four people will cry but the energy is one and we embrace that, we're addicted to it, we need it, you know.'*

Finally, the Spoken Word movement is considered important as a possible instrument towards addressing the injustices of the past and generating both financial and cultural legacies for future generations. The socio-economic effects of apartheid are understood as

having creating hindrances towards economic upliftment of the black population; consequentially a significant gap exists between black and white persons. As a result, advances are made towards attaining better socio-economic standing. In the case of the Spoken Word movement, this end is expected to be attained through creative entrepreneurship. Furthermore, creative platforms are anticipated to facilitate prospects for creative entrepreneurship for future generations, as well as for creative mentorship, and the ability to enter existing Spoken Word platforms. This perspective is narrated by Afurakan:

*'To understand that leaving financial legacies for our kids, we come from such a horrible past that we don't have kick-starts it starts from us as creative entrepreneurs and we have to literally start from the bottom where white kids have three generations advantage by the time... we'll never catch up, you know what I mean? So it's starting to build financial legacies for our kids, creating platforms so that our kids don't have to start from scratch creating their own open mic. Why can't our kids step onto an open mic that has been running for 15 years and that kid can point faces and names of people who have gone through that open mic and then turned out to be like legendary writers and creative, and they can grow up in that legacy, that space, with those people, getting workshopped by them, getting inspired by them. Because currently there's still a gap between us and the Lefifi Tladis's and the Lesego Ramokengs, and for me it's about bridging that gap. That any twenty-one year old writer can go up to [inaudible] and ask can I have 30/40 minutes of your time, can I pick your brain on one, two, three, four things? And those are the kind of legacies we are trying to overturn as we go, and the reality is that the arts can feed you, the arts... you can be mega rich from creativity. And we need to start believing that and understanding that so we can start shifting our parents' mind-sets so when a child says I wanna go study literature, you know, the parents can see examples, can see the trajectory, can see the bigger picture because you can make a living, you can become successful and so forth. So turning that around and just making poetry and words part of mainstream culture because it's a pity that it's side-lined but it's at the core of everything.'*

## Finding a space in the Cultural Industries

We became acquainted with the work of Throsby (2001) on the cultural industries in Chapter 2 who argues that although money is not the primary motivator for artists, money is an important factor for artists as it is essential for both survival and upward social mobility. We have also remarked earlier in Chapter 3 that significant effort is placed in improving the poets' craft, and also in this chapter that efforts have been geared towards steering the Spoken Word movement towards achieving financial gains whilst producing art that speaks to the human experience.

Throsby (2001:100) argues that to an artist, the production of artistic labour is more significant than the financial reward it offers. We have noted in this chapter that poets view their work as having important social and cultural value, and thus as adding personal significance to their lives. Vangi expresses the extent to which she invests time and effort into polishing her work and ensuring that the cultural output is of good quality:

*'I think for me personally my work is my life. This is what I do full-time; this is what I do for a living. I dedicate, I don't know if I've put in ten thousand hours yet but I'm pretty sure that I am somewhere, very, very close. You know, because I eat, breathe, sleep Spoken Word. I mean I'm the type who is constantly reading, I mean poetry not just Spoken Word. I mean I'm constantly reading, I'm constantly watching YouTube clips, I perform in front of like chairs and showers and mirrors [laughs] to rehearse. I walk, when I'm walking, if I'm walking I'm seldom not rehearsing. Even on my way here I was rehearsing so, yes...'*

This point is further stressed by Illustrative who in the quote below, as Throsby (2001:94) has inferred, considers his creative work and the social value thereof of primary importance, economic value is regarded as an incentive and outcome of creative work. This pursuit of the craft and dedication to one's work despite the absence of immediate financial gain is further drawn out by in the second quote:

*'I personally don't think much about the money, uhm, I love, to be quite honest I love the message, I love doing what I do, I love conveying the message so to be quite honest I don't really know much*

*about how to acquire funds in terms of poetry. I really don't have too many clues. What I do know, and this is from my own personal experience and through other people, artists who surround me... first of all, we make money through shows that we have, people pay obviously to come and watch us on stage, people pay for our material in terms of books and audio albums, uhm, and, companies pay for poets to basically come and boost their brands and increase their sales, and sometimes even in business seminars you find that they need a poem to come and be an icebreaker and ja, those are basically ways in which poets make money that I know of where I'm at.'*

Afurakan similarly expresses the same sentiments in the following quote, speaking more specifically about his beginning years on the scene:

*'So for me that time it was just exploring just engaging in the scene, trying to understand who's who. How does this whole thing work? Can I even make money off of it? I mean I left home Flo and I didn't have a flat or anywhere to stay in Jo'burg, we used to crash pretty much everywhere, at a friend's place, outside even. I remember this one time [laughs] we opened for Mutabaruka, oh God, we opened for Mutabaruka and then we went to Auckland Park and slept on a flight of stairs like literally with the posters that had our names on it, we took our posters off the walls after the show and when we get there, that was like our blankets, so you know. That was just like part of getting into Jo'burg and trying to find your feet in this crazy place. It was just like ja, that was the early years, that's how I got into it. That was just like getting into it'*

I thought it interesting to consider the poets' perceptions on the availability of funding, whether from private institutions or government. It came to my attention that although poets perceive themselves as being at a peculiar disadvantage, there is a perception that the arts in general struggle in South Africa. Nova, who is both a dancer and poet, provides the following explanation:

*'I mean even the dancers struggle that I know first-hand, the theatre struggles in fact, everybody struggles. But then only as far as it suits,*

*only as far as it suits the state then, you know, the cultural industries is given importance. It's really, it's really sad actually. But I guess everyone is struggling when it comes to the arts, poets even more so because poets don't have an established place in South Africa's imagination, you know what I mean.'*

The lack of funding for this genre is not without consequence; it has also come to the media's attention that performance poetry does not receive nearly as much publicity as do a number of other performing arts (Artslink, 2011). It is assumed that perhaps, due to the nature of the content of this poetry, it is unattractive to the state as is suggested by Nova:

*'but this, it explains why poetry you're not gonna switch on you television and find something to do with poetry. It's still something which even the Department of Arts and Culture is only recognising very reluctantly and it puts poets in such a hard situation because I don't know if the government is so uh... I don't know if the government is so uninvolved with poetry because poets usually speak truth about the state, I don't know what the issue is, but it's such an unsupported art form and that's why many people have to establish their own platforms, ja.'*

As is insinuated above, a number of poetry stages are self-funded due to the absence of funding. I remark from my interview with Kurt that without the injection of personal funds, it is safe to assume that a number of Spoken Word platforms would collapse. Kurt posits that the art form is seldom supported financially, regardless of the possibility of making noticeable returns on investment through income generators such as ticket sales. He attributes this lack of funding to ignorance concerning the value of this art form. One of the essential features of his remark is that because of the frequency of poetry events, it becomes somewhat unreasonable to charge large sums for events as it defeats the possibilities of sustaining the sense of community that exists within Spoken Word circles, most especially because followers are usually students.

*'Uhm, ja, for me Spoken Word is [pause], it's so hard to fund it. Every event that I run, I've been running Spoken Word events for two years, and every event that I've run I've funded myself. Uhm, and it's hard. When I say I've funded myself I mean that some of it is frankly*

*straight out of my bank account and that's ok. But funded myself would be, we'd run an event, R20, or R30 or R40 to get in and whatever we make we pour into our next event. I've never made money out of Spoken Word events management. As a performer I've had a couple of paying gigs which was fantastic, but as an events manager the money always goes straight back into the next event. It's just enough to start the next event and so on. What is, what is frustrating for me is that I can see the potential for investment value and for return on investment if people would just throw their money behind this. But then I would obviously have to be that as an event organiser. So In terms of getting funding it's difficult, it is difficult to communicate to people the value of this in a way that gets them excited to put their money in this. At the same time it's hard to find a balance between profitability and affordability, profitability for yourself and affordability for your audience. Uhm, the majority of the audiences at my events are people my age, people who [referring to students] money is, there's not a lot of money going around and you can't afford to charge, people can't afford to be paying R100, R150 to get into a venue. If I were charging that, sure I could make a profit. But I feel like it would defeat the point of an easy place for people to come together and be a community.'*

As I have already demonstrated that most Spoken Word stages are self-funded by poets and organisers, it is useful to also consider the various expenses involved in producing Spoken Word events. Throsby (2011) includes cost of production as a factor towards calculating the financial and cultural value of the art produced. Cost of production thus includes material costs as well as time spent on production. In terms of time, we remark earlier in this chapter that a significant amount of time, “ten thousand hours” if I am to quote Vangi, is put into manufacturing performance poetry of high quality. Vangi's consistent reference to the “10,000-Hour Rule” expanded on in Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers* solidifies the notion that production time, and time spent perfecting the art is a significant cost. In this section, I proceed to consider a few material costs that also feature in the production of a poetry event as posited by Vangi, who, with reference to a typical paycheque for a corporate performance states the following:

*'Uhm... Listen, I think that that's a really good pay cheque, considering that if... I mean it depends on how long you take to write. I mean sometimes if people want to commission a poem then you charge more. So that process alone is gonna take you a very long time to complete and then you're gonna have to memorise the poem and work it into a performance. So I definitely think that that's worth it. Uhm... For everything else there is also a lot that goes into a performance. Say for example if you're going to perform at a big stage you also have to consider that you are probably gonna need a dress or you're gonna need make-up, you're also gonna need to get there, get back, uhm and you still have to write you have to learn the words and you have to perform.'*

In the statement below, Illustrative suggests that considering the costs and efforts involved, it is an important objective to members of the Spoken Word movement that this art form be recognised for its financial value, and that as a result, poets be accordingly compensated for their artistic efforts. In his statement, he remarks on a level of resistance that exists in the general public around poetry, an aspect that could also have an influence on the prospects of attaining funding:

*'the objective of getting poetry to be recognised, and this I'm talking in the sense of for us to be respected as artists, and for us to also be paid what we are worth because I've seen that people in the Spoken Word movement put in a lot of effort in their work, I mean I've seen people walking in the street reciting the piece that they wrote last night and they're tryna get it, or he or she is tryna get it in their head, and all of that effort is the same effort that any other artist would put in their work. And so I think the main objective basically that we're trying to push is to just get poetry recognised commercially, and also to be accepted by society because also I think, I've realised that a lot of times for poets, or in the Spoken Word movement, what we've experienced is that every time you go and perform somewhere, first you just feel this resistance because someone just introduced that a poet is about to get on stage.'*

Naturally, as a poet the costs involved when performing on a stage to which one is invited differs significantly from costs involved when performing on a platform one has set up oneself, or when organising such an event. Of the main factors that ought to be considered the cost of venue and payment of artists featured. Despite despondency regarding lack of funding, there is a sense of hopefulness concerning the prospects of raising the stakes of Spoken Word in the cultural industries. In the quote below, Cornelius Jones acknowledges that there have been certain successes in this regard by referring to a greater visibility of Spoken Word artists on various forms of media. However, he indicates that time is required in order to boost the public's familiarity with the art form:

*'I think, I think with poetry we're still trying to build an industry, you know? And [pause] and it's not as fast... It's not growing as fast as, say hip hop you know? 'Cause hip hop is there already. But, I think, I mean, look at Mack Manaka, he's doing all these ads for FNB and for Windhoek you know? So I, I think people's perspectives about what spoken poet... Spoken Word is, is changing as well, so people are [mumbles] that umm... onto TV, radio, err... in their ads, You know? So umm... it, it definitely takes longer because you have to introduce people to this art form first, you know? They don't, they don't know about, or they have misconceptions about it. So you have to deal with that first and then... and then proceed from there.'*

The idea of commercialising Spoken Word poetry is considered as an objective that extends beyond South African borders. Word N Sound, pioneers in this endeavour, have managed to secure international funding towards their Spoken Word events, as well extend the reach of the poets belonging to their organisation throughout various platforms across South Africa. This allows for the kind of exposure mentioned by Afurakan above, and importantly, allows for the valuation of African cultural products. Masai tells about Word N Sounds attempt at commercialising Spoken Word poetry on a global scale:

*'We have a catalogue where you can go and hire a poet, where you have links; you have so many things, you can interact with that person. So we're also trying to play our part in this, like I'm saying we're trying to make poetry an industry so I think more than anything with us as a movement we get people that we feel that kind push the*

*objective. We have trips, like S'bu just came back from Berlin, and when he was going there he was briefed like 'dawg, you know the objective; you know what we're pushing. Let's make it work, kill that side and come back with a shit load of business cards so we can interact with the entire world, with the world at large. So for us, we're trying to get like the most radical kids, the most creative kids, the most... we try to surround ourselves with those types of people because we know it's important to push the objective'*

I consider it significant to state that although poets made significant reference to the commercialisation of Spoken Word poetry, or to transforming the art form into an industry, very few poets were able to define the term 'cultural industries'. However, I refer to Afurakan's definition of the cultural industries as follows:

*'So for me the cultural industries is about one, understanding and appreciating the cultures, traditions and identities of the people, from their language to their creativity. Two, highlighting that [referring to the point made above], sharing it with the world, exposing that, and then further allowing people to then commercialise their culture if they want to, because somehow it seems wrong for Africans to commercialise their culture whereas all along we've been bombarded with commercialised versions of everyone else's culture, the American culture, the European culture, all those have been forced onto us and commercialised, and sold overseas. That's why people now aspire to an American dream, no one aspires to an African dream, you know what I mean? Suddenly when you start selling a shweshwe print it seems exotic, but those things have been with us for a long time but we never understood how to commercialise our cultures, and the value, and what it means to the people outside.'*

Afurakan describes the cultural industries as beginning with an appreciation of cultures and identities of people, then proceeding to increase the positive exposure of such culture and identities, even to the extent of exposure on a global scale. Thereafter, the cultural industries are seen as involving the willing sale of cultural products, and understanding the value thereof both internally and externally. In his description, he insinuates that as a result of

power relations, Africans have not had the same freedom to commercialise their cultures when compared to the West, nor have Africans been given much power in deciding to willingly partake in Western culture. Thus, it can be concluded that the participation of Africans in the cultural industries is expected to result in the valuation of African cultures and identities in both socio-cultural and financial terms.

Although poets concur that the objective of commercialisation is an important one, this does not diminish concerns regarding the effects commercialisation will have on the authenticity and honesty of the art form. This point was emphasised by Illustrative saying:

*'But for me personally, it worries me because as soon as humans commercialise things, those things tend to lose their authenticity, they become less authentic, they lose their quality because now they're becoming commercialised, now you have to do what the people paying you want. That is my main concern...'*

When commercialising Spoken Word poetry as a product on stage, it came to light that poets consider it important to employ business principles in order to ensure professionalism. However, very few are successful in effectively occupying both the role of artist and the business aspect of this (Throsby, 2001:102). Although Mutle is greatly acknowledged within the Spoken Word circles as one of the first poets to pursue Spoken Word poetry as a full-time career, in the quote below he indicates a struggle that exists in negotiating these two aspects, and a longing for a company or alternative form of management to take on the business side of it in order that he may focus on making a living off his poetry:

*'I think I'm too stuck on... on... the creative part of it, more that it is about the business aspect of it. That's why I was like.. ok I want to get under a company that could sort out the business and the big stuff on it. I just want platform and a place where I can make a living off of it.'*

Although a number of poets are aware of the objective towards commercialising the art form and desire to partake in its fruits, for some it continues to appear a distant, nearly unattainable possibility. Kurt goes to the extent of labelling the artists' contribution as charity until financial gain is feasible for poets because many poets whose names are not broadly recognised and do not as yet perform for corporate events are not paid significant sums of

money. Therefore, as many artists do in order to ensure a financial livelihood (Throsby, 2001: 101), poets engage in more conventional forms of work:

*'Uhm, for me there's a guy called Mutle Mothibe and he's a big deal... [Ellipsis own] But as far as I know he, at the moment, is the only, in South Africa, one of the only, if not the only, full-time professional Spoken Word artist. Which is unreal! Because that's a dream. And it's only unreal because we can't conceptualise someone making a living off of this art form yet. It's a charity until it becomes profitable, and at the moment there's so many Spoken Word artists who do this for kicks and giggles on the side, but have got serious jobs, I say serious relatively.'*

In line with the perspective highlighted by Kurt above, even more popular poets struggle to make ends meet solely from performing poetry. Apart from the uptake of more conventional forms of work, diversification of writing, which is at the core of poetry, becomes a more attractive prospect for the generation of income. In the two quotes below, Afurakan posits that through diversification, one is able to escape the pressure to engage in work outside of one's artistic inclination whilst increasing the prospects of financial sustainability:

*'You know you can't just be a poet. You can't just write poems and perform and think that you'll pay off R6 000. 00 rent at the end of the month and buy groceries and so forth so you have to diversify. You know so, a lot of these young writers are writing for TV, they're writing for business advertising, they're doing a lot of different things with their work which makes it a lot more sustainable. Digital distribution has also made it easier for people to get their work out there. You know, you can link with your peers internationally, you can travel, you can go overseas... So the opportunities are abundant now for poets, I think it is a much better scene. It's a much more progressive, open, informed, uhm diversified and a bit more sustainable than the previous one.'*

*'You're not overstretching yourself, you're not one minute you're an accountant next minute you're writing a 30 second ad. You can live*

*off just writing but you have to be smart, you have to teach yourself the different formats as well and teach yourself those...'*

A similar strategy of remaining within the field of literature is employed by Vangi who stresses the importance of self-management and deliberation in finding income-generating avenues in line with one's art. In the absence of management in this genre of art, the onus for finding gigs and other forms of creative work rest with the artist. Below follows Vangi's narration of her strategies towards generating income as an artist

*'Yoh! Ok! So I'll talk about myself and how do I make ends meet. Uhm... So if I'm not performing I'm finding gigs for myself, I'm sending my profile through, asking people if they're looking for a poet especially for busy months, June, August, December and September, you know... And when I'm not performing and not sending through my CV I'm writing articles and blogs and proofreading other people's work. I work a lot with words. Uhm... Also, I coach debating which is voluntary but sometimes they give me a stipend which is nice but it really isn't part of the income itself. Uhm, but anything I can do that is word-related, I do.'*

### **Building Spoken Word: A question for the future**

We have noted above that considerable efforts have been and continue to be put in place ensuring that Spoken Word poetry becomes a more sustainable vehicle towards entrepreneurship. As part of their discussion, poets made a number of recommendations towards achieving this as well as adding towards the overall improvement of the Spoken Word movement in general. In this section, I give brief exposition of these suggestions:

1. Release secondary products such as books and audio albums

Gioia (2003:39) states that although achieving a significant reputation through print alone is difficult, print is nonetheless a minimum prerequisite to attaining credibility in literature and thus publishing books remains relevant and significant. Vangi echoes this notion in the following quotes:

*"Spoken Word artists also need to take more of an initiative and understand that it's not enough to have just performed, you must*

*release a book, you must release an audio book, record your work, leave some kind of legacy that will remain behind with your audience even when you are gone. And I believe that once we start doing that more we will see a growth in the Spoken Word culture as an industry”*

*“When you understand that you venture into the Spoken Word parameter of poetry, then you understand that people fall in love with your voice, and the textures of your voice, and the nuances of your words as spoken through your mouth, and that’s what they want to experience, that’s what they want to take home. So then you have to go into studio and pour it down into that”*

2. Tell our own authentic and original stories. Begin to value our own narratives as important cultural and historical contributions.

A number of poets echoed the sentiments that it is important to draw out the uniqueness of our particular cultures and contexts, across race groups in order to build on and expand on the diversity of the movement. Somers-Willet (2005:70) expresses this in saying that it is the most ‘authentic’ identities that are rewarded in this genre. Afurakan states this point as follows:

*“Having confidence in that story and finding a beautiful way to tell that story, for us that’s where it should start. We need to build our own pride in our own stories, but its confidence that we have to learn because we have been systematically broken down to be told that ‘you are worth nothing, you are just black, you know what I mean? And that is a psychological effect that we need to work out of our systems, you know what I mean? And that is something we need to work out of our systems, and to understand how powerful and valuable we are, and to understand that my experience as Afurakan is unique to the billions of people there are in the world. That I can go anywhere and tell my story, its unique even though it might resonate with other people, it’s a unique story and it worth hearing. And once we start understanding that, we can start taking pride in the work that we create, and once we’ve started taking pride we can control the price*

*to the work, we control the market and from there we can start controlling the economy around it”*

3. Engage with schools to build an artistic culture in school learners facilitated through workshops. This allows for the possibilities of learners entering into creative industries in future to be broadened, whilst creating revenue for facilitators.

Ellis et al (2003) consider the effects of slam poetry being implemented as a means of teaching language and poetry in high schools in the USA. A few poets engaged these ideas as not only a way of teaching language, but also as a means by which alternative career trajectories may be explored. Mutle best expresses this in saying that:

*“I’ve noted that we can do workshops on Spoken Word. We can train other people to facilitate to schools, like your disadvantaged schools, your schools where they don’t even know that this is a form of art that can... especially now that have seen that the current curriculum doesn’t cater to art, so I feel like this is one of the ways that we can bring art into schools, and I feel like a lot of kids are deprived of the ability to be creative. And I feel that this could be one .... So what I have been doing of late, presenting workshops and then you get paid for it. And I’m like if we could turn more kids into this then they could learn even just past being a Spoken Word artist. Then they could branch off into, from being a Spoken Word artist to writing scripts. I mean the, your Mzansi shows, your, your, your Mzansi stories, for if you present a script and they like it you get twenty grand once off. That’s, that’s they go... you could write for adverts, and people... I feel like people could, I feel like it could be a nice launch pad like where you find something that you love and you find a place where you can apply it. Instead of getting into something that you dislike like ‘I’m here but I don’t know why I’m doing this’. So I feel like it could be a cool way of making people see how art can be applied into different formats.*

4. Government should look into reforming education by giving more attention to the arts as well as emphasising African history and heritage. Also important is to foster the generation of a reading culture.

In the quote below, Nova continues the dialogue on the role of education by emphasising its importance in the kinds of narratives it conveys, and the importance of structuring education in such a way that it yields a culture of reading and fosters positive identities:

*“Go into almost all ministries of the government, we’d start with reforming education and when you reform education you remove all of the... kind of, white supremacist structures within education that let you know that learning about the Cold War and you know, Russian politics in the 60’s, that’s more important than understanding the history of South Africa and this continent, right. Because once you remove that kind of... Because you see the thing is it leads to self-esteem issues, you know. If you’re telling children all the time that their ancestors never achieved anything and all their ancestors ever were was colonised and brutalised, if that’s the kinda legacy you’re giving to children, children aren’t gonna have that esteem, children aren’t even gonna want to look at how can I create with my hands, how can I create, they’re gonna want to move into, you know, you know things, into the market and all of that stuff that gives them uh... Everyone’s gonna, consumerism is what’s gonna rule everybody. It sounds like I’m stating this point very terribly but uhm... Reform education, ok? Reform education, create a reading culture more importantly. Create a culture where people want to read, are excited to read, they love the things that words can do. And once you’ve got that, then you’ve got children that want to learn poetry, who understand poetry, who want to pursue it and then even theatre and dance and so on. We just need to give more importance to the arts in general in this country from when the children are young just to let them know that it is a viable, legitimate thing to be doing with your life. Artistic output is important, you know. Yeah...”*

5. Apply business principles in the Spoken Word movement, these include excellence in production and presentation, marketing and branding, and building a team.

Gregory (2008:69) refers to slam poetry as a marketable product, accordingly artists such as Afurakan have begun the move towards marketing and commercialising this art form.

Afurakan stresses the importance of applying business principles to the art form in the following statement:

*“Look, with any business, any brand, there are business principles which go into that. For one, making sure the production is on point so when the people buy the ticket they know the production value is worthwhile, it must be good value for money. Two, understanding that a brand lives in a world of brands. Marketing, how do you market your brand? We started Word N Sound as a purely digital brand we were trying to understand how the digital space works, who is our target market, where are they, how do they consume information, what size information are they comfortable consuming, you know. So we’ve gone through that exercise in terms of building the brand, consistency as well. See people don’t always latch on to something at the first instance, but when they see that this thing is ongoing, people are talking about it, then they, four more kicks and they’ll think why are they not going, clearly this thing is bigger than me. Clearly people are finding value in it so why don’t I go there, consistency is important. Building a team is important; you cannot do this by yourself. As much as you might understand everything that needs to be done, you cannot do everything by yourself so building a team, bringing people in, and sharing that vision. I think the one thing that is working for Word N Sound is that we created a vision and shared it with everyone.”*

6. Employment of managers that focus on the business aspects of poetry so that artists are able to focus their attention on producing their creative work.

A number of poets expressed a longing for managers to take care of ‘business’ in order that they may focus their attention on art production. In Vangi’s words, she expresses the poets’ desire as:

*“We want there to be managers who manage Spoken Word artists specifically and who find Spoken Word work for Spoken Word artists. We want people who will put their best interests into getting Spoken Word artists work because once that happens, if I don’t get paid, you*

*don't get paid. And you'll want to get paid so you'll work hard to get me paid. Because it's you know, the reason we as artists have managers is the reason why musicians have agents. It's the reason why someone else handles the business side of the artist's life, because artists tend to be creators. And you know, you do get beautiful artists who are able to do both."*

7. Spoken Word poets are to employ greater discipline in perfecting their craft. In so doing, they anticipate to gain greater recognition from relevant institutions such as government and private corporations for funding as well as platforms on which to showcase their art. Vangi expresses this sentiment as follows:

*"I think that Spoken Word can be considered an infant when it comes to, in comparison to other art forms because uhm... First of all there's a discipline that is required in most art form that the Spoken Word culture hasn't yet been able to instil effectively, so you have a lot of chancers who pass themselves off as Spoken Word artists, uhm.. But they don't put in the ten thousand hours to be considered, you know, true Spoken Word artists. And also, I feel like [pause] because of the discipline factor, because every other art form requires such discipline, I mean you have to master different art forms, I feel like Spoken Word artists can't, are not yet at a point where they command high sums when being asked to perform outside the Lebo Mashile's and the prominent poets. You know? Because you're not gonna, I mean within Spoken Word culture there's recognised poets and uLebo Mashile and Mak Manaka can command high figures but uhm, the rest of us... if someone wants to book a Spoken Word artist and they just want it for entertainment value then you become disposable and when you say 'no, I won't do it for that amount' then someone else will."*

8. Greater organisation of poets, as well as a sense of community that allows for joint development as opposed to separate, individual development.

Although no poets other than Vangi directly suggested this need for greater communal organisation, *Word N Sound* has begun working towards this direction which suggests that

such a need has already been identified. Vangi suggests that a more solidified space for Spoken Word in the cultural industries can be attained through organisation in the following quote:

*“It will take time, I mean comedy was in the same space not long ago where comedians weren’t as organised, weren’t recognised as a legitimate art form and weren’t able to market themselves properly even in government departments. So I just think that Spoken Word artists they, they just need to be more of a community as opposed to a separate development plan that Spoken Word artists choose to have for themselves. Uhm, and we need to be organised a little bit more saying this is the standard we need to set for ourselves, and then we can start expecting such”*

## **Concluding Remarks**

I begin the chapter by considering the poets’ descriptions of the Spoken Word scene. I note that poets make a distinction between previous waves of performance in that the current Spoken Word scene is more progressive, diverse and provides more opportunities. The Spoken Word movement is also described as providing a culturally stimulating sense of community. Poets further perceive this art form as assisting towards making important contributions towards developing African art and African literature by allowing black writers to emerge from the scene. Social justice is also perceived as an important objective of the movement, alongside laying a foundation toward cultural and financial legacies. I also consider the poets’ perceptions and experiences of Spoken Word as forming part of the cultural industries. According to Gioia (2003:36), Spoken Word poetry is differentiated from mainstream poetry in that it is able to attract a significantly large paying public, and in that sense possesses potential to thrive in the marketplace.

Finally, I consider the poets suggestions for the future of Spoken Word. I suggest here that the poets’ descriptions of, and aspirations for the future of Spoken Word have something in common with the endeavour towards making the Afrikaans language and culture respectable, reputable and professional as is explained in the writing of Hofmeyr (1987). Similar to the origins of Spoken Word, this endeavour was targeted at least in part at the upliftment and

economic prosperity of marginalised groups (i.e. including rural and urban poor whites) in the Afrikaans community, and Afrikaans literature was employed as a means to reach this goal. But it also included efforts at creating a public and market for Afrikaans literature, stimulating pride and respectability. This chapter demonstrates that to varying degrees, Black South Africans continue to experience forms of exclusion and marginalisation which are expressed through their narratives within communities that can relate to such experiences. The literature formulated from these experiences is then used to cultivate positive Black, and in fact African identities.

As we have already explored the nature and culture of the Spoken Word poetry scene in Chapter 3, and the opinions of the poets of the movement in Chapter 4, we can now proceed to consider the narratives produced by these poets through their poetry.

## CHAPTER 5:

### MORE THAN RHYMES: THEMATIC CONTENT ANALYSIS

In as much as Spoken Word poetry as an art form emphasises performance, the presentation would be impossible without the written poem.

A number of Spoken Word artists such as Natalia Molebatsi, Lebo Mashile, Given ‘Illustrative’ Masilela, and Thandokuhle Mngqibisa to name but a few, continue to pursue print media as a secondary output of their poetry, illustrating that although the art form is not directly produced for the page, there remains literary value and cultural significance to the work they produce. In this chapter, I examine by means of thematic content analysis a number of poems from young poets of the movement. Despite the fact that the performance of the poetry, and aesthetic features such as wordplay, punchlines and so forth play a critical role in whether or not the poem is able to resonate with the audiences to which it is presented (Somers-Willet, 2005: 52), I have chosen follow the approach of scholars such as D’Abdon (2014), Hoffman (2001), and Haupt (2004) by focusing on the content instead of the aesthetics of the poems. I consider an analysis of the content as important because, as D’Abdon (2014) has argued, it is within the narratives that one is introduced to the value of the poem. Because the poems produced for the Spoken Word stage are performed orally on site, and those that are printed are usually self-published and are thus not easily accessible, it is difficult to select poetry in the same manner as would be done for conventional literature. Therefore, the poems used in this section were selected from poems I heard at various sites during my ethnographic study. These are poems that either elicited a strong audience response, or present an interesting interpretation of a particular topic. The poems were chosen as reflections of the main themes I came across in the Spoken Word movement in Pretoria and Johannesburg, namely race and politics; gender and sexuality, as well as religion. I identified these themes by keeping record of the topics on which poems were centred as I attended various Spoken Word events. These records were then counted and I noticed that most poems presented were based primarily on political issues and race (which is in itself political), followed by issues on gender and sexuality. Religion was also an interesting occurrence as poems centred on various themes contained a number of religious references. I also remarked that although the majority of the poems are based on the themes mentioned above, at times poems that were not focused on these themes made important reference to

them. This is not particularly surprising as the themes are important aspects of the human experience, and reflect important issues within the South African context itself. Two of these poems were transcribed from YouTube videos and the remaining six were emailed to me by the poets upon request. For each theme, I have also included the titles of related poems that are accessible either in print or on YouTube. Unlike authors who have studied Spoken Word and have included aspects of performativity in their analysis (see Hoffman 2001), I focus on the narratives expressed in the selected poems, which provides a sense of the key narratives that surface in the movement I have studied, and the intellectual and cultural value thereof, excluding the performative aspects for the purpose of this section. Through analysis of the narratives expressed in the selected poems, I aim to show that the predominant themes around which the poems are centred demonstrate the present-day Spoken Word poetry's link to protest and liberation poems of old, although the styles and languages in which they are commonly presented differ strongly. I also argue that the content of the poems reflect a number of important discourses occurring amongst South African youth. Finally, I aim to demonstrate that the content of the poems suggest that the driving force of the movement is not only the sharing of human experiences, but also a drive towards social change.

### **Race and Politics**

The political conversation in South Africa is difficult to divorce from the narratives and politics of race, an occurrence that has duly surfaced as the result of the former apartheid regime. As South Africa is at present still a young democracy, it remains essential for the nation to reflect on the past, its wounds, and the successes democracy has brought. The narratives presented by the Spoken Word movement allow for such reflection. In this section I analyse poems that tackle perceptions of race, politics and the state of South Africa, and attempt to debunk the meanings captured therein.

#### ***Bedoel nie***

***By Mpho Khosi***

Ek bedoel nie om te kla nie,

Maar, julle begin nou om julle-self soos kafirs te dra.

Dit is soos ons voorheen gesê het.

All you good for,

Is to drink, dance and make lots of noise,  
Marry many wives, have sex and make lots of babies.  
Just look at yourselves,  
You have brought to life our prophecy;  
Ons het mos gesê,  
You cannot rule yourselves,  
You are a symbol of poverty,  
The bottom feeders of humanity,  
Creatures of opportunity,  
And like the rats that run riot in your townships,  
You would rather step over each other to get to what you want,  
Than work with each other to build towards what you need.  
You are a disgrace of a race,  
A lazy, mentally inferior peoples.  
Allowing you to rule,  
Is like letting the monkeys run the zoo,  
Maar, julle is erge as die diere,  
you rape your own young,  
And abuse your own women.  
Just look at what you have done to our once beautiful Johannesburg,  
You have prostituted with her,  
And now she stands as a squatter camp,  
A refuge to pimps, drug lords and net my here weet.  
She has become a wasteland,  
Even kak op sy straat bear witness to that.  
Then you wonder why we didn't want you to procreate,  
Your offspring; they are monsters like the seeds from which they fell,  
Constantly high,  
Just to try and forget that their mothers were prostitutes,  
And their fathers drunkards.

You see,

You are only a tool to be used like a spade,

Useless without your master's guiding hand.

But your leaders,

Julle luiers was studente van ons,

They have learnt well from the masters,

And now they themselves have become monsters,

The art of instilling fear they have mastered,

Having seen what we had done to Sophia-town,

They send in "Red Ants" to tear your homes down,

And with these so-called "Maberete"

They are slowly implementing a curfew now.

Then to soften you up,

They throw food parcels at your doors.

And remind you how they won freedom for you.

Places to educate; they will never build.

instead shebeens and churches pop up at every street and every neighbourhood.

They would rather keep you indoctrinated and intoxicated,

Unbeknown to them; They simply carry on our legacy.

Why should they invest in a nation of "clever blacks",

While you serve them well as their puppets.

Black pride my foot.

I am being sincere in saying,

This is no complaint,

Maar julle begin nou om julle selfs soos kafirs te dra.

In this poem, Mpho Khosi takes on the identity of an Afrikaner male, passing judgement on the lifestyles of black South Africans. He begins the poem with an Afrikaans statement which sets the piece within the context of South Africa, establishes the character, and brings to mind

the idea of the oppressor through the use of the Afrikaans language. The language in this opening statement is carefully selected “*Ek bedoel nie om te kla nie, maar, julle begin nou om julle-self soos kaffirs te dra. Dit is soos ons voorheen gesê het*”. The speaker states that he does not mean to interfere, or complain but ‘julle’, a term stressing black people as the ‘other’ are beginning to behave like ‘kaffirs’, just as they (the oppressors) had prophesied. The speaker then stresses that black people themselves are to blame for bringing to pass the self-fulfilling prophecies of ‘morally degenerate’ blacks who partake in, and are the reason for a number of evils such as unruliness, poverty, rape, abuse and the lack of black solidarity. These judgements are passed not taking into account the manner in which the apartheid regime which he represents contributed to the current state of black society. Furthermore, the speaker’s statement “*Then you wonder why we didn’t want you to procreate*” serves as reason to justify the implementation of oppressive tools of control during apartheid and leads to his point that black people are “useless without your [black people’s] master’s guiding hand”. This paints the idea that white people perceive the current democracy as a failure because black people are not only unable to rule themselves, but have demonstrated failed leadership as those in power have not succeeded in bringing to pass the promise of democracy, but instead begin to mimic the oppressive apartheid regime. A symbol of this is given through the depiction of “Maberete” continuing the legacy of police brutality and state repression. Also, by linking Maberete to the statement “They are slowly implementing a curfew now”, the poet demonstrates how a leg of the current police force, though not enforced by legislation, continue to enforce repressive ‘curfews’ which may also be associated with former pass laws all aimed at restricting free movement. With the statement “instead shebeens and churches pop up... They would rather have you indoctrinated and intoxicated”, the theme of repression continues as he draws on the imagery of religion and alcohol being as emerging structures instead of structures for education which are needed for black advancement. This is an important imagery as religion was used as a tool for social control and even as justification for the apartheid regime. In essence, through this poem the poet illustrates two realities. Firstly, he narrates how he imagines white people perceive black reality as a consequence of their own fault. Secondly, by presenting such an illustration the poet depicts clearly the current realities of the lives of black people in South Africa.

To the reader (or most commonly the listener), the poem stirs up feelings of anger and disillusionment, not so much at the history of the country, but directed towards the people perceived as being responsible for the occurrence of such historical events. Such painful

feelings are experienced and expressed within a safe space, a public “majority in black” (as expressed by Nova in her interview) that such dialogue is able to resonate to. The poem thus serves as an example of the kind of narratives that are difficult to share outside these ‘black’, safe spaces. At the same time, one can certainly appreciate that if a white person were to read or witness such poems, it could create discomforting feelings and serve as a form of exclusion as discussed in Chapter 3, or may also lead to some reflection on the history of the country.

*Open Grave*

*By Dee Rasedile*

My home is an open grave  
Sits concave at the southern tip of the continent  
Cradles the souls of slaves agitated by the injustice that echoes on  
after the last sacrificial breaths of life they gave  
my home is an open grave.

We’ve boxed our state of minds in coffins of dependency  
Carried by the force that drives the shenanigans of presidency  
As they mask their shortcomings with a festive farce –  
Dance, rally and sing  
Pretend that 18 years of freedom can atone for centuries of suffering  
Ring warning bells for the youths  
as their minds are lowered into the abyss,  
our parents scold our ways as though they had nothing to do with this  
Stones deluded with fresh cut flowers that once stemmed from reality  
Now uprooted, ungrounded as scarred natives  
endeavour to mark their territories  
economically and socially  
with tender pay cheques and BEE fallacies –

The scapegoated poor must be sent to the slaughter,  
for the rich must get richer, cue the mourners,  
this ceremony just got realer.  
Yes, my home is an open grave  
Look how far we've made it  
Barred the picket fence around us and shunned the company of our neighbours  
Though God said welcome them for we too, in Egypt were once strangers  
Instead we laced petrol bombs with a fiery hatred  
Spat in their faces  
Said "Forget that they sheltered our own in exile,  
This country is ours and no other African can claim it!"

My home is an open grave  
Where our children die of starvation  
though they play in fertile soil...  
but knowledge is attained so who's to blame for this mishap?  
'Cause in my home, we hold education up so high  
when the powers refuse to build us schools we  
burn the one's we have.  
Hard labour is frowned upon so these shovels stand unmanned  
How can we luxuriate in the fruit of our forefathers' labour  
when no one will till the land?  
This land that was the livelihood of those before us  
Take heed of that melancholy chorus  
in retrospect of that blood shed –  
the evidence of the grace of a God who is for us.

My home is an open grave  
We see the cracks before the splendour  
Cringe at the ashy, calloused skins of our elders

the black rings around their eyes from when they engaged the struggle  
and birthed the future that we now call ours.  
If we could just exhume the wisdom they maintained  
to see the beauty and capacity engrained in our land  
and discard the Third World concept,  
for we too, were written on the palm of God's hand.

My home is an open grave  
And nations have come to be fed  
off the riches of our earth and the blue collared strength that we bred  
fled with our treasures of minerals and stones  
and turned a blind eye to the tears that we shed.  
But blessed are you who weep, for you shall find laughter  
Despite the turmoil, seek the path of truth  
and find life in your hereafter  
For the road to freedom – though scarred and bruised,  
is an endeavour we built  
from the resilience we gained  
from the blows they gave.  
In the meantime, my home is an open grave...

In this poem, the poet brings to attention her views on the current state of South Africa. The title *Open Grave* elicits the imagery of open graves at massacres used as vices of the powerful for the weak to fall into and perish. Throughout the poem, we are presented with imagery that suggests that the state as well as ideological powers render the advancement of less powerful persons, and the nation as a whole greatly difficult. By making the statement '*Cradles the souls of slaves agitated by the injustice that echoes on after the last sacrificial breaths of life they gave*', she depicts the political condition of South Africa at present as an insult to the freedom fighters and martyrs of old that sacrificed their lives to achieving an independent, democratic state. Furthermore, the poem portrays state interventions as an inadequate response to addressing the injustices of the past '*Dance, rally and sing, pretend*

*that 18 years of freedom can atone for centuries of suffering*'. This point is further stressed much later in the poem by drawing out failed attempts at addressing issues of citizenship, and social and economic exclusion. This reflects on the debates surrounding measures of affirmative action (AA) in South Africa that suggest that it is predominantly those that already occupy middle or upper-middle class positions that benefit from one of the most contested or controversial AA policies, Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). Issues of citizenship are further highlighted in her description of violent xenophobic attacks. However, it is not only the state that is criticised in this poem; citizens are condemned for destructive demonstration of grievances against the state through violent protest action and the burning down public resources i.e. schools. They are also rebuked for violently claiming sole ownership of the country, yet failing to till the land and yield produce, which results in an inability to harvest the country's full potential. Citizens are further portrayed as having a negativity bias in perceiving burdens before victories. This is illustrated in the portrayal of the elderly as burdensome instead of recognising them as the custodians of wisdom and the ushers of the freedom enjoyed today. Furthermore, in the acceptance of the Third World title and failing to recognise the riches possessed by the country that are in turn exhumed by the West '*nations have come to be fed off the riches of our earth*'. Through the use of Biblical references, the author concludes with a message of hope and direction for the inhabitants of the country.

The two poems above have in common despondency at the present leadership in the country, rooting these feelings in the history of the country vis-a-vis the condition of South Africa at present. In the first poem we are confronted with imagery of black people as problematic, perceived as needing the guidance of 'superior' whites who in turn take no responsibility for their part in the present state of the country and its black population. The second poem depicts a country that ought to flourish considering the victories its people have won, yet has not fully succeeded in doing so, yet presents a facade of success. Most of the poems I came across on site, and even those that I have explored through literature by Spoken Word artists reiterated complicated race relations and strong reflections on the collective memory of the apartheid regime as well as feelings of unhappiness regarding politics. Although most poems on politics do not have an air of victory, some carry strong messages of hope in spite of current despondency. The following poems provide interesting perspectives on this theme as well, *To do list for Africa* by Lebohang 'Nova' Masango, *I expect more from you* by Vangile Gantsho, *Jo'burg, let my people go* by KB Kilobyte, *Manufacturing Kings* by Kagiso Tshepe,

*Walk on the White side* by Philippa Yaa de Villiers and *Her withered beauty* by Given 'Illustrative' Masilela.

## **Gender and Sexuality**

Post-apartheid South Africa has made significant strides in bringing to the forefront more progressive policies on the display and representation of sex in the public sphere. Consequentially, important issues pertaining to sex and sexuality have also taken centre stage in the country's political agenda such as those pertaining to HIV/AIDS and sexual violence (Posel, 2004: 53). The rise and influence of feminist perspectives have also won significant gains by changing not only policies, but perspectives on gender and gender issues, and allowing women the opportunity to honestly share their own lived experiences. The narratives in the Spoken Word movement have captured some of these transitions, some are admittedly more pronounced than others. It is also important to reiterate here that issues of gender are mainly focused on women's issues, even when presented by males.

### **Wrath on fire**

**By Dee Rasedile**

I am woman

A powerhouse founded on fulfilled promises of the most high

Knighted with the authority to command things into being,

so heaven help us all should I call fire from the sky

Because as I wrote this poem I thought

How many 17 seconds have gone by

How many women are staggering home

as the blood trickling down their thighs runs dry

how many husbands are beating rainbows on their partners' skins

knowing forgiveness is a sure cry

Jesus please write this poem

Because the power of word is a lethal weapon

determining whether one lives or dies

so heaven help us all should I call fire from the sky.

Time heals nothing  
when ticking testosterone time bombs are 17 seconds apart  
Lord knows what triggers these vermin Joes  
and how far their lust goes, 'cause really  
some of these victims are as sexy as  
hop-scotch-scathed toddler knees  
and their sweeter than honey dreams turned bitter  
before they could even learn about the birds and the bees.

How many women are staggering home  
leaving a trail of bloody footprints for the next victim to step in –  
line up and take a number  
its going to be a long wait before the state responds to their pain  
with more than a glorified shudder  
a long wait before the state wakes from its slumber  
a little too late because now countless women yearn  
to be surges of pain younger  
Thinking, perhaps a different route  
or a longer skirt would suffice  
because he clearly couldn't take no for an answer.

How many husbands are beating rainbows on their partners' skins  
Painting portraits of pain –  
and even turned their households against them  
'cause coffee tables are deadly to bellies that carry babies within...  
If walls could talk they'd speak of abusive cycles  
that hurricane behind closed doors  
leaving shattered homes and battered souls  
and hollow wedding rings of those who left

and still managed to escape death's claws.

Found an unfortunate clause in the marriage contract  
a disclaimer, because a lover's hands  
should not have murder draped in their physical contact.

Who would have known  
that "to love and to hold" meant clutching to tightly sometimes  
Happily ever after's just a myth  
when Prince Charming's rage burns in his eyes.

So forgive me Mr President for not joining your camp's march  
I'm not ignorant, as a matter of fact  
I was dodging bloody footprints and praying  
that the 18<sup>th</sup> second finds me intact.  
Can't put my fist in the air  
and chant "You strike a woman, You strike a rock"  
'cause rocks don't go far in the thickest of plots  
so don't be shocked when you strike this woman and get shot.  
Jesus, please write this poem  
'cause the power of word is a lethal weapon  
determining whether one lives or dies  
but its sickening how some of these men  
can sleep right through a woman's cries!

But I am woman  
A powerhouse founded on fulfilled promises of the most high  
Knighted with the authority to command things into being  
So I rebuke the passive stature of these streets  
and speak life to the death I'm seeing.  
Pack healing into these words  
to bring restoration to tortured souls

‘cause they descended from the one who through being broken  
made things whole.  
Still, I’m that frontline-of-battle type of woman  
who refuses to raise the sum of those who turn a blind eye  
So heaven help us all  
should I call fire from the sky...

According to the author, *Wrath On Fire* was inspired by statistics released in 2012 stating that every 17 seconds in South Africa, a woman is raped or is a victim of domestic violence. The poet, as a woman, personalises the statistics and portrays herself as two characters. Firstly, she takes on the persona of a woman who understands her God-given authority to act against these occurrences and retaliate by causing devastation as she ‘*call[s] fire from the sky*’. Secondly, despite her recognition of the authority she possesses, she remains aware of the vulnerability of the female body and the daily exposure of herself, and other women to the risk of violence. The poet is deliberate in her use of language that creates vivid imagery of the brutality and frequency of rape of both women and children statements such as ‘*How many women are staggering home as the blood trickling down their thighs runs dry*’, and ‘*some of these victims are as sexy as hop-scotch-scathed toddler knees*’. Once again, we are presented with the theme of inadequate state response, because of which the responsibility of interventions then shifts to women as they attempt measures that will hopefully be more useful in assuring their protection ‘*its going to be a long wait before the state responds to their pain.... Thinking, perhaps a different route or a longer skirt would suffice*’. In the final stanza she reasserts her authority, and rebukes the passivity with which such issues are addressed, taking on the identity of a ‘frontline-of-battle type of woman’.

Although the spirit of the poem is clear – advocacy against various forms of gender-based violence, the poem runs the risk of being perceived by some feminists as counter-progressive because of the explicitly descriptive and highly emotive nature thereof re-enacts the scene thus leading to secondary victimisation. Despite this perspective, one ought to recall that through the styles of writing and performance, Spoken Word poetry seeks to arouse the imagination and emotion of the listener. In this sense, the highly emotive nature of the poem is successful in creating emotion in favour of such advocacy amongst both men and women in the audiences.

## **I am a man**

**By KB Kilobyte and Donald 'Neosapian' Mokgale**

See, I, Yes I, am a man

Muscle bone and missing rib, I'm a man

Yes, I owe you no explanation for my existence

None

The world has taught us that we can be anything in this world except ourselves

Unless we explain ourselves

Even without earphones you're still the stereotype

The all men are dogs type

The boys will be boys who are listening to boys to men type

Well I'm the real men do exist type

And not the prototype

Yes, I was born from the blood type

Yes, the same type that likes to type his own destiny

Man type

I am a man

Even though ego and testosterone pump through my veins

So does blood through my heart

My manhood as a man can't be labelled by Black Label

Or Boxmasters who are to chicken to KFC

that men are more than muscles and words

I owe you no explanation for my existence

I am one of the very few men left in this world

And these words belong to me

Hence I am a man of my word

I'm an extended version of God but you still use my name in vain?

What?

Equating rapists, killers and molesters to a real man

So greater is she that believes in me for she knows

A real man when she speaks to me

I am a man woven by scripture and integrity

Though I have been made from dust

I am so far ahead of the man created by you misconceptions have created that I have left him choking on dust  
[choking sounds]

Please trust that I will bust through every crust just to prove that I am just

God made me in His image

Hence I have sought to keep it original

He made me with the fabric of His hands though He called everything else into existence

I am a man!

And real men fight for a cause

And split oceans by force, one died on the cross

I am a man!

Who will shift time to the now now time signature

And remove the signature abyss from a man

And He will become the epitome of love

And love will call him by name, a man

Muscle bone, and missing rib

I wish not to be known by the deeds of others like me

But by serving the purpose of being a man

I am the 'man' in mankind  
The kind of man whose heart abodes charity  
Sweet is but a mild understatement because I bear the fruit of the Spirit  
With my temple intricately carved with muscles made to remove obstacles from my rib  
And not beat it to death  
See, love pumps through my veins so romance is innate  
So responsibility and valour are common sense to me  
What you see before you is a man  
nothing less but so much more  
I've got strength encrypted in my core  
Raw, Pure and filled to capacity with love  
See I've captured stars from above and placed them in my heart  
Abs-olutely  
Licensed by faith I'm self-driven  
In more ways than one I'm given [gesture at abs]  
So tell the pilgrims of time that here stands two men for a legion of real men  
And they will be spoken for!  
Amen!  
A man is what I am, if it's a crime then call this self-conviction'  
Guilty as charged by the self  
So I dare you to call all your judges because being in the same space as me is certainly an honour  
All your objections are sustained and stained by our existence  
Yes, good men still exist!  
Buried beneath the rubble of social norms, labels and typical men  
A real man's work is never done  
Never!

With sweat dripping from lifetimes for he shall cultivate the earth with secrets shared with God

Same kind of man to lead mankind!

Hey! Someone give that man a Bell's!

Yes! For being a real man and not the prototype

The same type that likes to type his own destiny

Man type

So we have come to make amends

With those who forgot to mention that

Men are part of everything that women go through

Like menopause, menstruation and not to forget manipulation

We are real men and we beat bad habits instead of women

We cheat death, not on our women

We steal people's hearts and not their property

We build empires and leave a legacy

We nail misconceptions to the cross

And we excuse you for mistaking us for typical men

Here stand men,

For real men!

Here stands men,

For real! Man!

Masculinity has been defined by Morrell (1998: 607) as a gender identity accepted and adopted by a collective and not a natural, biological attribute. Because displays of masculinity vary amongst communities, masculinity is thus thought to be a social construct as opposed to a universal norm, the contexts of which are affected by cultural shifts that occur with time as well changes in the society. Because of the social nature of masculinity, scholars have perceived masculinity as a fluid identity susceptible to change.

Morrell's (2000: 100-101) paper on masculinity indicates that over the last twenty years, South Africans have begun to engage with an international dialogue that argues that there may be a global 'crisis of masculinity' and seeks to decipher ways in which this crisis may be attended to. This narrative sprouts from literature suggesting that subsequent to the gains of feminism, there has been an emasculation of men that has occurred, however although this has not been to the extent that patriarchy has fallen away, it remains important to note. Despite its prominence elsewhere in the world, this dialogue has not received as much attention in South Africa due to the urgency and focus that is still required in addressing the plight of women. However, it has been stressed that as South Africa is a highly violent country with the majority of perpetrators and victims of violent crime being men, not to mention that men constitute approximately 90% of the prison population, it is crucial to realise that addressing issues of gender ought to include the addressing of the question of masculinity. This includes the notion that men are to rediscover and redefine their masculinity, with projects trying to achieve such aims working alongside or with feminist organisations.

The poem above addresses the issue of masculinity which in actuality is not very popular in the narratives of the Spoken Word movement itself. The title, and introductory statement *I am a man* (which is repeated throughout the poem) is an assertion of manhood, and a contention against the absence of a platform on which men are permitted to 'be men' '*The world has taught us that we can be anything in this world except ourselves*'. This touches on the notion of the emasculation of men and the pressure to reassert one's manhood despite 'countering forces'. The poem is thus a deliberate rebuttal of stereotypical ideas on what it means to be a man, more especially the negativity associated with masculinity.' This viewpoint is strongly articulated using the punch line "*My manhood as a man can't be labelled by Black Label Or Boxmasters who are to chicken to KFC that men are more than muscles and words*". The word 'Boxmaster' is a food item offered at food outlet KFC, but in this instance is used to refer to people who maintain a 'boxed' understanding of manhood. The poem appears to advocate for a new hegemonic masculinity that is identified by positive traits.

Accompanying the move towards redefining masculinity is a narrative aimed at creating engaged fathers who make significant contributions to the overall wellbeing of their children, as well as the restructuring of masculinity and gender relations. This notion stems from the fact that stereotypes present men as unemotional and uninvolved, rendering active parenting

difficult for men. The following poem is based on such active fatherhood. Although this is not the kind of poem one typically finds on the scene is both interesting and important.

**Purpose unorthodox**

**By Simon 'Cymon' Mahlangu**

I am a stay at home dad and I feel like I am where I should be

Light rays from the sunrise alarm my being to be awakened and so my day begins

Honey, please pass me my apron

Pass me a woman's patience with a mother's gentle touch

Well sure I stand different, but love conquers all and can be expressed in ways that baffle the world

To start off my day:

I firstly go to the sink, so I can rinse the typical stereotypes of testosterone edged in my palms

I rub together my new found beauty in these palms as if I'm trying reconfigure my fingerprints

That is to say, change the blueprint of what the distorted American dream public eye fails to see

Because as I wake up my son from his cot

Light effortlessly falls from his toothless smile, bounces on walls and is beamed to my perspective's prism

A rainbow appears! And we stuff its colours into his wax crayons and paint over the blueprint so to change its colour scheme

Every morning, I fall in love with this scene

Since man cannot live on bread alone, your breakfast young one will not be stuffed with substanceless food

But also from every word that comes from God as I recite life in your eardrums and collect pieces of joy from

your chuckles as if you can understand every word I am saying

Which actually reminds me that your sister, young one, is still asleep

As I wake up my daughter, the innocence carefully carved in her face is a daily epiphany as to why God made women from a man's rib

Carved with atoms of beauty, covered with gentleness and is the best recipient for a man's love

We share inside jokes that keep your brother staring with peculiar interest

Interest, as I invest in the river bank of your teary eyes

That reminds me that time is money and so I invest hours, comma, minutes, and every second you will need on this life journey

But for now let us journey into the bathroom as you both juggle my attention with your unknown baby jargon

To my household and you kids, let it be known that dad did not stay at home for simple chores

But has found joy in nurturing life with love that conquers all

I'll let you crawl race to daddy's arms as you both win my affection and where the medals I hang over your heads is a daily reminder why I chose to be a stay at home dad

Taking on the persona of a father, the poet narrates a typical day in his life by beginning with a controversial statement on gender roles: *'I am a stay at home dad and I feel like I am where I should be'*. He proceeds by highlighting the manner in which he has taken on traits (and tasks) that are conventionally labelled as feminine by requesting his spouse (assumedly a woman) to hand these over to him *'Honey, please pass me my apron, Pass me a woman's patience with a mother's gentle touch well sure I stand different...'*. This statement both re-enforces the ideology that these qualities are feminine, whilst asserting that although it may be 'different' for a man to adopt these it is a manner of expressing love in an unorthodox fashion. The poet advocates for positive fathering that is characterised by being physically, emotionally and spiritually present.

The possibility of stay at home dads are not, at present, a popular dialogue in our communities. Therefore, one can appreciate that such a poem usually draws out an emotion of

surprise from the audiences. However, as the poet begins to describe the type of father-child relationships such a living situation fosters, it is interesting to observe the ways in which the audiences positively respond to this possibility.

### **A lesson in poetry women and jazz men**

**By Lebohang ‘Nova’ Masango**

*This poem is composed in three movements; spring, summer and autumn*

The night I laid eyes on you  
is the night I laid eyes on Jazz  
Hymn, a redeeming sound  
Stood proud like Sophiatown at high noon  
Your presence spoke in tongues to skin  
As if Coltrane had chanted A Love/Allah Supreme  
For a vision such as you

A man of music, moving  
You, my favourite Miles Davis ballad,  
Soothing  
How piquant heaviness of Gucci teased me  
Closer to conversation  
How inside wanted out  
I only pretended to be interested in your words  
So I could breathe you in  
[inhale]  
And land on your mouth

And I did  
Until I knew nights soaked in kisses and drenched in Jazz  
By first name  
And steadily they do rise in love,  
These poetry women and their Jazz men

Lover

Your body became a Bebop of endless Summer

Your tongue would travel down

The burning brown

Brass instrument of my body

Finger tips, felt me

Strong grip, held me

Kisses overflowed like water

Filled me

Before this

I had spent an entire lifetime being thirsty

Loved me up! 'til I felt

Melodies and

Constellations burst in my belly

Proved that heaven

Does not only exist in theory

This is how we loved

And I prayed at the temple of your body

But someone should have warned me

Someone should caution these poetry women

Against these Jazz men

How all we ever do is welcome them in

We find the late nights

Whisky-breath

And great sex

Too enticing

Tell me:

How will you ever know which song to sing

When the man you love becomes

The needle in the metronome

A piercing refusal that keeps its own time

He's a pendulum

An absence that controls you like clockwork

Uncertain

You will wonder which prettier, more lady-like version

Of you has now laid claim to him

He will whisper lullabies to your sensibilities

While every memory you thought he'd left for dead

Will resurrect as red, lacy underwear & love letters

Their ghosts will populate your bed

But, what do you expect a Jazz man to do?

You're a small instrument packed tight with all the Blues

He stuffed inside you

Tears snatch the breath from your very lungs

While he remains air enough to hum

New hymns into the tongues of other hers

Everything about him will slip through your praying fingers

After they play you

They will pack up every note, rip the chords of your love clean

And then leave you

For the very, next interlude

It hurts when you're no longer shiny, brazen & new

It hurts when you're unwanted for being broken

By the very man who destroyed you

*That* is the truth, poetry women, about these Jazz men

Yes, your love rose at the beginning of Spring

But soon everything must come to an end

It will be worst kind of Fall  
The void he leaves  
Will taste like Autumn  
Sound like May  
Look like leaves clutching their broken hearts  
In a death leap for a man who will not stay  
Some things just aren't meant to survive the seasons  
Some Jazz tunes will make your blood run cold  
Echo a savage Winter in your bones  
Heart beating too red raw a bloody war  
To ever be repeated

In his paper *Sexuality and Globalisation*, Altman (2004: 23-24) links the decline of traditional ways of regulating and controlling sexuality to modernity and globalisation. He argues that young people (referring especially to those residing in cities in the Third World) are exposed to a number of media images which project new and increasingly different ways of imagining gender roles and identities as well as of exploring sex and sexuality. These are rendered possible due to changes in the social and economic sphere which subsequently result in shifting away from traditional modes of living. Sexual desire is thus projected in such a way that it coexists with the desire to participate in the affluence and freedom associated with wealth and modernity. Such media influences result in people from non-western communities gaining a greater awareness of prospects of sexual autonomy. For black youth, especially women belonging to the rising black elite, the assertion of sexual freedom indicates the extent of the generational gap that exists between apartheid and post-apartheid generations, as well as questions the levels of enforcement of parental authority. Such freedom from authority can also be interpreted as a celebration of freedom from the multiple prohibitions of old (Posel, 2004: 55-56).

*A lesson in poetry women and jazz men* is a classic example of a poem on sexuality – although not explicitly, it encompasses the feminist ideal of the emancipation of the female body, and female sexuality. I find particular interest in this poem because of the way it combines the personal experience of sexuality and heartbreak with religion in a somewhat unconventional manner. The poet narrates a romantic and sexual relationship with an intimate

partner, bringing to light her sexual agency and autonomy whilst emphasising female sexual desire and sexual intention ‘*I only pretended to be interested in your words so that I could breathe you in And land on your mouth And I did Again and again*’. She makes use of religious innuendo to create an imagery of the relationship and the sex as divine by making religious inferences such as ‘Proof that heaven does not only exist in theory, and ‘And I prayed at the temple of your body’. In her reference to religion, she also uses a post-modern and feminist approach to understanding God a possibly being a female figure ‘*I talk us up to God incessantly, we are her favourite vinyl record*’. At the commencement of the poem, we see a link between sexuality and the presentation and attractiveness of an upper-class lifestyle illustrated in her description of the scenery such as through the statement ‘*How piquant heaviness of Gucci teased me*’, this is reminiscent of Altman’s (2004) argument on sexuality and class.

As mentioned earlier, many of the poems on gender presented in Pretoria and Johannesburg’s Spoken Word scene are focused on women, gender issues, and various forms of violence against women. Although there are poems such as those mentioned above that touch on issues of masculinity and the changing nature thereof, this is not the norm. Also, poems on sexuality (or at least reference thereto) are expressed by both males and females, these poems express both the pleasures of sexual intimacy and relationships, the heartbreak, and the struggle against sexual violence. There does however, appear to be a silence, and sometimes even an atmosphere of resistance from the audiences regarding issues of homosexuality. The sexual health risks involved when entering sexual relationships such as HIV/AIDS are also not popular on the stage. Interesting poems that allow further insight on how this topic is addressed include *I want to be touched* by Lebo Mashile, *For the woman known only as Judy* by Natalia Molebatsi, and *Kissing in public* by Phillipa Yaa de Villiers.

## **Religion**

Although it is not the central theme of the poem, references to God and various religious aspects tend to feature in a number of poems discussed so far. This is a common feature in Spoken Word poetry. These references may either be uttered in reverence to religion, as opposing it, or at times even as a form of heresy. Nonetheless, one cannot dispute that religion or at least the ideologies surrounding it are central to the human experience. During his interview, Afurakan remarked that

*'But we must also make sure the platform is open for them to step in, and the reality is that once you step in nothing is barred on the stage everything is criticised, everything is challenged, but that's the whole point of it. You find people who are predominantly Christian, and who write their poetry in a Christian manner, and you find people who are predominantly atheist and they write from a point where they criticise God, Jesus and what not. But we still give these two people the same stage because it is about challenging people's perceptions. You're allowed to believe in your thing, he's allowed to believe in his thing and we can coexist we can find our balance, and we can find common ground and we can agree to disagree on certain things and that is the whole point of dialogue that is the whole point of creating stage. The minute we are all 'yes men', then creativity dies.'*

The poet above states that, as mentioned in sections above, Spoken Word stages are platforms that allow for dialogue and the challenging of ideologies. In this same sense, religion is also presented as a topic to be probed, and individuals present the religious ideologies congruent with their worldviews. We can all appreciate that religion is an important aspect of the human experience and thus many poems thus carry religion as a central theme, and are related to or presented as solutions to and sometimes even causes of a number of social issues. The next two poems reflect both anti-religious as well as religious views.

**The Church of Assholery**  
**By Elysium Garcia**

When hours are named ungodly  
They knock at our doors  
We clinch our hearts from beating  
The silence of saintly tombs  
We lock our rooms  
Not even two spoons of sugar do we give out  
These cocoons have limited space  
We never let them in  
We are tired!  
Our shoulders have no wings  
above our heads no luminous rings  
we are not angels,

but exhausted human beings  
Yes, God exists! For all of us.  
But when they come knocking unannounced at your door  
their stomachs falling apart and throats tearing  
move the curtain, peak though the window

Remind them,

God for us all, but tonight my friend, it is every man for himself

Here's a gospel to preach,  
Do unto your friends what you wish they reciprocate  
Friendship is not a charity ministry  
Or a hymn to remember when voices are gone  
When they come from an exile you know nothing off  
Turn the key and lock the door  
be silent, sing the holy gospel beneath your breath, holy!

Welcome to the church of assholery!  
Here we are not sad or broken  
We are not lonely,  
God is always there,  
Look around you,  
How he has broken himself down to every single smile you see  
Do not fear solitude,

Even the island has the whole ocean hugging its feet at all times

Do not wait for loneliness to see that you've always been alone  
Gather your bones and bury the ashes of your sad isolation far away  
You cannot be alone, you are part of a godly revolution  
This is the church for you!  
Welcome to the church of assholery  
Come in, you are welcome!

In the name of the holy infinity  
The grace of drunkenness and stupidity  
The small mercy of being selfish  
We welcome you

Yes, indeed  
We are ridiculous, insipid and folly  
Corny and pointless  
Call us what you want,  
We are the synagogue douche bags  
The holy mount Zion of egomaniacs  
We are the hooligans of the lord  
A congregation of tired people  
We have let the dead weight of inconsiderate friends go  
Because we know, we don't share the same destiny

This is no prophecy,  
Here is the truth,

Not only when you are broken  
At times you are happy and want someone to praise with  
You stand atop the chapel of your lonesome holy life  
And ring the church bell of your smile, your laughter so inviting  
But no one ever comes,

No one ever needs church when it is not a Sunday  
No one needs shelter when the clouds are just still hinting rain  
Floods are a tragedy no one fears until they are drowning  
You are Noah and your ark is a joke when the sun is still shining  
Bless your heart, you are a congregation of volunteers  
A non-profit organization, no one needs your company  
They will never remember you, unless they really have to  
Bless your heart,  
You are a church of forgetful believers

The pillars are rattling  
Walls have gone deaf  
the whole structure is falling apart  
Dangling at the collapsing temple of your heart  
are the ghosts of friends that need for quenching  
A sudden thirst, your drying holy water well  
So shallow and almost empty  
Out, You keep pouring your soul for them  
Leaving nothing for yourself  
The passersby, the strangers, bystanders  
and comfortably loitering acquaintances

With no ideal of converting to true friends,  
but they keep drinking

Your hands are lakes of baptism  
A backup plan when in need for ablution  
when the dust of their busy lives has risen to the necks  
Chocking, they remember you for cleansing  
only when they run out of options

Your chest is a cathedral, a holy refuge of sinner-like friends  
Recalling you only when the emergency of salvation emerges  
You are the pope slouched behind the veil  
as they unveil all their agonies  
You forget you troubles  
and with tender mercy solve their mysteries

Only sometimes, when all doors are shut in the faces  
do they remember that your shoulders are a church of eternal kindness  
The entrance to your heart is ever welcoming  
Your arms are open doors  
They can always walk in  
Bless your good heart;  
The secondhand sacrament needed only when sins start itching  
You are always there for scratching  
Glory O Glory you are such a good friend!

Have you not tired?  
Have you not tired of being the messiah?  
How you always put down your fire  
to fuel their distant flames  
They are bonfires now, and you have put aside all your desires  
Watered down your dreams to set sail the ship of their passing realities  
Out of breath; you have been the insignificant air filling their tires  
And they move! You are static  
Your hands have wires,  
look up at see the puppeteers you call friends  
When will you ever see that your good heart has been your downfall?  
Bless your soul!  
You are a church of pretenders and parasitic cynics  
Glory O glory you are a song sung only when tongues are cut off

I say leave that church my friend

Your big heart is heavier than what your hands can hold

Let it go!

Kindness has nothing to do with accommodating parasites

Selflessness is not the act of giving away yourself

Remember your soul, even the promise of love cannot afford it

Forgiveness has nothing to do with your spirit

We forgive just to eliminate physical problems

Just to avoid criminal records and death sentences

If it is then fuck spiritual growth,

Your body is still young, no need to age the spirit

It is time you learn to say no!

Mean it!

Do not tremble, stand firm at the pulpit of your church and say NO!

Do not be fear loneliness, you were born alone

Your destiny is yours,

the cross you carry was designed for your small shoulders

Carry it! When they come to ask for help with theirs say it proudly Fuck No!

Yes, be an asshole!

It is so much easier than being the good guy

All you have to do is be yourself!

Come to the church of jerks!

The church of the new faith,

Our religion is one,

We believe in you!

All you have to do is what you want to

Our commandment is one,

Do you!

Burn the masks and wear your only face

Do not fear being selfish!

Holy O divine you've been fucked many times

It has to stop!

...back to The Shadows

The theme of religion in the Spoken Word movement is usually approached from either a stance of pro-religiosity or anti-religiosity. In this text we are confronted with a poem that leans more towards the latter, yet can also be interpreted as an appeal for an alternative religion that moves away from the prescription of selflessness as a core virtue. He begins the poem by drawing from The Parable of the Friend at Night (Luke 11: 5-8). However, contrary to the original message of the parable, the poet suggests that the door be not opened to the friend; one should be permitted the freedom to act in accordance to his own will. The poem proceeds with a number of other religious references, yet carries a theme that opposes the ways of conventional Christianity. It promotes a new ideal that does not allow for oneself to be mistreated or exploited in the name of friendship. The final verse ‘...*back to the shadows*’ stresses the point of countering conventional religion that emphasises the good of light, by encouraging a return to darkness.

On the scene, I was personally taken aback by the extent to which this poem achieves such an overwhelming audience response. It is evident that although the overall message appears to be self-centred and individual-oriented, there is a desire amongst the audiences to hear poems that allow for the community focus of religion to be challenged. It is also interesting to note that poems advocating for religious ideals also attain similar applause, such as the poem presented below.

### **Breaking News**

**By Given ‘Illustrative’ Masilela**

We interrupt your daily Broadcast  
To bring you this breaking news  
A group of Protestors have gathered at heaven’s gates  
Threatening to violently express their views  
They claim the K.O.G.P, Kingdom of God Party,  
Has done nothing but box them in rules  
Ever since their reign in governance.  
Armed with boards reading: “you must think we’re fools”  
The Protestors threaten to renounce their support of the party  
Expressing that their efforts have been unsatisfactory.  
President of the K.O.G.P, Mr J. Christ,

Has been accused of having dealt with the matter evasively

A leader of the Protesting mob,

Whose name is currently uncertain, exclaims:

*“We expect more from you!*

*A party that claims to reign in absolute Divinity*

*One that has many-a-times declared*

*An absolute rule in Potency and Supremacy*

*You have promised us everlasting Victory*

*Yet we have lost our Children in countless battles*

*We’ve fought against death and misery*

*All you’ve given us are Promises,*

*Retrievable only if we remain in faith unflinchingly*

*Mr President, we are in a time of war.*

*A time in which a nation’s needs need to be met instantaneously*

*You have promised us a beautiful land with,*

*I think, abundant milk and overflowing honey*

*But you have failed*

*To cater to our heart breaking desperation currently*

*Our enemy does not run in fear*

*As you have promised us*

*He glides above us as an eagle above rodents.*

*He’s every intention is malicious.*

*And all you’ve given us is the same statement:*

*“Remain in Faith. Remain in Faith?” Nonsense!”*

The K.O.G.P is further accused of having had

An intangible presence during their reign

In a time of desperation and essential needs

The Party is said to have failed to even maintain

A healthy and safe environment for the population of earth.

They are said to have remained the same  
Season in and out. Accused of having failed to provide shelter  
To keep the people safe from lightning, and heavy rain;  
And having promised to heal physical wounds,  
The Party's alleged "*false hope*" is said to have led to much emotional pain  
Parties in the physical realm such as the DA, ANC and etc...  
Are said to have shown a much more satisfactory gain  
Requiring in return nothing more than mere taxation.

Prior to a public appearance by the president of the K.O.G.P  
A supporting Member of the Party made a stand and expressed the following:

*"Some of you say, 'You have Faith, and I have works.'  
Well I say show me your faith without your works,  
And I will show you my Faith by my works.  
You believe there is one God. You do well.  
Even the Demons believe and tremble!  
But do you want to know, O foolish man,  
That faith without works is dead"*

Following this sincere and earnest period of self-expression  
The President of the K.O.G.P, Mr J. Christ, made His stand and expressed the following:

*"Your Moans are without Faith, yet you expect us to be in your debt?  
I tell you, that if you had Faith the size of a mustard seed  
You would say to the trees: 'be uprooted'  
And they would separate themselves with the ground  
And to the mountains you'd say: 'be thy removed'  
And to the winds: 'be still.' And they would commence without sound  
To your current leaders you are willing to lose coins  
Which represent your blood and sweat  
And all we ask of you is that you believe*

*And through this Faith we will cater to your every need*  
*The people of earth do not perish due to a lack of an effective God*  
*They perish due to a lack of paying Divine-Taxation...Faith*  
*All we ask is that you believe*  
*And we shall cater to your every need”*

With that having been expressed by the President of The K.O.G.P  
Questions are now raised as to whether the members of the protesting mob  
Still find the motivations behind their current riot as being substantial  
From *Shifting Paradigms News*, my name is Given Illustrative Masilela  
And I wish you all a fantastic evening.

In the poem above we are confronted by ideology that the Christian religion has failed to provide tangible solutions to occurrences of social crisis. In the form of a news broadcast, the poet creates the imagery of Christianity as a political party with Jesus Christ as their part leader, that has pledged to deliver on services and promises. In light of ongoing injustices a faction of followers claim the party has failed to materialise on its promises ‘*You have promised us everlasting Victory Yet we have lost our Children in countless battles*’. A response to these accusations is given by stating the Biblical scripture that reads “*Faith without deeds is dead*”, which emphasises that although one may believe for certain societal changes, their behaviour and actions ought to align with this faith. Fault regarding societal degradation is placed on those who believe, yet do nothing about it “*The people of earth do not perish due to a lack of an effective God They perish due to a lack of paying Divine-Taxation...Faith*”.

Many poems in the movement make some or other reference to religion, many a times intertwined with other issues relating to the human experience such as politics or relationships as is illustrated in the poems above. Religiously inspired poetry usually serves as a form of encouragement and assertion of one’s beliefs. In other cases, religiously themed poetry is presented as a means to suggest a shift away from the disillusionment religion may bring.

## Concluding Remarks

During my fieldwork, I identified race and politics, gender and sexuality, and religion as three main themes about which poems in the Spoken Word poetry movement are concerned. I illustrate that these narratives reflect both present day ideologies on various issues, yet also allow for a platform on which to contest existing ideologies and thus attempt to induce social change. Considering the value poets themselves place on the content and social significance of their work as remarked in Chapter 4, I employ the method of content analysis, focusing on the content value of the poems instead of the aesthetic value. In his paper, D'Abdon (2014:80) quotes Mda (2009) referring to present day Spoken Word poets as “a generation of young South African artists committed to the transformation of the unjust and unequal society they live and operate in”. I agree with the overall argument of D'Abdon (2014) who stresses that Black Consciousness ideology continues to have a strong reflection in the narratives of present day performance poetry. The poems presented on gender and sexuality in this chapter capture the ways in which women's poetry in contemporary South Africa pays attention to the link between private and public worlds, and foster sisterhood (see Gqola, 2011:8). In this Chapter, the narratives illustrate the forms of identity politics that emerge on the scene which include race, gender and religious affiliation (or absence thereof).

## CHAPTER SIX:

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I became acquainted with the Spoken Word movement in 2009 in Pretoria. Initially, although the following of the movement did not appear to be large, there was a constant flux of people towards it and over the years the numbers present at Spoken Word events and its popularity continued to grow. Embarking on this study, I sought to explore the key attributes and components of the Spoken Word movement, and the extent to which these could support its inclusion in the cultural industries of South Africa. To do this, I engaged in an ethnographic study of the movement in order to produce a description of the movement, and thus inform my overall research question.

In Chapter 2, I consider various literatures that provide a backdrop against which to frame this study. I note that the current South African Spoken Word movement has its roots in oral poetry, African praise poetry, and American stand up poetry. It also strongly reflects the liberation poetry used as a social weapon during the apartheid era, and continues to demonstrate strong links to Black Consciousness ideology. The Spoken Word poetry movement is described as a form of poetry which blends word, music and performance in such a way as to elicit imagination and emotion within the listener. We are also confronted with the argument that the performance is more emphasised than the textual content, and could thus also be considered as being more important, which raised questions concerning the value of this art form. However, Spoken Word artists tackle a number of issues facing their individual lives as well as those of their communities, reflecting the idea that Spoken Word poetry is an art form that was and in some contexts still is a tool used by historically minority groups to resist their oppression. For this reason amongst others, I classify Spoken Word poetry as a form of popular culture.

Chapter 3 reflects my description of the Spoken Word movement in Johannesburg and Pretoria by presenting the findings of my ethnographic study. I illustrate that although a Spoken Word culture does exist, it is fluid and differences exist between different scenes. I make a distinction between Spoken Word sessions and Spoken Word events, whilst also commenting on the different types of Spoken Word events i.e. open mic events and slams. I note that the Spoken Word poetry scene in Pretorian and Johannesburg is predominantly young and black in its demographic, and illustrate the ways in which this demographic

creates modes of solidarity yet also consequentially serve an exclusionary function. I further remark that over the years, changes have also occurred in its demographic by opening up the stage to women poets. However, the Spoken Word space still remains a gendered and patriarchal space. I stress that because of the history of the country, and the forms of poetry from which Spoken Word has inherited some of its features, one notices a strong political and revolutionary voice. In the same breath, there is also space for non-political narratives and entertainment. For this reason, performance and exploration is stressed as a means of bringing to life a poem in a way that cannot be done on the written page.

I consider the opinions and descriptions of the Spoken Word movement from the perspectives of a number of poets from Pretoria and Johannesburg in Chapter 4. By drawing on the poets' own voices, I illustrate that the post-apartheid poetry scene has experienced a number of waves of performance poetry. However, the present Spoken Word movement is considered as being the most progressive by poets. I also take note of the various factors that poets' feel render Spoken Word poetry as an important art form. Importantly, I explore the various channels by which revenue is generated from this art form, illustrating that means for financial revenue exist and Spoken Word's inclusion in the cultural industries can be justified.

Finally, Chapter 5 explores the content of a few poems selected from the poetry I witnessed on the scene. I identify race and politics, gender and sexuality, and religion as the main themes on which poems in the movement are centred.

In conclusion, this study has served as a contribution towards describing the Spoken Word scene of Pretoria and Johannesburg. We have remarked that contrary to views brought forward by traditionalists (see Weber, 1999), Spoken Word poetry makes significant contributions to South African literature and indeed has value beyond mere performance. By stressing issues that pertain directly to the lived experiences, and societal problems facing South Africa today in a beautifully artistic manner, I argue that the movement has great social and cultural value that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, I demonstrate that poets have already begun making advances towards Spoken Word poetry's inclusion in the cultural industries, an endeavour that could possibly create sustainable financial and cultural legacies for future generations.

The existing body of literature demarcating the nature and features of South African Spoken Word consider important aspects of this movement such as its aesthetics through fusions with

musicality and performance as drawn out by D'Abdon and Molebatsi (2007). A few scholars have also importantly considered the rising presence of women poets, black women especially, in the movement and their subsequent contribution to South African literature (see Gqola, 2011; D'Abdon & Molebatsi, 2011 and Schutte, 2011). The influence of Black Consciousness ideology on Spoken Word poetry has also been explored by Raphael D'Abdon who makes an important contribution to this field in his unpublished thesis *Features of the Post-apartheid Spoken Word Movement: A critical analysis* (2010).

This study engages the various aspects explored by the scholars cited above. Furthermore, the study makes additional contributions to this dialogue by exploring the features of the Spoken Word movement not only from the perspective of the researcher, but also from the lens of poets who identify themselves with the movement. Through such engagement, the study demonstrates that the present day Spoken Word movement in South Africa encompasses more than just narratives, it is a movement that seeks to build a culture centred on the valuation of Africanism through literature, whether oral or written, similar to the endeavour towards building a positive Afrikaner national identity as expounded on by Hofmeyr (1987). The study also illustrates that in the pursuit of such a culture, poets make deliberate efforts towards simultaneously leaving an imprint on the cultural industries on various fronts. These efforts contribute towards youth attempts at not only securing financial livelihoods, but also laying foundations towards building financial and cultural legacies that will benefit future generations and thus to an extent, curb inequalities brought on by the former apartheid regime.

Due to limitations of scope and time, I was in this study unable to explore a few areas that could be interesting for future research in this field; these include but are not limited to the following points:

- I indicate in Chapter 4 that post-apartheid Spoken Word poetry has experienced a number of waves, each time dying out and being resurrected. However, beyond a demarcation offered by some poets themselves in Chapter 4, I do not provide much engagement with the statement. It would be interesting to conduct an in-depth exploration of the features of these previous waves, the influential players of each of these waves and their particular contributions, as well as the factors that led to these waves dying out and reforming.

- There are exchanges that occur between South African and International Spoken Word poetry; these exchanges include cultural and aesthetic exchanges, as well as the mobility of poets and their ability to present their narratives across their particular contexts through media and travel. It would be interesting to give consideration to such exchanges and also consider a transnational perspective to Spoken Word poetry.
- Kaschula (1997) provides an interesting perspective on the oral-written interface of literature. It could be helpful to give further deliberation on the debates that exist on this aspect of literature, considering the location of Spoken Word in relation to this debate.
- In Chapter 5, I investigate the value of the content of the poems presented by Spoken Word poets. In this study, I do not give consideration to the aesthetic value of Spoken Word poetry. Such consideration would be useful considering the strong focus of the performance aspect of this art form.
- In Chapter 3 I demonstrate that the issue of poet-audience engagement emerged as an interesting feature of the movement. Initially, I had wanted to focus ethnographic attention on the audience as co-producers of the movement as well, giving attention to their input beyond financial terms. Unfortunately, due to the scope of the study it was not feasible for me to do so. I suggest that this are be explored for future research, linking it to Warner (2005) and the idea of publics.

Finally, this study locates itself in a number of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. It shares similarities with works of a number of scholars who illustrate how art can be used as a form of resistance politics. Gqola (2004) writes on the intersection of the private, public, and artistic life of pop-icon Brenda Fassie who was able to navigate her music as well as her commentary on topics towards public discussion and fascination with issues of identity formation and sexuality. Basson (2007) employs an ethnographic study of Punk identities and highlights that although political motivation is not a prerequisite for participation in the punk scene, it has and continues to play a significant role. Her findings display similarity to this study of the Spoken Word movement by illustrating how shifting contexts allow for the permeation of new narratives, yet may retain strong links to the political ideologies for which it was founded. A similar study is that of Haupt (2004) who explores hip-hop lyrics of ‘newer-generation’ hip-hop heads in South Africa. He identifies hip-hop as a means by which groups are able to construct their particular racial identities

(referring in this case to Coloured and Black identities), and refute mainstream and academic representations of such identities. Similar to the outcomes of this study, Haupt (2004) demonstrates that the hip-hop lyrics are aligned with the ideology of Black Consciousness.

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## Annexure A:

**Table 1: Table of poets interviewed**

<b>NAME</b>	<b>PSEUDONYM</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>DATE</b>
Mwamba Chileshe	Mwamba	Pretoria	10 April 2014
Roché du Plessis	Roach	Pretoria	May 2014
Dineo Rasedile	Dee	Pretoria	May 2014
Vangile Gantsho	Vangi	Pretoria	30 May 2014
Kurt Schröder	-	Pretoria	14 June 2014
Given Masilela	Illustrative	Pretoria	29 June 2014
Thabiso Mohare	Afurakan	Johannesburg	5 July 2014
Masai Dabula	-	Johannesburg	5 July 2014
Mpho Khosi	-	Johannesburg	5 July 2014
Sibusiso Simelane	Cornelius Jones	Johannesburg	6 July 2014
Mutle Mothibe	-	Johannesburg	6 July 2014
Lebohang Masango	Nova	Johannesburg	12 July 2014
Natalia Molebatsi	-	Pretoria	October 2014

**Table 2: Table of Poets involved in impromptu discussion**

<b>10 MAY IMPROMPTU DISCUSSION</b>
Mantombi Mbangata
Dineo 'Dee' Rasedile
Donald 'Neosapian' Mogale
Given 'Illustrative' Masilela

Ragi Bashonga
Thabiso 'Theist' Ngwenya
Mwamba Chileshe
Emmah Mabye
Leo Matthews

## Annexure B

**Table 3: Table of events attended**

DATE	EVENT	LOCATION	COST
March 2013	Word N Sound Extra	Reggae Lounge, Melville, Johannesburg	R30
24 July 2013	The Love House Discussion	The Love House, Sunnyside, Hatfield	N/A
17 August 2013	Women's Month Open Mic Event	Rapture Lounge Jazz Café	R40
14 September 2013	Icebreaker	Rapture Lounge Jazz Café, Hatfield	R30
19 September 2013	Night of the Poets	State Theatre, Rendezvous	R50
21 September 2013	Short Movie Screening	Cinema Nouveau, Brooklyn, Pretoria	Invite
6 October 2013	Slam for your life	Market Theatre, Bus Factory, Newtown, Johannesburg	R60
13 October 2013	No Camp Chairs	Union Building, Pretoria	Free
19 October 2013	Shifting Paradigms	Rapture Lounge Jazz	R25

		Cafe	
8 November 2013	Spoken Sessions – A day in my shoes	+27, Hatfield, Pretoria	R30
15 June 2014	No Camp Chairs	Union Building, Pretoria	Free