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# Cape Town Performance Poetry: The Activist's pen is Mighty

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**CAPE TOWN PERFORMANCE POETRY:  
THE ACTIVIST'S PEN IS MIGHTY**

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## **Abstract:**

Beginning with a look back to historical Xhosa oral traditions and then examining the role of performance poetry in resistance during Apartheid, this paper explores the existence of contemporary Cape Town performance poetry in a setting that has been a home to poets for centuries. Specifically, this project is a look into the space, mental and physical, that exists within Cape Town's current performance poetry scene for themes of resistance and activism. Through the observation of public poetry performances in local bookstores and coffeehouse, and through interviews with poets and audience members, contemporary attitudes of writers and community members toward activism and resistance poetry in Cape Town are examined and situated in Cape Town's larger historical poetry narrative. The contemporary conflicts between traditional "page poets" and performing poets is discussed, as well as the racial, wealth, education, and age make up of the two differing groups. This paper further researches Cape Town citizen's access to poetry, poetry as a status symbol or a privilege, and the dangers of viewing performance poetry through a narrow westernized ideal. Basing its relevancy in recognizing the effect of art as a tool of social change, this paper argues Cape Town poets, some of whose cultures have historically incorporated oral narratives, can uniquely garner activism performance poetry to spark empowerment and establish a voice for both marginalized and wealthy communities if the conflicts between poets of altering genres are dismissed.

## **Introduction:**

At my American home institution I am a mentor for a program, Engaging Diversity, that guides incoming students in examining modern-day racism and privilege. Within this program I utilize poetry (in the form of an “I am from…” template) to help students recognize their differences and similarities and to promote the seeking of equality. This poetry exercise showcases the power intrinsic in people’s expression and celebration of self through art and storytelling. Poetry provides a platform for words to be received on a level beyond the confines of formal speech making or debate by creating an atmosphere of freedom of expression: poets are at liberty to say whatever they want, to whomever they want, and in whatever way they want.

Coupling my understanding of the power of poetry with my observations of the continued racism and discrimination within Cape Town, I began wondering if people were using poetry as a means to incite social change and empowerment. My initial research turned up a few hits on venues where resistance and activism poetry had occasionally been performed and the names of a few poets, most notably the late Dennis Brutus. Yet, most of the poetry I encountered centered on the tradition of isibongo, or praise poetry, not activism poetry. These search results led me to pose the preliminary question, “what sort of space exists for resistance and activism poetry within Cape Town and how is the space being utilized by poets and communities?” In thesis format this question became. “What space, mental and physical, exists within Cape Town’s performance poetry scene for themes of resistance and activism and how is this space utilized by poets, audiences, and communities to promote social change and empowerment within marginalized communities”?

To answer my thesis I explored various subthemes of Cape Town poetry. These could included a look at how Cape Town’s poetry scene has functioned in ways outside of activism post-Apartheid, a look at the tradition oral narratives in indigenous tribes, an examination on the impact of a poet’s preferred language, focus on the access of poetry venues to different groups

and the intended targets of works, a look at the venues where poetry is performed and these venues locations and audiences, an examination of the poet's background, intersectionality, and intent, and a look at the recognition of activism and resistance poetry by Cape Town as a whole.

### **Literature Review:**

In order to situate my research of Cape Town's performance poetry into a historical narrative, I needed to explore the literary ancestors of contemporary spoken word. This required I look backward to a South African setting untouched by European colonial rule and a westernized style of writing and recording poetry. Jeff Opland's work, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* (1998), provided this context in his exploration of traditional Xhosa iimbongo and izibongo. Opland explains that, in an oral tradition dating back an immeasurable number of years, the people of South Africa's Xhosa tribe prized their ability to spontaneously compose poems for occasions of festivities, weddings, initiations, dances, or any social function with an audience (Opland, 6). These oral performances were a brand of poetry found in a majority of sub-Saharan African tribes, where poetry was "propagated orally" among "nonliterate" societies (Opland, 5). Because tribes were not using a form of written record keeping to preserve their poetry, oral poems became an integral instrument in maintaining tribal identity through the retelling of battles fought, of the lives of great chiefs, of the messages to and from ancestors, of fables, and of stories of creation or supernatural explanation. Xhosa poetry, my chosen focus because of Cape Town's Xhosa speaking population, followed this oral poetry trend, but was unique in both the prestige bestowed upon official poets from chiefs and ancestors, and in the ability of ordinary tribes citizens to spontaneously compose verse themselves.

Within Xhosa tribes, anyone had the ability and the agency to perform izibonga, traditional praise poetry, be they male or female, young or old. For example, "women memorized short izibongo for their relatives and uttered them as pride or thanks," boys "talked of the composition of short izibongo during long hours of herding livestock," while "their fathers had usually memorized izibongo about their cattle which they may have uttered to encourage their team while ploughing or men may have composed little autobiographic izibongo, which they shouted out while dancing or fighting" (Opland, 10). These people were not teachers, chiefs, or

poets by trade, yet they still incorporated poetry into their daily lives as a way to pass time, to give thanks, to celebrate life, to commemorate, to bond, and to make sense of their world. Furthermore, the space for these citizen's poetic talents was not limited to ordinary circumstances rather "it was not uncommon for someone to stand up at a ceremony and burst into spontaneous poetry," regardless of their class or function as these events. Xhosa people did not treat poetry as an elitist art form, poetry could be harnessed by anyone and anyone could be made an audience member out of, without consideration to their station within the tribe. Poetry in these instances tended to be performed at a fast pace, in "loud, high toned voice" and any rhetoric mistakes were usually masked by the "verbal activity and the emotional rising intonation" (Opland, 10). Here, Xhosa people's relationship to poetry can be understood: poetry was an art form prized not for its glamour, it was an art form realized to be so significant a tool in self expression and in understanding of the world, that it was better to perform and make mistakes than to not have experienced the poetry at all.

There was only one member of the tribe that was not allowed to make mistake, and he was known as imbongi. The tribe's "court poet" (Opland, 5), an imbongi was a man who had been bestowed a divine gift from the ancestors, for "the imbongi regarded their ability to produce oral poetry as an inner unexplainable gift (stemming from some central inspiration point)" (Kaschula, 11). His poetic talents were not a frivolity, but serious messages from a higher power. This divine power allowed an imbongi to play a very specific and crucial role in tribal dynamics. With his words, he announced the presence of his chief to his people and to neighboring villages (this was done to such an extent that a chief had his own izibongo fingerprint and could be recognized simply from a short recitation), maintained the legends and glory of the ancestors, celebrated battles, births, and weddings, and kept the morale of his tribe raised high. An imbongi

was usually the chief's right hand, was awarded livestock and robes for his better performances, and was able to exist on a level of authority no one else could. For example:

“The imbongi had the privilege of criticizing the chief in his poetry with impunity. His criticism was never intended to stir up dissent or dissatisfaction, but rather to express popular opinion and to moderate excessive behavior. The imbongi thus acted as a spokesman of the people. In turn, he aroused in the people intense feelings of loyalty for the chief. He acted not only as an ethnic history book but also molded communal solidarity. Herald, spokesman, mediator, historian, entertainer- all these were elements in the complex role of the imbongi in tribal life; overriding all was the peculiar ability of the good imbongi to arouse intense emotions in his audience, especially pride, loyalty and bravery.” (Opland, 17)

The cultural and often practical life of Xhosa people were kept kindled by an imbongi, the man responsible for the survival and the sharing of the tribe's common heritage.

Another critical aspect of the imbongi's role was his ability to create a piece of poetry as he was speaking it. As Albert Lord in *The Singer of Tales* explains, “oral, however, does not mean merely oral presentation...what is important is not the oral performance but rather the composition *during* oral performance.” (Lord, 5). This spontaneity met an imbongi was as comfortable with performing as he was in ordinary conversation and also insured that no “misunderstanding on the part of memorizers would render their poems nonsensical” (Opland, 10). Ultimately, Xhosa performance poetry did not originally exist as solely an art form or a means of resistance, but was an unmovable part of everyday life, ceremonies, and expression. To take poetry away from a tribe would have been to take its identity away.

Transitioning into the 20th century, and particularly into the rise of Apartheid, imbongi were separated from their tribes and their chiefs by forced labor and removals. If any imbongi continued his performance, as he felt he was divinely compelled to do, it could only be in his spare time (Opland, 18). But spare time was hard to come by and the imbongi tradition began to dwindle. Additionally, an imbongi's words had been mostly used for praise and to understand the

world around him, yet the Apartheid state gave an imbongi nothing to praise and begged to be changed more than it begged to be understood. This is where the shift from praise to resistance begins to manifest in performance poetry. Iimbongi began adopting new chiefs, anti-Apartheid leaders, and poems took on political and radical personalities.

Following the example of these anti-Apartheid leaders, “poetry of the late 1960s and the early 1970s directed itself to the oppressor, to those in power, and to those who were seen to be able to influence those in power” (Horn, 97). This poetry still maintained the Xhosa tradition of being performed orally, but the themes had shifted from a celebration of life to a fight for life. Recognizing the ability of poetry to educate and empower, whites sought to shift the focus of black poetry away from activism by “attempting to steer Black poetry into the safe channels of British aesthetics, which had more to do with dictating to Blacks how they should think and feel than with telling them how to write good poetry (Horn, 97).” Yet, performance poetry prevailed, especially after the passing of the Publications Act, which banned the work of South Africa’s most prominent black authors. Pages could be burnt, but spoken words required the poet be imprisoned and were more accessible to a larger audience.

Post Apartheid poetry has attempted to maintain some sense of activism. Yet, as the poetry is no longer needed at rallies and is not under constant threat of banishment, it has lost rebellious appeal. This sentiment, coupled with the poisonous, yet pervasive, belief that the New South Africa has nothing to resist or campaign against, the general public has lost interest in poetry performances, specifically those geared toward activism. As Amitabh Mitra explains, “democracy brought with it new found freedom, implementing the aspirations of millions but also bringing with it newer challenges, so poetry too changed its course” (Mitra, 3). Poets have taken to the page instead of the stage in hopes of garnering a wider readership (often a false hope with reference to the number of poetry anthologies sold in South Africa). Marlen Van Neikerk of

the University of Stellenbosch's Afrikaans and Dutch departments, made one of these attempts. In 2011, Neikerk published the anthology *Letter to South Africa: Poets Calling the State to Order*. She extend an invitation through other University departments and online for the inclusion of other poet's works. This system proves problematic in that it prohibited poets who are not professors or students and those who do have regular access to the Internet, from submitting their work. Even the retail price of the anthology, 174.00 Rand, is more than some can afford to spend on a week's worth of food. Neikerk limited her anthology to the middle class academic, when those who perhaps have most reason to "call the state to order," people who cannot afford an education, were excluded.

Nevertheless, *Letter to South Africa*, raised important themes and occasionally delved up powerful words. Written in the style of the American beat poet, Allen-Ginsberg (who one poet refers to a "grandfather", creating a rebel-rousing family tree), the anthology included over a hundred poems, some written in Afrikaans and then translated into English on the following page. William Anker's "South Africa's" piece was particularly strong in asking why libraries felt like bastions of the Apartheid regime and asking of South Africa "when will you be worthy of your millions of children's graves?" Anker, through his poetry, is demanding the country recognize her past and atone for her ills. In response to this plea, Anker writes, "South Africa I hear nothing."

Another poet, Andries Bezuidenhout, follows Anker's criticism of libraries in writing "Are you the one who stokes up library books to smolder in their/shelves?/Are those your Kwashiorkor crows that pluck out children's eyes?" Bezuidenhout's piece, "Synecdoche," argues that a person who cannot read cannot see and blames South Africa for the plight of her own citizens' short sightedness in violence and racism. Bezuidenhout also accuses the county of being "detached from your innards," or ignoring the citizens who work hard labor jobs in favor of

wealthy citizens that are perceived to give South Africa a globally positive image. Bezuidenhout concludes the piece with the lines, “South Africa, hear me, all your broken parts/ your estranged pieces of a greater whole” and “How do I summon your renegade bits/ with my trapeze artist voice?” Bezuidenhout is arguing poetry, through the depiction of common desires and hardships, has the power to unite various groups of people against the failing government and calls on all artists to wield this power. “Sneddoche” is an example of a poet believing in the power of words and art to incite positive social change.

Zandra Bezuidenhout is a poet who also subscribes to this belief. In her poem, “Praise Song of the Drums,” she writes, “when you, o troubled land, reimagine yourself,/ the chant of the coming generations/ will fill the valleys.” Bezuidenhout believes it is going to take artistic creativity to imagine and then achieve a new South African reality. Her use of the word “chant” is also strong, signifying she believes it will be the peoples’ *voices* that shoulder this change. Poetry then, and the voice it bestows on its performers, is an integral part of activism.

Phillippa Yaa de Villiers’s poem, “Consider the Birds,” also places paramount importance on voice and on language itself. In describing South Africa’s pre-colonial past, she writes, “in this world/ all language was indigenous, natural, innate, and equal.” De Villiers believes that poetry was a means of asserting equality, that people were equal in the strength of their voices. She follows this argument with the line, “culture’s the great silencer,” meaning South Africa’s culture of racism stole people’s freedom the moment their voices were silenced. Villiers’s chilling conclusion is the line, “words make the world and if we don’t/ let them breathe they die and so does the world they represent.” Without a means of self-expression and voice, we lose our place in our world and the world itself becomes uprooted.

Another similar anthology, published in 2012, is titled *Unbreaking the Rainbow: Voices of Protest from New South Africa*. In the anthology’s editorial note, Amitabh Mitra labels the

work a “protest poetry collection” and writes he does not term “these poets included here ‘Struggle Poets’ as the struggle they dreamt of was never really achieved” and “I would rather call them Rebel Poets whose rebellions are with them in not being able to implement the dreams of the Struggle Poets” (Mitra, 3). Mitra recognizes the persistent need for poets’ voices in the new South Africa, arguing there will never be a time when poetry does not have something to say.

The most powerful poem of the anthology is Naomi Nkealah’s “A Poet’s Deilemma.”

Nkealah describes the push and pull of a poet’s life in South Africa:

My people say angry words ooze out of me  
 Like pus from a rotting sore  
 They say my mouth is bitter  
 Like kolanut from Equatorial Africa.  
 But when the president appoints his son  
 The *Minister Ultimate of Finance*  
 They run to me for angry words,  
 Angry words to throw at the president  
 Like stones at a thieving dog;  
 They demand bitter truths,  
 Bitter truths to make them feel justified  
 In their anger, like dying patients  
 In a crowded hospital.  
 But when the cacophony dies down  
 And my angry words keep oozing  
 Out of my discontent-infested lungs  
 They say I’m subversive;  
 When my bitterness rejects pacification  
 They say I’m disturbing the peace,  
 The peace of their acceptance.  
 What am I to do  
 Trapped in this wilderness  
 Of shameless eaters and helpless onlookers?

Nikealah’s describes the harm of needed this poet’s voice to project public opinion and then the disregard of the poet’s voice in times of assumed peace. She argues that listening to the poet’s voice only when its convenient for the public undermines the purpose of poetry. If the public is

only interested when they see fit, they are preventing poetry from achieving its full impact and instead are barring it in a solitary corner of anger and uselessness.

In Anna Hamlin's poem, "Meditation on a paperclip" she explores her own discomfort with South African libraries, following the thoughts of Anker and Andries Bezuidenhout. She writes, "Don't you know I will die feeling ill at ease/ In Libraries!!!!/Yes libraries/ Those places full of books/The things I love so much/ I love to read and touch/ My books are in those libraries/ That I dislike to enter." Hamlin argues South Africa's black and coloured citizens have been unable to distance themselves from the feeling that public libraries are a whites only location. This unease, the lack of positive memories in libraries, is still today effective in maintaining the white demographic of libraries. The talent of poets like Hamlin is at risk for extinction without nurture from literature. Deena Padayachee, in the poem "For our Liberators," calls for poets to "free those books from their racist chains." Books were made a privilege in South Africa and this stigma is one that prevails today into the pig headed minds of whites and the colonized minds of blacks. One of the final poems of the anthology, "Mightier Than" by Graham Vivian Lancaster, depicts the true power of the pen. He writes, "Flight of/ Communal voice/ Roosts/ Upon the perch/ Of exiled poets/ With the people's ear/ And mightier/Vigilant pen/ Patriotically grasped/ In clenched fists/ Of underground power/ Stabbing the jugular." Poetry has the power to slice the throat veins of South Africa's oppression.

However, not all poets are in agreement that activism poetry is effective in promoting social change, or that activism poetry is well composed, even good poetry. In his article "Poetry in South Africa Today," Stephen Watson criticizes poets' focus on activism. He believes, "South African poetry is not of constant flowerings or of great promise fulfilled" as "the cultural conditions of South African life have tended to produce a body of poetry, in whatever language, which often says more about the enormous difficulties of its own conditions of production than it

does, for example, about an unbroken spirit of resistance to Apartheid outrages” (Watson).

Watson argues that with the lack of poetic education, of access to libraries, and of literacy itself, there is no conceivable way South Africa is in the position to produce talented poets. He believes that the obvious deficiency of training and finesse in poetry is more attention grabbing than the messages of the poetry as poets only “reproduce the deficiencies of their time and place in their verses” (Watson). Watson is ashamed of the state of his country’s poetry, and would rather people not write poetry if they cannot write “good” poetry.

Watson believes that in advocating for social change, “poetry is always the loser” (Watson). For example:

Not only is the struggle for liberation being waged on political, economic, and military fronts, but culture too has become a "site of struggle" or "contested terrain." In such a context it is perhaps inevitable that poetry should often become a kind of continuation of warfare by other means, but today the poetry scene is also marked and marred by ferocious verbal battles between those practitioners who, while more or less united in their abhorrence of all racism, nevertheless differ profoundly in their conceptions of poetry and their sense of its cultural mission. (Watson)

Watson believes activism poetry is a vain child’s game and that those that engage in resistance poetry will produce nothing profound.

Watson discusses the valid points that poets in South Africa often have little tangible recognition to aspire to as “there are no equivalents of Guggenheim Foundation awards, no Yaddo Corporations, MFA's in creative writing, writers' workshops, none of the nation's universities has a writer or a poet-in-residence” and “there is no reading circuit on which the poet can make his or her work known, nor is there anything like that secondary industry of reviewing and essay writing” (Watson). At the national level, poets are hardly encouraged by prizes and awards to continue their craft. However, the majority of Watson’s article is swamped in a westernized bias and his intersectionality as an educated white male informs his ignorance. Watson is ashamed of his country poetry when he should be ashamed of the conditions that

continue to prevent marginalized people from access education and libraries. He a perpetuator of the system that seeks to exclude those deemed unworthy instead of one that seeks to assist the underprivileged, yet talented. Watson also subscribes to the western ideal of poetry as a written art that includes illusion to Greek Tragedy and Shakespeare. He ignores the fact that poetry has existed in Cape Town in the centuries before his ancestors arrived. The pre-existing Xhosa poetry was not intended to be pretty little riddles, but was used as battle cries.

I will refer to these texts and the research presented here often in the findings section of the paper. I will recall these texts to situation my research of Cape Town's performance poetry scene into a larger historical narrative and validate my analysis of events, interviews, and poetry.

**Methodology:**

To conduct my research I predominantly relied on the methods of participant-observation and interviewing, to both observe poetry readings and speak with poets respectively. Through the course of my project I attended four poetry readings at the venue Touch of Madness, a restaurant and bar in Observatory. These were weekly readings hosted by a group named Off the Wall Poetry. Off the Wall's Monday evening performances were divided into two parts, the first 40 minutes dedicated to a guest performer and the time after a quick interval dedicated to an open-mic session. I also attended a presentation of Equal Education's findings on schooling in the Eastern Cape at the Book Lounge in Cape Town's city centre. Equal Education's group of delegates included prominent South African novelists and poets. During these events I was a participant-observer and did not acknowledge my identity as a researcher to others. I chose to remain anonymous for fear the presence of a researcher might shift the natural atmosphere at venues. My research hinged on my ability to observe Cape Town's authentic performance poetry scene and I did not want performers to feel pressured to read specific poems or to not read because of my attendance. However, if I included pieces of performer's poetry in my project I always introduced my research and myself and received the poet's permission.

During interviews I used a combination of note taking and electronic recording on a Flip Cam to document the conversation. All of my interviewees signed a release statement, and in the case of one interviewee, part of their responses were agreed to be anonymous. Interviews were conducted in a space of the interviewees choosing, all coffeehouses and cafes with exception of one residential home, to insure maximum comfort for interviewees. I began interviews with a specific set of questions based on my research goals (see appendices), but let interviews take their natural course as conversations, often including alternate question based on the interviewees' responses. I ended my interviews with question, "Is there anything you would like

to add before we close?” This gave an interviewee the chance to speak about areas they felt I had not covered or to clarify any information. Additionally, I made available my research project, before finalization, to my interviewees so they could see in what capacity they had been included and make sure they were being represented in an accurate way.

On occasion, there were people who I felt would be important contributions to my project but mutual schedules prevented a physical interview with. In these circumstances I conducted interviews by email, following the same protocol for my face-to-face interviews and having these interviewees either electronically sign a consent form or fax their signed consent form to the SIT office.

Furthermore, my positionality as a native English speaker, a student and amateur writer of poetry, a white woman, and a financially secure person will naturally inform my research. I aimed to be as unbiased as possible during my observation of poetry reading and my interviews and to not unfairly judge Cape Town’s poetry through the lens of an American academia ideal (a perspective unfair in examining Cape Town performance poetry). I believe I managed this through approaching my topic from various perspectives. I explored the viewpoint of poets and audience members from diverse backgrounds, education levels, languages, and experiences.

The following is a list of my face-to-face interviewees:

**Bulelwa Basse:** Bulelwa is a Xhosa and English speaking black woman in her mid-thirties. She is an accomplished and renowned Cape Town performance poet, invited to perform at functions across the country. She also runs a non-government funded group, Lyrical Base Project, which aims to inspire and give a voice to underprivileged youth through performance poetry.

**Keith Gottschalk:** Keith is a sixty-seven year old white man and native English speaker, born and raised in the Cape Town area. He is best known for his anti-Apartheid poetry. Primarily a performance poet, Keith's work has also been published in a number of national and international poetry magazines. He has served as a tutor and junior lecturer at the University of Cape Town, where he currently works for the Political Studies department.

**Michael** (last name withheld): Michael is a middle aged white man and fluent English speaker, originally from Zimbabwe. Michael is the current host of Off the Wall Poetry readings and has been with OtW since 2011.

**Stream:** A regular Off the Wall open-mic performer, Stream is a mid thirties black man originally from Zimbabwe, and speaks fluent English.

**Toni Stuart:** A young coloured woman, Toni is both fluent in Afrikaans and English. Toni has worked as a journalist, with arts based NGOs, and is now a poet by trade. Toni is a respected name in the Cape Town performance poetry scene is often invited to perform for events around the city.

The following is a list of my email interviewee:

**Rabbie Serumula-** Rabbie is a young black man, working as an independent journalist. He was an open-mic performer at Off the Wall's open-mic session on April 29th.

**Limitations of Study and Ethical Reflexivity:**

The most glaring limitation of my research was the lack of exposure to the performance poetry scene specifically occurring within Cape Town's surrounding townships. There are usually no advertisements of these specific readings (because of funding and target interest groups) and the location and date are usually passed through word of mouth. Often these readings occur spontaneously. Due to these circumstances and my limited mobility around Cape Town, I was unable to first hand observe performance poetry in the townships. Furthermore, Cape Town plays host to a few poetry and book festivals each year, none of which were occurring at the time of my research. Again, I only have my interviewees' perceptions of these events and not my own observations to base findings on. Despite these limitations, I was able to attend four Off the Wall readings with varied performers and audiences and I felt that my interviewees represent a diverse group of poets, giving my research legitimacy in its attempted representation of multiple groups of poets.

I also am conscious that performance poetry and spoken word were birthed out of black culture and tradition. Throughout my research I have tried to be respectful of performance poetry's origin and culturally sensitive. Although I believe every person has the right and the ability to express themselves through performance poetry, I had to make sure none of research and findings culturally appropriated performance poetry to suit my needs.

## Findings and Analysis

What is performance Poetry?

In the Oxford English Dictionary, poetry is defined as a “literary work in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm” (OED). Poetry is a worded form of artistic expression that follows a sometimes distinctive, sometimes loose, set of rules. These sets of rules and the question “what makes poetry poetry?” have been turned over in the minds and tongues of varied civilizations throughout the course of history. With distinct contrasts across the societies under which poetry flourished, very few trademarks of the literary genre have aligned across space and time. This makes the features of poetry that are universally discernable paramount in identifying and analyzing poetry. Poetry is typically understood to have a rhythm or a beat that prose lacks. While prose portrays ideas or narration in a condensed and logic method, poetry is the escape to this form. Poetry focuses on the sound of language in addition to the meaning of language while playing with the weight and connotations of words and often incorporating imagery as a means of argument.

So, where can we draw the line between poetry intended for the page and poetry intended for the stage? The largest difference between the two styles is the requirement of a live audience when dealing with performance poetry. This poetry’s impact hinges on the interaction between performer and listener. Much like theatre, the meaning of a piece can be voided if a conversation is not occurring between the words of the poet and the minds of the audience. Harold Scheub, in his book *The Poem in The Story*, describes performance poetry as involving, “things of the external form: the spoken word, silences, gestures, body movements, facial expression, audiences, place of performance” in addition to involving, “the internal form: all the feelings and

meaning undercurrent of the external forms” (Scheub, 226). Performance poetry is the emotional bringing to life of a poem so that the audience will have an emotional, cathartic response.

However, for the sake of my research, I defined performance poetry as “poetry that is read or spoken aloud.” This is perhaps the broadest definition of the genre I could present, but I feel that it is also the fairest definition. I toyed with the idea of defining performance poetry as any poem that is composed with intention of being read aloud. This seemed to exclude those poems that become more powerful when performed, but are also capable existing on the page. The definition also presented the problem of me viewing another poet’s performance through my definition of their work as opposed to their own definitions. The way a poet defines poetry is heavily influenced by their intersectionality: their race, their wealth, their age, their gender, their education, etc. To have a narrow definition of performance poetry would have closed off this exploration of intersectionality and poetry. In defining performance poetry as “any poetry that is performed” I allowed my interviewees’ own definitions of poetry to fit comfortably inside of my research.

“What is performance poetry?” is a question that I asked all of my interviewees. The answers I received were as varied as my line up of interviewees, with the responses illuminating an individual’s relationship to poetry, how that relationship was conceived, and how a performer views themselves. Michael, my first interviewee and host of Off the Wall Poetry’s readings, defined performance poetry as “what transfers from the heart of the poet into the heart of the listener” (Michael). Michael had “been born into a racist country to racist parents” and was taught from an early age that a person’s outward appearance was reflective of their inner self (Michael). In this context, Michael’s given definition of poetry demonstrates instances in his life when he was able to shed his prejudice and understand someone by connecting inside, through the “heart” (Michael).

When I posed this question to Bulelwa Basse, her answer followed the belief mentioned by the poet Zandra Bezuidenhout as discussed in the literature review section. Bezuidenhout believed it would take a “reimagining” of South Africa to realize positive social change. Basse’s definition of poetry relied heavily on the concept of imagination: “poetry is a neat encapsulation of reality and fantasy.” She unpacked this definition by asking me “if fish exist”, to which I replied “yes.” She asked me “if humans beings exist” and I nodded my head. Then Basse asked “if mermaids existed” and I paused. She then said, “when I asked you that final question, there was a possibility that mermaids may exist, but they are not our current reality, and that is poetry” (Basse). Her demonstration of the nature of poetry proves that poetry is a tool to reimagine a current situation into a better situation. Poetry had already accomplished this for Basse, a girl raised in Langa, who now performs for the likes of Desmond Tutu (Basse).

Stream, a regular performer at Off the Wall, defined poetry as “the way I speak to people” (Stream). Stream was my first interviewee to offer a personally definition of poetry instead of a universal definition. Stream has been living in Cape Town for over five years after fleeing Zimbabwe. Stream left his home country because he felt betrayed and disregarded by the government only to arrive in South Africa where “nobody listens to you unless you’re rich” (Stream). Stream, feeling ignored by the powers that be, decided that if he could not converse normally and expect people to listen, he would force them to listen as his audience. Poetry is not an art form for stream, it his voice.

Toni Stuart, my final interviewee, combined a personal and universal definition to say:

Poetry is a way of loving. It is the way in which I see, approach new people, engage with and open up to the world. Poetry is about noticing all the little details and a commitment to inquiring something and exploring the inquiry through every perspective. (Stuart)

Stuart admitted that it was hard to come up with a definition because poetry meant many things to different parts of her life and her opinions of poetry changed frequently (Stuart). The difficulty

in choosing a single definition stems from how intricately woven poetry is into Stuart's person. Choosing a definition for poetry was on par for choosing a single definition to describe Stuart's personality or her soul. Her definition shifts with the changing of days as her mood shifts, each affecting the other. Stuart went on to define poetry as "exploring where life's difficulties and triumphs meet all the time and helps us to accept both" (Stuart). Here, Stuart is arguing poetry can help identify the good and bad in a person by acting as an inner monologue, a nonjudgmental space of conflicts of the soul. Stuart's definition of poetry as a place to examine the good and the bad, lead my research project in the search for activism poetry, which inevitably required I define activism poetry.

What is Activism poetry?

This question was also posed to all of my interviewees in addition to the question "do you consider yourself an activist poet?" Again, the responses were varied and indicative of a person's past and intersectionality. To begin the definition train, I will give the scholarly definition of activism. In the Oxford English dictionary activism is a noun defined as, "the policy or action of using campaigning to bring about political or social change" (OED). The definition required that I research if poetry can be a sort of campaigning and if poetry has agency in achieving social change. Poetry.org defines activism poetry as "poetry that specifically promotes an ideological point of view" (Poetry.org), however I find fault with this definition in its lack of address to poems that criticize current realities, but might not offer a means to change these realities, or a specific "ideological point of view." Part of the poetry's strength comes from the freedom of a poet to ask questions without providing answers, or to explore multiple perspectives of an issue. The only universal "ideological point of view" I understand to exist in activism poetry is the recognition that poetry is a safe space to speak your mind and to question. My definition of

activism poetry, for the purposes of this research, is “any poetry that questions or challenges realities, past, present or future, or advocates for the betterment of these realities.”

The most obvious poet that fits the criteria of my definition is Keith Gottschalk. Gottschalk was a performance poet during Apartheid and read his poetry at ANC events and Apartheid rallies. When asked the question, “how do you define activism poetry and do you consider yourself an activist poet,” Keith self identified as an activism poet before he offered his definition. This instantaneous gut reaction to label himself an activist poet has been shaped by his life’s work and those he has “allied” himself with, organizations like “Greenpeace, Cafes Against Corruption, and the ANC” (Gottschalk).

Gottschalk was likely also to immediately call himself an activist poet as that is how the rest of South Africa views his work and his words were the reason for his imprisonment during Apartheid. While some would applaud his bravery and spirit, others, like Stephen Watson, would hesitate to even refer to Gottschalk as a poet and would use the prefix of “activist” as a buffer to prevent Gottschalk from identifying as a true poet. Gottschalk wears the badge of activist poet proudly. He defines activism poetry as, “poetry that mentions some current cause, or maybe a historic cause or campaign, or at the very least the poetry may never mention this cause but give some time or some celebrity support to the cause” or “it could be that you are writing love poems, or poems of tragedy and death...which never mention the cause you are involved with, but you still give that cause your passion and time” (Gottschalk). This definition aligns with Gottschalk experiences in performing during Apartheid. At resistance rallies Gottschalk was asked to read his poetry to fill the space in between speakers and some of these poems might not have had a political flair, but were still representing the event. With this definition, it is possible that someone might become an accidental activist poet through the lending of their time and voice to a cause. Stream fits this criteria.

Stream, perhaps the opposite of Gottschalk in terms of recognition, had never fully considered the definition of an activist poet and how he might situate himself within that genre of performers. When I posed the same question to Stream that Gottschalk had so confidently answered, Stream paused. He looked away, eyes searching for a definition he did not have on hand. When he looked back to me he said, “that is one of the best questions I have ever been asked” (Stream). He explained:

I don't want to be a love poet who writes romances, because I think those subjects are over exploited and I don't want to be a poet who writes silly things that can be forgotten. But I also don't have a microphone at important rallies. I want to be the kind of poet that helps to transform, but man, the problem is a lot of people don't see themselves transforming or helping others to transform, because it can be so subtle. I guess I want to be an activist poet and I hope that is how people hear my poetry. (Stream)

Stream had never been termed an activist poet by the community and this lack of an outward label was perceived by Stream as a lack of recognition. When he said that he did “not have a microphone,” he was buying into the belief that being an activist poet, or at least a successful activist poet, requires your work to be broadcast in massive audiences. But then Stream, the man who felt ignored by government his entire life, thought about what he was trying to say in poetry, not who was listening. He wants his poetry to tell people “you can be so much more than what you have been told you are” and “when you think that you are ordinary, have the courage to become extraordinary” (Stream). Stream realized the message of his words were louder than any microphone, especially when he self reflected, “I am someone who has gone through that transformation of a poor village boy who knew nothing of life outside or the rural areas into a man who feels like the world could be at my disposal...poetry has done this for me” (Stream). Throughout the course of our interview I felt Stream realized the full impact of his activism poetry to be impact on himself, a realization that allowed me to understand poetry that changes your own life can be just as powerful as poetry that aims to change the lives of others.

Bulelwa Basse is a woman whose life was transformed by her own poetry, a transformation that provided her the talent to help others know the power of poetry. Basse grew up in Langa, and although her mother encouraged her passion for reading, Basse had no close examples of people from her community who had made a career of writing poetry (Basse). Basse's choice to pursue her passion professionally was bold, but she could not forfeit "the best way [she] was able to communicate (Basse)." About her career, Basse said, "I do not aspire to be a writer, I aspire to inspire" (Basse). This focus on inspiration is where Basse molds activism into her poetry: "activism poetry is about inspiring people to imagine their life differently, it offers different perspectives and gives people the opportunity to make a choice on what's just and unjust, right or wrong" (Basse). Through her own empowerment at the words of poetry, Basse was inspired to create the NGO, Lyrical Base Project, an "arts and culture organization which seeks to elevate the profiles of writers from marginalized communities through community-publishing projects, performance poetry, cultural and corporate events" (Basse).

Toni Stuart and Michael shared opinions on activist poets that differentiated them from the rest of the interviewees. Stuart believed she never set out to be an activist, but that the causes she writes about (AIDS, racism, and gender based violence) demanded to be heard from somewhere inside of her: "it was not what I intended to write about, the subjects simply would not stay silent" (Stuart). Stuart defines activism itself as "using my work for a purpose, being aware the responsibility that comes with the power to speak and be heard, and knowing that I want to present, never preach" (Stuart). Although Stuart wholeheartedly agrees "poetry is a tool for understanding and creating social change" (Stuart), she resists being termed an activist poet. For her, preceding the word poet with any label is attempting "to qualify a poet and not letting the poet be free" (Stuart). Her activism is highlighted in her poetry and vice versa, but she does not want activism to define her poetry. Michael's opinion aligned with Stuart's in that he

believed, “poets can stand up and say things people don’t want to hear in a way that people want to listen,” but he also found fault with the term activist. Michael thought the term activist was outdated and reflected a group of people who complained, but did not force change. Michael prefers the term “revolutionist poetry” (Michael). To him, the term revolutionary both means someone who “gets shit done instead of posting whiny Facebook statuses” and separates him from Apartheid activists into a new generation of people fighting for their own rights in their own time (Michael).

### Cape Town’s Performance Poetry Scene

Cape Town’s performance poetry scene (it should be noted for the remainder of the study the specific scene I had access to involved publically advertised events within in Cape Town) is small, but filled with passionate and vibrant performers and poetry lovers. Michael, the host of Off the Wall poetry reading stresses that the venue is a “safe space” and “anyone, absolutely anyone is welcomed” (Michael). Not only are people welcome to watch the guest poet’s performances at Off the Wall, anyone is allowed a slot in the open-mic portion of the night. Michael encourages everyone to read a piece, whether the work is their own or someone else’s, whether they have read a hundred times before or they are a first time performer (Michael). To stress this point Michael added, “I have seen people just really, tremendously fuck up before, like, truly horrible performances,” but he would rather “witness a bloody awful performance than to not have seen someone perform at all” (Michael). Michael understands the experience of reading and sharing your voice trumps the quality of performance. It was this welcoming attitude of Off the Wall that drew in first time performer, Rabbie Serumula, an independent journalist. Rabbie, assigned to write about Oscar Pristorious’s case, chose instead to compose a poem because he felt compelled to “tackle the story of Reeva’s murder from the perspective of her

graveyard” (Serumula). He felt that “the journalist feeding frenzy” was dehumanizing and sensationalizing the case and that poetry “sort of became the obvious choice to help me work through the case” (Serumula). About his performance, Rabbie said, “I won’t lie, I was nervous for the first thirty seconds, but nerves mean you respect your art” and that he eventually “felt at home” (Serumula).

Serumula’s reading garnered him a round of thunderous applause, Michael being so particularly impressed that he demanded Rabbie continue return next week with a new poem. The enthusiasm for the level of the crowd was in part due to Serumula’s status as a first time performer and because the poem itself was well written, but the enthusiasm is also indicative that the audience was receptive to the theme of activism Serumula’s work presented. Arguments about how to better society and passion for human rights are themes that consistently appear at Off the Wall’s readings. I observed poetry on the topics of AIDS prevention, South Africa’s housing and schooling crises, LGBTQ rights, environmental issues, issues of racism and discrimination, and women’s rights. Stream frequently performs on the issue of freedom, and one of his most memorable verses was, “how can we be free when we believe our freedom is in other people’s hands?” This poem received a standing ovation. The guest poet on the evening of April 29th, Kroch E Moses, also incorporated elements of activism into performance. He wrote, “doesn’t equality have to be the source of our diversity” (Moses). He believed so much in the power of words to lead and create positive change, he wrote “vote poetry for president” by “casting your poem” (Moses). At the end of Moses’s performance, Michael referred to him as one the best poets to have ever performed at Off the Wall. The partiality toward these sort of poems from the audience and the performer’s keenness to read them, asserts that there is definitely space within Cape Town’s performance poetry scene for activism poetry.

Cape Town's performance poetry scene also encourages poets to read in their own languages, though English usually reigns. Basse remarked of performing in mother tongues, "it gives poets a sense of themselves and how they relate to those that came before, because it is never just you who is speaking, it is your ancestors and your experiences" (Basse). Basse encourages the youth she works with in Lyrical Base Project to perform some of their work in their native language, and says, "there is definitely a place for traditional Xhosa praise poetry in the performance scene, even white people seem to like it" (Basse). Basse recognizes that having Xhosa students of Lyrical Base Project perform in a traditional style helps them realize the "talent inherent in their culture and makes them proud to have been born who they are" (Basse). Stuart also occasionally performs in Afrikaans, though she favors English "to reach a wider audience as it is the most accessible language" (Stuart). The acceptance of native languages in Cape Town's performance poetry scene reiterates Michael's belief that anyone and everyone is welcome, but the overall use of English demonstrates the extent to which poets want their voices to be understood and who their intended audience is: the entire country.

This space, however, is sometimes divided. Depending on the race, age, and gender of the guest poet, I observed the audience at Off the Wall shifting from week to week. Michael affirms my observation by explaining, "you notice that older whites don't want to listen to the hippy new black artists and that young blacks don't want to hear old whites perform, so I've got to try and balance out the personas of my guest poet's from week to week" (Michael). This statement seemed to be true as the first night I attended Off the Wall I observed fourteen black people and thirteen white people in the audience to watch the performance of Winslow Shcalkwyk, a young non-white man. As it was my first night attending an Off the Wall reading I was impressed by the multiracial crowd and the number of various people the event seemed to attract. It was also inspiring to see the relatively equal race numbers because even being able to

attend an Off the Wall poetry event is a privilege only people with a car and money for gas can exercise. However, at the following week's performance, there were only five black people and 21 white people who had come to hear Ralph Goodman, a middle aged white man, read a collection of his favorite poems written by others. Although a definite space for activism poetry exists in Cape Town's performance poetry scene, this space shifted from week to at Off the Wall, depending on the poet's race and age, a phenomenon activism poetry would likely fight against.

Furthermore, the Cape Town's performance poetry scene does not seem to permeate the public sphere. At the four Off the Wall poetry readings I attended, nearly half the audience were open-mic performers and rest were divided into these performers' friends and the occasional professional writer or teacher. I never once observed the odd member of the public wander in to listen and, when I got hopelessly lost on my way to Off the Wall, none of the eight community members I questioned on the streets knew that weekly poetry took place blocks away from their homes, never mind the location of the venue. One woman even said, "We don't have anything like that happening around here, you must be in the wrong place." When I asked my interviewees if they felt Cape Town citizens in general were interested in performance poetry, I received very mixed remarks. Bulelwa was quick to say, "definitely" (Basse), while Toni responded, "I'm not sure, that is a hard thing to gage, but is sometimes feels like people have no time to listen" (Stuart). Gottschalk expressed his fear that South Africans "feel as if there is no longer a need for activism poetry and any contemporary pieces of activism are seen as only rebel rousing criticisms, when in reality we need activism poetry today and right now" (Gottschalk). Rabbie was quick to comment that people are far more people are interested in his journalism work than his poetry and Michael said, "the biggest problem in this country, above anything else, is people's lack of interest in literature" (Michael). Perhaps these varied responses are more telling than a cohesive answer would be: there is no obvious number of South African's interested in

poetry and the answer must be searched for and guessed. Even on a governmental level Stephen Watson was quick to point out:

None of the nation's universities has a writer or a poet-in-residence. There is no reading circuit on which the poet can make his or her work known, nor is there anything like that secondary industry of reviewing and essay writing which is available, for good or ill, to American poets as soon as they achieve prominence. There are no more than three or four English-language literary magazines, almost all of them operating on a shoestring budget and unable to pay their contributors. The sole annual prize for English poetry in this country carries with it an award roughly equivalent to \$175. On average, individual collections of English poetry published each year amount to five or six; Afrikaans-language volumes are usually double or triple this number; those in the African languages more or less a dozen. Apart from public events like mass rallies, the effective audience for poetry is also minuscule: the print runs of collections range, with rare exceptions, between five hundred and seven hundred copies, and these usually take from five to ten years to sell out. (Watson)

Cape Town's performance poets are clearly not getting the recognition they deserve, but no one has worked out how quite to crack the barrier between poetry circles and the public sphere. However, a far sinister force than lack of public interest is working against Cape Town's performance scene. There exists a major conflict between Cape Town's page poets, writers who compose poems specifically to read on a page and not aloud, and the performance poets.

### The Two Worlds of Cape Town Poetry

With an interviewee who wished to remain anonymous, I discussed the differences between page poets and performances poets in Cape Town. The interviewee, henceforth referred to as Doe, classified page poets being "usually older white people, hardly anyone who is black has a problem with performance poetry," and performance poets as being, "a younger crowd, predominantly made up of black or colored artists who address social issues in their work" (Doe). Michael agreed that with Doe in the existence "of a massive cultural gap between page

poets and stage performers” (Michael). Where the conflict occurs between the two groups is in the page poets’ prejudice against performance poets. Page poets often argue that performance poetry is a lesser form of the art or, in the style of Stephen Watson, not an art at all. Doe, as a performance poet, feels “looked down on when I enter certain spaces, like I am not good enough, it feels like blatant prejudice based not only on my craft, but on me as a person” (Doe). I would argue Doe feels that their person, in addition to their poetry, is being discriminated against for two reasons. One, poetry is an extension of self and criticism of poetry will ultimately feel like a criticism of personal beliefs and characters. Two, Cape Town performance poetry traces its roots to Xhosa oral tradition, a distinctly cultural and black practice, so to delegitimize performance poetry is to delegitimize an entire facet of a culture. When page poets disregard the validity and impact performance poetry can have, they are not only shoving aside contemporary poets or poets of the Apartheid era, but an art form that defined all Xhosa’s people’s celebrations, achievements, and understandings of self and the world.

The primary argument against performance poetry from Watson and his fellow page poets is that a performance does not allow for in-depth contextual analysis of poems and a performance piece “cannot often survive a separation from its context--that of actual performance itself.” I would disagree with Watson on both points. When an audience member engages in a performance, they are actively analyzing. A page poem will of course provide opportunity to analyze time and time again, but a page poem cannot fluctuate its voice or play with the connotation and logic of words in the manner a performance can. To refute Watson’s second point, I will quote Russel H Kachla, from his writing, *Exploring the Oral-Written Interface with Particular Reference to Xhosa Oral Poetry*. He writes, “one must remember that oral literature preceded writing, lives alongside writing, influences writing, and yet also manages to stand-alone. It is a well-developed, firmly established form of literature that has always

included, for example, lyrics, religious poetry, prose narratives, and panegyric poetry” (Kaschula, 174). Yes, performance poetry cannot be read on a page with the same effect as an actual page poem, but a lack of a western style of recording does not mean the poems’ themes and cathartic potential are voided. The memory of experiences at performances certainly stands alone, as does the actual meaning of the poem itself.

Doe says there are “the occasional page poets, few though, who are sympathetic toward performance poetry and recognize their luck in being exposed to page poetry at an early age and their parents encouragement in their talent to write poetry” (Doe). I find this report to be wholly un reassuring. I took Doe’s statement to mean a handful of page poets have begun classifying poetry, and exposure to poetry, as a privilege. When I asked my interviewees if they agreed that poetry was a privilege in South Africa, both Michael and Gottschalk replied affirmatively. After visiting both Langa and Tshabo’s local high schools, and attending Equal Education’s presentation on Eastern Cape education, I have no doubt that poetry is not the most highly prized subject in schools. Access to poetry in schools is a privilege and it is a problem, but when page poets label poetry, in its entirety, a privilege, they are operating under a very western definition of what poetry means. Kids who may not be exposed to their Shakespeare, Poe, and Frost in school, usually have experience with their culture’s praise poetry traditions and the slam poetry scene in the townships. To call poetry a privilege is to, once again, ignore the existence and validity of performance poetry, for “if one portrays orality and literacy as incompatible and different rather than forming part of the same continuum, then one is left with images of literacy versus illiteracy, civilization versus non civilization, structure versus non-structure, and so on” (Kaschula, 173).

It is also important to note that oral poetry existed before western style writing was introduced to Cape Town (and before western style writing was developed in Europe for that

matter). The question should not be which form of poetry is better as they both have influenced each other:

Oral and written literature are literature in their own right- interacting at some point, remaining autonomous in many ways, back by the same culture and society and the world in general. A western ethnocentric view sees oral literature as inferior- something one associates with an illiterate uncivilized society. One must remember that oral literature preceded writing, lives alongside writing, influences writing, and yet also manages to stand alone. It is a well-developed, firmly established form of literature that has always included, for example, lyrics, religious poetry, prose narratives, and panegyric poetry. (Kaschula, 174)

Doe firmly believes that “poetry is poetry no matter the form” (Doe), and I am inclined to agree. One of the most poignant quotes from my research was when Stream said, “I do not feel like an Zimbabwean poet or a South African poet, I feel like I have the soul and talent of an old, white English man” (Stream). Initially I was shocked to hear Stream, the man who had used his poetry for empowerment, to confess something like this. But the more I uncovered the conflict between page and performance poets, the more I understood why Stream felt he needed to adopt this identity. Stream had been told by page poets that his style of writing, his person, was not worthy and that his voice was unequal to theirs.

## Conclusion

Cape Town's performance poetry scene is a continued tradition of Xhosa oral performances and also pays homage to the performance poets of the Apartheid struggle. Given this ancestry of the current scene it is natural that there exists a space for activism poetry specifically to be read and appreciated. Poets are at liberty to discuss human rights, racism, housing, education, gender based violence, LGBTQ rights, and a score of other topics some consider taboo for polite conversation. Performance poetry gives these topics a platform to be contemplated while giving poets the voice and the audience to be heard. Cape Town's performance poetry scene incorporates many activists of all races, genders, and ages who's past experiences, ancestry, and intersectionality define their writing. However, the celebration of diversity and activism within the performance poetry is marred by divisions within, lack of public acknowledgment, and outside discrimination.

In order to fully realize the potential of activism performance poetry, Cape Town's poets will need to support one another, regardless of race, age, and subject matter. It is going to take a united front from within the scene to tackle the prejudice of the page poets. If organizations like Lyrical Base Project and Off the Wall's readings continue to flourish, the stigma of performance poetry might stand a chance at being rewritten and the country might recognize "oral permeates the written, and possibly always will" (Kaschula, 177). Oral poetry has existed in Cape Town for centuries and the art form will remain relevant as long the poets I had the pleasure to interview and those like them, fight for their voices.

In order understand my findings through a creative outlet I have composed four collaborative poems based on my interviews, specifically the questions, "How do you define poetry," "what is your relationship to poetry," "how would you define activism," and "what how

do you define activism poetry?” These poems allowed me to synthesize my research on poetry through poetry itself. Please find these poems on the final page of the appendices.

Finally, my recommendations for further study include an in depth look at the organization Lyrical Base Project and the actual effects poetry has had on the life of youth. An examination of the rise of the page poet prototype would also be helpful in continuing this study as would exposure to the slam scene in the townships. A study on the poetry curriculum of South Africa’s school and the type of poetry being taught to what students would be another avenue of possible research.

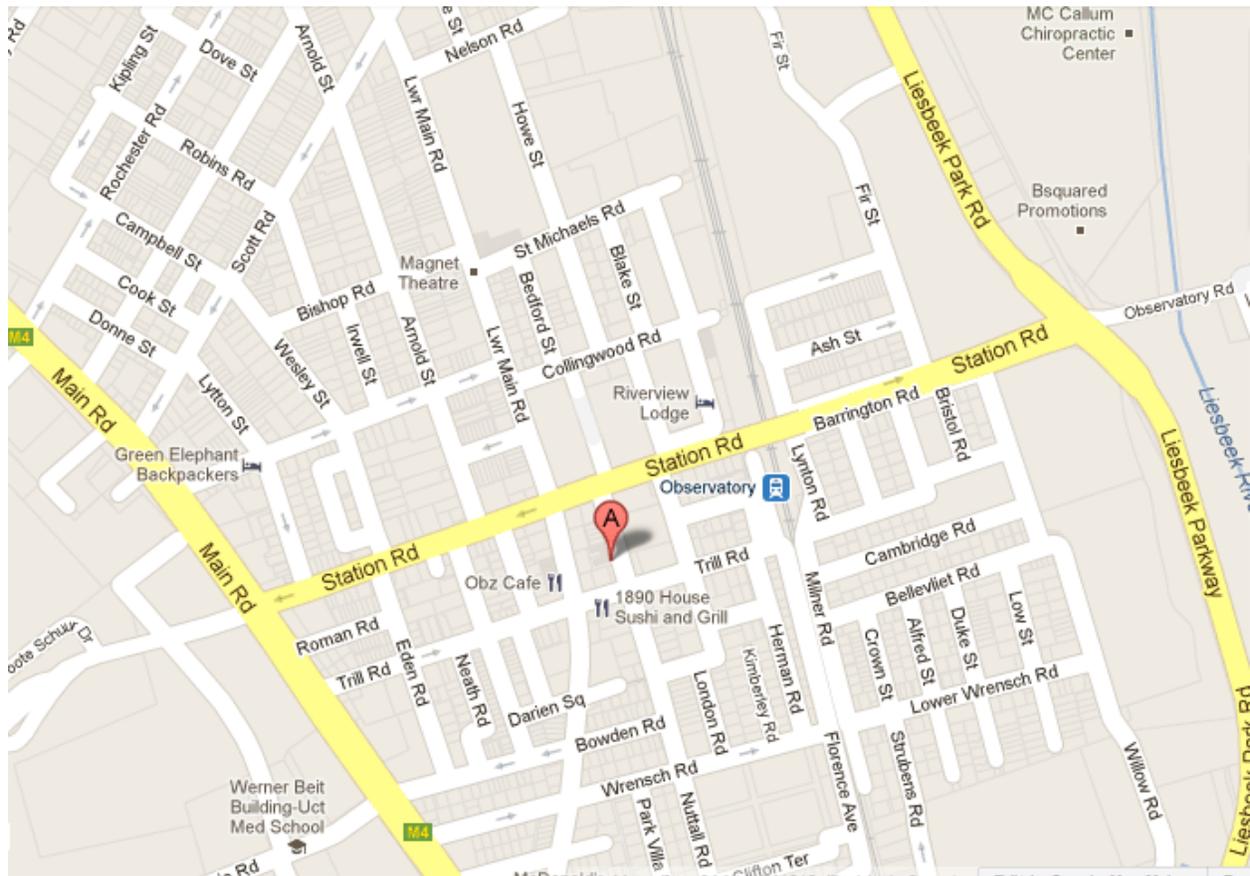
**Appendices: Interview Questions**

(The following are questions covered in a typical interview. However, not all interviews included every one of these questions and most interviews included a few questions outside of this list based on the natural flow of specific conversations).

1. Can you give your full name, basic background information (place of birth, place of adolescence, current place of residence, education, occupation), and the race you identify with?
2. What is your earliest memory of coming in contact with poetry? When did you first begin writing poetry and why? What were the style and themes of this poetry?
3. Was your family supportive of your interest in poetry? Was your community supportive? What kind of poetry were you exposed to at school, if any?
4. Were there poets you looked up to or a place to draw poetic inspiration from growing up?
5. What is your current relationship with poetry?
6. How would you define poetry? What defines performance poetry specifically?
7. How would you define activism?
8. Do you think poetry has a place in activism?
9. Do you consider yourself an activist poet?
10. What are the themes you find yourself drawn to write about? What do you want to say through your poetry?
11. What is a typical audience for your poetry and who is your target audience?
12. Do you think Cape Town citizens, in general, have an interest in reading or listening to poetry?
13. How do you feel when you are performing?
14. How has poetry affected your life?

15. Do you think poetry has the power to incite positive social change?
16. Do you feel that poetry has given you a voice?
17. Is poetry accessible to everyone (in terms of language, performance space, themes)?
18. Who can benefit most from poetry and in what ways?
19. What was the role of poetry during in Apartheid and how has that role shifted?
20. What languages do you speak? What languages do you write and perform in and why?
21. Can you describe Cape Town's current performance poetry scene and your place within this scene?
22. Can you give me one word to describe poetry? Your relationship to poetry? Activism?  
Activism poetry?

**Appendices:** Location of Touch of Class, the space of Off the Wall's weekly readings:



12 Nuttall Rd, Cape Town 7925, South Africa

**Appendices:** These collaborative poems are the result of my interviews. In bold are the interviews answers.

1. Poetry is...

A place where **surreal** reigns  
down to **hearts** suckling

**power,**  
**listening** for a trace  
of **sanity**

where we will  
place a “**welcome**  
home” door mat  
at the cottage of Mr. and Mrs.

**Evocative**

2. My relationship to poetry is...

A **dynamic**

**sacred**

as silence before an **all**  
**intoxicating** storm,  
celebrating the

**lifelong** flirt  
of lightening and  
metal, the

**commensalism**

as **uncomplicated**  
as dawn and dusk

3. Activism is....

The **fundamental**

**consciousness** of

**intentional change**

that beats the country’s  
song of

“**getting on with it**”

4. Activism Poetry is...

A **builder** of lily pads bridges  
swirling through the ocean’s

**revolutionary** currents

meeting petal to **purpose**

and **exaltation**

to **consciousness**

as the swings of fish tusks

**encourage** the workmen

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