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Slam to Heal. A Poetic Inquiry Reflection

Abstract I: In termini generali, la slam poetry può essere descritta come poesia competitiva recitata/letta in spazi pubblici da poeti in erba. Nei tornei di slam poetry, i giovani concorrenti affrontano argomenti come intersezionalità, violenza di genere, storia, traumi, ecc. di fronte a folle attente e partecipative, catalizzando la loro attenzione e la loro energia in luoghi carichi di emozioni. Tuttavia, a causa della sua forma problematica e della sua insistenza sulla performance piuttosto che sulla scrittura, la slam poetry è anche uno degli argomenti più controversi all'interno dei dibattiti che si svolgono su temi quali letteratura, società e cultura popolare: da una parte, si trovano i detrattori, che la liquidano frettolosamente, sostenendo che sia una carnevalizzazione della poesia; dall'altra ci sono i praticanti e amanti dello slam, che lo considerano un'espressione artistica innovativa, in gran parte emancipata dalle convenzioni prosodiche e dalle 'norme' linguistiche dell'accademia. Utilizzando la poetic inquiry come metodologia di ricerca, questo articolo offre un'analisi comparativa di testi che sostengono entrambi i punti di vista e riassume la loro tesi centrale in found poems. Inoltre, attinge alle teorie della poetry therapy, al fine di arrivare a una posizione di sintesi che sia capace di offrire una visione complessa della slam poetry in Sudafrica e altrove.

Abstract II: In very general terms, slam poetry can be described as competitive poetry performed by budding poets in public spaces. In slam tournaments, young competitors engage with topics like intersectionality, gender-based violence, history, trauma, etc. in front of attentive and vocal crowds, catalysing the attention and the energy of the urban youth in emotionally charged venues. However, because of its problematic form and its insistence on performance rather than writing, slam poetry is also one of the most litigious topics within discussions on literature, society and popular culture: on one side, one finds detractors who dismiss it by claiming it is a carnivalisation of poetry; the other side is occupied by slam practitioners and lovers, who consider it an innovative artistic expression, largely emancipated from the prosodic conventions and linguistic 'norms' of the academia. Using poetic inquiry as a research methodology, this article offers a comparative analysis of texts that support both views, and summarises their central argument in found poems. It also draws from poetry therapy theories, in order to arrive at a synthesis position that can – hopefully – facilitate a nuanced understanding of slam poetry in South Africa and elsewhere.

Keywords: Slam poetry, poetic inquiry, poetry therapy, narratives, arts-based methods, found poems.

Introduction

Slam poetry is an oral, narrative type of storytelling that occurs within a competitive event (the 'slam') at which participants recite (or rarely read) original pieces in a standard time limit of three minutes per round. Each act is judged on a numeric scale by a panel of poets or, exceptionally, by randomly picked members of the audience. The judging criteria can vary, but mostly revolve around writing skills, content/subject matter, delivery and audience response. The poets with the best cumulative scores advance in the draw, until one competitor is crowned king/queen of the mic at the end of the tournament. The structure usually assures that the winner is the poet who has best impressed both the judges and the audience.

Stylistically speaking, slam poetry is dramatic verse, i.e. a distinct form or application of verse, and in slam spaces what counts as admirable poetry is not (only) determined by the participant's talent as a writer, but by his/her ability to give the spectators an all-around emotional experience, thus breaking down the traditional academic barriers that exist between poet/performer, critic and audience. Slams are events in which both the performers and the listeners are in search of something different from mere literary appreciation: what they are in search of is the topic under scrutiny here.

The article begins with an overview on slam poetry and its reception in the literary spaces; it goes on by presenting a case study (i.e. an examination of a prototypical 'slam poem') followed by a discussion on South African poets' views on the strengths and weaknesses of slam; the final section broadens out to consider its significance as a therapeutic tool for young people living in urban, neo-colonial contexts.

'Stage Fever' vs 'Text Anxiety': Slam Poetry in South Africa and Beyond

I have charted elsewhere the genealogies of South African spoken word poetry (of which slam is one of the most dynamic expressions) and its indigenous and exogenous influences (d'Abdon 2016); the specific origins of slam are examined in the seminal works of Marc Kelly Smith, one of the founders of the slam movement (Smith & Kraynak 2009a; 2009b), and in many other studies¹, including South African poet Mphutlane wa Bofelo's *Bluesology and Bofelosophy* (Bofelo 2008). In South Africa slam was pioneered by Qhakaza Mbali Mohare, Thabiso Mohare, Mutinta Bbenkele Simelane and the other members of the Johannesburg-based Word N Sound poetry collective, who started organising the first organic slam tournaments in circa 2010. In the last decade, Word N Sound has been emulated by other organisations across the country, most notably Hear My Voice (Pretoria), Current State of Poetry (Johannesburg) and, recently, Poetry Africa, one of the most prestigious poetry festivals

¹ The bibliography on slam is too vast to list here. See the bibliography section for some recent research on the topic.

in the continent, held annually in Durban. All these platforms are curated by young black wordsmiths: driven by their passion for poetry and their creative impulse, these innovators have used the 'classic' slam format, but also developed it into unexplored spaces (including the digital one, especially during the Covid pandemic) to create massive events.

The article focuses on the South African slam scene only (Johannesburg and Pretoria, in particular), because this is where my field work experience in spoken word poetry is rooted, but also because South African slam possesses peculiar features and characteristics that, in many ways, differentiate it from the slam practiced elsewhere; however, it acknowledges the diversity of the slam communities both within the country and outside of it.

As a poet with an academic background in literature, and a participant researcher in spoken word spaces with an interdisciplinary approach to poetry, I am intrigued by this research question: is slam poetry a topic that deserves the attention of literary scholars?

Frassen has argued convincingly that the poetics of modernism still dominates literary criticism, and its preference for ambiguity and poly-interpretability has blocked the critical views on "performance poetry"² (Frassen 2011: 35). Slammers are misjudged by critics because the former "do not operate according to the classic avant-garde scenario, which requires that the young revolutionary first has to relate to the previous generation of poetic innovators" (35). These poets, Frassen claims, "refrain from defining their position in relation to the literature of preceding generations" and therefore, "the work of these performers lacks the "literary frame of reference" that most critics rely on" (35). Indeed, one distinctive trait of the slam community is the severance with the previous generations of poets, since the sole poets slammers are in conversation with are fellow slammers³; while the critics look for "literary references" and a "complex interweaving" with literary history (characteristics of modern poetry), slammers normally refrain from engaging with the conventional (written/literary/academic) spaces of literature: they do not publish their poetry in print altogether, and opt for self-referentiality and "the immediacy of the performance" (35). Needless to say, these criteria are for the most part incompatible with written poetry criticism, and contribute to the fossilisation of a Manichean scenario, which sees critics suffering from "stage fever" (33) disapproving slammers suffering from "text anxiety" (34), and vice versa. This major source of miscommunication is what this article tackles, and seeks to overcome.

Case Study: Analysing an Emblematic 'Slam Poem'

"O Christ, my craft, and the long time it is taking!" wrote, famously, Derek Walcott (Walcott 1984: 23). This prudent approach to writing goes against the ethics of slam, according to which everyone can join the competition, as long as he/she is able to deliver a convincing act. This 'open door' philosophy, if on one side 'democratises the verse' by making the stage accessible to a vast array of amateurs, on the other side places trained performers in

² For a critical analysis of this problematic definition, see d'Abdon 2018.

³ In this 2014 interview, when asked which poets he looks up to, slam champion Mutle Mothibe mentioned only fellow slammers. According to my experience, this is a recurrent response by young poets active in the slam circuits, *Mutle Mothibe to perform at the Apollo Theatre*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NPpjNMRRRw>.

the position to excel, and even win poetry competitions, irrespective of their writing skills. Naysayers point at this idiosyncrasy of slam, denouncing the fact that for the slammer-persona, the performer is more important than the writer: indeed, slammers spend a considerable amount of time perfecting the text-external elements of poetry that increase their chances to win a tournament (memorisation of poems, study of videos of other slammers, rehearsals/ dress rehearsals, studio recording, video production and post-production, social media promotion, etc.), at detriment of reading, writing and editing, the core activities of writers, which refine the text-internal elements of it.

Concentrating on the singularity of slam, this article maintains that the poems presented in competitive arenas should be studied as written, theatrical, visual, sonic, and spatial interventions, and that the imbricated concepts of body, place, and rhythm should be placed at the centre of the analytical framework(s) employed to study them; it suggests that an in-depth examination of slam poetry produces new theoretical approaches, and exposes the inadequacy of the extant ones; it contends that the text-external elements of slam poems should not be seen as categories that are developed elsewhere and applied to the poem by way of analysis, as characteristics that are bestowed on the poem by its context, or as supplementary to the poetic text; they should be considered intrinsic to the poem in its performed form, and scrutinised as such.

In order to illustrate what stated above, a succinct textual and contextual analysis of the poem “Dear Dad” by former Word N Sound champion Bella Cox is given hereby. The piece, shortlisted for the 2015 Word N Sound Perfect Poem Award, is presented as a blueprint of slam poetry, since it was praised by the judges, and provoked an enthusiastic response from the spectators⁴.

The poem’s irregular, yet steady structure is framed by an ordinary anaphora, which creates parallelism and rhythm, aids the performer’s mnemonic efforts, guarantees a basic musicality, and sustains the storyline by spotlighting a villain, described stanza after stanza with increasingly trivialising epithets (“Dear dad ... Dear You ... Dear Donor ... Dear 23-Chromosome-Giver ... Dear Betrayer ... Dear Abandoner ... Dear Stranger”). The repetition acts as a sort of chorus within the poem, and announces the words that are most integral to it; more importantly, it keeps the listeners constantly reminded of the subject, strengthening the link between their life experience and that of the poet. Rhythm is also enhanced by randomly distributed full- and half-rhymes (noose/lose ... sun/one ... protect/neglect ... her/caregiver/mother/sister), magnified in the anti-climactic stanza:

And the distance is pushed wider by the addition of ‘biological’!
On fire-fuelled days, I reduce your role to the mere functional
[...] perhaps if the process were clinical the abandonment would not seem quite so
pitiful!

This roughly-crafted work would most likely be rejected by journals or magazines,

⁴ A video of the performed poem and its transcription are available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNqxhfm1cJU>.

since it explores a cliché topic from an uninspired angle, is overwritten (“your love for me / did not even extend to the purchasing of an English dictionary!”), burdened by trite similes (“She turned my head like a sunflower to the sun”) and devoid of inventive images and linguistic innovations. This hypothesis is irrelevant, though, since slam poems are not conceived for written publications, but calculated to court specific audiences: the poet knows that in slam arenas pleasing the crowd is *the art*, and the audience’s passionate reaction to this piece is evidence to its effectiveness in a live competition. The success is explicable if one considers the importance of the cumulative extra-textual aspects of the poem: firstly, in a country where paternal abandonment is a social pathology, its chosen subject matter connects the speaker to the listeners by enhancing the latter’s compassion; secondly, its rhetorical devices are designed to sustain a performance aimed at deepening this emotional synergy. In the piano accompaniment, minor chords and downward motion combine with a slow tempo to create an atmosphere of loss and despair; the controlled body gestures, the modulation of oral and aural expressions, the regular alternation of high-pitch and low-timbre, interrupted by a broken voice and crocodile tears, confer expressive depth and amplify the melodramatic tone and feel of the piece, giving it an aura of tragedy and drawing the viewers in to an even greater extent. Despite the lack of literary merits, a triangular relationship between performed poem, author/performer, and the audience is established, and the perlocutionary and illocutionary force of slam poetry has created a community: the poem has wholly served its purpose.

In conclusion, sustaining a three minutes recital without sounding prolix is a mammoth mission, even for experienced poets who know how to structure long texts without compromising the economy of language; it becomes an almost impossible one for novices, with the result that the poems one hears in slam events are often redundant, verbose and overstretched, in other words, non-poetic or even anti-poetic. In order to make the act appealing, the text has to be pushed into the background of a performance in which the aural and the visual become the prevailing aspects. The cursory analysis offered above confirms that the way the audiences relate to poetry has changed, and that there is no longer a transcendental connection to writing and its quality. In slam it is not the poetry that matters, but what the performance can offer in terms of mutuality, solace and relief. Slam is about the glamour, the posture, the appearance, but above all about emotional connection: it has values, it teaches to hold space together, and to respect the effort the youth puts into personal and collective conscientisation and healing; it is a language that represents liberation because it makes young performers and spectators feel good (or, at least, better) about themselves. Nonetheless, slam undeniably remains a litigious topic within debates on literature: a comparative discussion on the reception of slam in South Africa is the focal point of the next section.

Slam Critics vs Slam Supporters

Are the current views on slam fine-grained enough to account for such a specific and complex phenomenon? Rejecting both the unimaginative argumentations of the poetry purists and the equally deceptive encomiastic narrative, typical of slam enthusiasts, this

section provides a modest dose of sober disenchantment: it builds up from the self-evident argument that slam occupies a vital space in South African popular culture and, using poetic inquiry as a research methodology and poetry therapy theories, arrives at a synthesis position that aims at offering a balanced, and hopefully more nuanced view of it. It presents selected testimonies by South African poets and poets-researchers with divergent opinions and angles on slam, and carves found poems out of them to magnify the strengths and weaknesses of this art form.

The Critics

Late Yale Professor Harold Bloom, who in a 2000 interview to *The Paris Review* (in)famously claimed that slam is “the death of art” (Bloom *et al.* 2000: 379), is the leading proponent of a list of conservative critics, alien to the spoken word community, who have brutally dismissed this movement; amongst them is Cape Town-based poet and scholar David Tyfield who mimicked Bloom’s pronouncement in a controversial piece published on the Stellenbosch Literary Project website (Tyfield 2013). However, this article places little attention on the opinions of these and other doctrinaires speaking from the bastions of the (white) literary establishment; in order to facilitate a necessary shift in tone, mood and emphasis, it engages with the grounded views of poets who are fully immersed in the South African spoken word/slam scene.

In South Africa, contestants in slam competitions (slammers) are young or very young people, mostly black, living in urban areas. Their cultural and academic background is assorted and multi-layered, but their experience with poetry commonly consists in what is (often insipidly) taught in the classroom, in what they see/hear in live poetry events and public ceremonies, and in what they consume (mostly in form of videos) in the digital space⁵. In general, one can safely argue that the average participant at a slam event is not an avid reader (if a reader at all) of poetry, and is devoid of a solid literary background: he/she is a consumer of poetry performances, a skilled entertainer, and an apprentice writer. This is noticed by poet, performer, editor and event organiser Kyle Allan:

The [slam] scene likes to posture itself as all forward thinking and radical, but many in the scene have got their own boxed ways of thinking [...] it’s extremely upsetting when people call themselves poets and legislate for others, and yet know nothing of Motsapi, Nyezwa, Muila, Dladla and so on. They have created their own little world, carrying on as if poetry started with them (Allan 2017).

“Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge” writes Césaire in his seminal essay “Poetry and Knowledge” (1990: 17): a manifestation of this poignant thought, poetic inquiry – or the use of poetry in research – is an art-based approach that emerged as a critique to positivistic paradigms of much traditional qualitative research (Glesne 1997; Richardson 2002; Prendergast 2004; Furman *et al.* 2006; Davis 2018; van Rooyen

⁵ Audiences are also composed by urban youth with a specular background, and little or no interest in literature *per se*.

2019; van Rooyen & d'Abdon 2020; Johnson 2021). Found poems are used frequently in poetic inquiry studies, and the one offered below was written out of Allan's quote, in order to magnify the essence of the author's standpoint. The same methodology has been applied to the other testimonies used in this article:

posture poets
legislate for others
yet know nothing of
motsapi,
nyezwa,
muila,
dladla.

in their own world
poetry started with them

In an interview published when South African slam was still an embryonic movement, iconic poet, scholar, editor and political activist Vonani Bila hit hard on the slammers of the nation:

They slam, and in their slam jam there's little poetry. They mimic some of the worst US thugs and choose to ignore rich and unusual voices. To generalise is not fair, but those who appear to have become celebrities, whether (that status is) self-constructed or acquired, are worshipped by the youth because their faces are visible on TV and from time to time they are invited to perform at government and corporate functions (Bila 2010).

slam jam
mimic thugs
ignore rich voices

celebrities worshipped by
government and corporate

Eleven years later, with slam having emerged as a force to be reckoned with within the poetry community, his opinion remained highly critical. In his words: "Sadly, post-apartheid poetry [...] is facing serious challenges of authenticity, influence and originality because of the advent of Slam" (Bila 2021: 68); he also quotes poet and scholar Tony Medina, co-author of the volume *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*, according to whom:

The Slam pits poets against one another in gladiator-like scenarios where they compete for chump change and prestige judged by a select group of audience members (sometimes consisting of other poets, most time not). Too often in this arena poetry is not what matters, but performance – how well one can recite a line or two, no matter

how backward or banal. A cat could read the phone book and, if his or her voice hits the right note, their facial expression caught mid-strain in the glare of the spotlight, as if in mid-shit, they just may slam their way to the top of the (dung) heap. Here, poetry is cheap, is cheapened. This kind of poetry [...] is in sharp contrast with Langston Hughes' notion that "the prerequisite for writing is having something to say" (Bila 2021: 68).

in the gladiator arena
poetry is not what matters

performance is in the spotlight

slam is cheapened
kind of writing

The problem addressed here is: if literary appreciation is a secondary factor (or no factor at all) in slam, what pushes massive audiences of young people to attend slam sessions and take part in the competitions? The reasons why young South Africans do treasure slam poetry are multiple, but – this article argues – the fundamental push-factor is its healing power. How I arrived at this conclusion is explained in the paragraphs below.

The Supporters

For its practitioners and supporters, slam is an avant-garde movement challenging the presumed authority of the academics who sanction 'from the top' what poetic excellence is (or is supposed to be); in their view, the advent of slam poetry has brought forward refreshment, revitalisation and novelty in the stagnant post-apartheid poetry scene. This is the thesis expressed by Durban-based slam champion MC and event organiser Page in an article published in the special issue of *Imbiza. Journal for African Writing*, celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Poetry Africa festival.

According to him, slam is a "fast-paced [...], radical", versatile, original and inclusive movement in which "[r]anting hipsters, freestyle rappers, bohemian drifters, proto comedians, mystical shamans and gothy punks have all had their time at the top of the [...] food chain". In big slam tournaments poets take to the stage "like warriors" to recite lines "flung with precision"; snap-seeking competitors are seen as disingenuous by the audiences, who ultimately reward "those who truly write"; the slam scene, he argues, is "dominated by brilliant writers" (Page 2021: 17)

radical shamans
at the top of the big stage
warriors who recite with precision
truly brilliant writers

These hyper-masculine, celebratory and perhaps too generous statements are recurrently uttered by leading (male) members of the slam community, who present

themselves and their fellow slammers as fast-n-furious, game-changing writers capable of unprecedented wordplays, and bearers of revolutionary stylistic innovations.

Pretoria-based slam champion Busisiwe Mahlangu on the other hand, provides a less muscular (and therefore more sophisticated) explication on the significance of slam poetry for young people, particularly for young black women. In her moving TEDx presentation, titled “Slam poetry is building a dream world”, she describes the discovery of slam events as an epiphany, and how entering that space allowed her to embrace her vulnerability, and to escape from the prison of shame and silence in which she grew up as a child. “When I started writing, I started speaking ... I write because it helps me speak” she admits. And, she continues:

When I first found out about poetry slams that were happening around Pretoria and Joburg, that was the first time I actually got to speak and share what I was writing, and that was a way of undoing my silence, which was very important *in my journey of healing* [...] Now I know that speaking out really does help, and *it has helped me in my healing journey dealing with depression and post traumatic stress disorder...* The poems I am doing today are dedicated to the child I was a few years back, the child that is still crying right now, and I want to tell that child that it is ok to cry, it is ok to feel pain. *This is a way of healing* (Mahlangu 2018, my italics).

The found poem fashioned out of Mahlangu’s speech appears in the closing section of this article; for now, her breath-taking confession is used as the entry point to the next section, in which it is argued that slam events are venues that are “specifically designed to be a non-pathologized, social environment” (Maddalena 2009: 226), i.e. liberated zones (Schimke 2017), holding spaces, and therapeutic communities created by and for the traumatised urban youth of South Africa, grappling with the tribulations of their everyday life, and with the effects of local and global injustice.

Slam Events as Holding Spaces

Slam poets care unselfishly for the art they serve, and have created a holding space for themselves and their admirers that must be studied, understood, supported and protected from the pernicious (mis)representation of both malevolent critics and phony idolaters.

Slam poetry is both a performance and performative: it is a performance in the traditional theatrical sense of poets reciting in front of assembled audiences, and performative in the sense that slam events are happenings, performative utterances calling diverse practices into being. As aptly observed by Dill (2013: 1-2), the experience of performing has often be described as therapeutic (Lerner, 1997; Camangian 2008), empowering (Maracle 1996; Bell 1999) and liberatory (Stepakoff 2009), and slam poetry has been studied extensively as a site of agency, resistance, activism, identity construction, literacy development and self-expression in performance spaces, in the classrooms, in prisons, etc. (Bruce & Davis 2000; Hoffman 2001; Somers-Willett 2005, 2014; Simon 2006; Boudreau 2009; Fields *et al.* 2014; Cullell, 2015; Muhammad & Gonzalez 2016; Rocchio 2017; Lems 2020); a few studies have also stressed the accent on the healing power of slam (Maddalena 2009; Ayosso Anignikin

& Marichez 2010; Dill 2013; Alvarez & Mearns 2014; Ávalos & César 2015; Ruchti *et al.* 2016; Davis 2018; Schucker 2021). These descriptions coincide with my experience as a poet and researcher in the South African spoken word community, which dates back to 2007.

According to my observations, the literary aesthetic and the political philosophy of the South African slam movement have been historically shaped by black female and non-binary poets. The textual and performing practices of Busisiwe Mahlangu, Mandi Vundla, Siphokazi Jonas, Katleho Shoro, Zizipho Bam, Vuyelwa Maluleke, Koleka Putuma, Ashley Makue, Nova Masango, Belita Andre, Emmah Mabye, Pakama Mlokoti, Yamoria and others are typically grounded in anti-oppressive and emancipatory frameworks (Drake-Burnette *et al.* 2016; Few *et al.* 2003; Holiday 2010; Lorde 2007), and very often their stated mission is to increase liberation and healing because of current constructs which are oppressive and harmful to themselves and other marginalised groups. In addition, one common trait shared by the most acclaimed male (or non-binary) South African slam poets (veteran Afurakan, plus Mutle Mothibe, Xabiso Vili, Mjele Msimang, Masai Sepuru, Vus'umuzi Phakathi, and Solly 'Soetry' Ramatswi, just to name a few) is the commitment to eradicate toxic masculinities (Ratele 2016; Hart 2019) from the slam community and from patriarchal society at large. In other words, the most charismatic figures of the slam community are invested in the taxing job of liberating themselves and their peers from the shackles of neo-colonial subjugation, and are leading the movement towards individual and collective emancipation and healing.

Poetry therapy is a form of expressive arts therapy, which involves the curative use of poems, narratives and other spoken or written media to promote individual and collective well-being and healing (Leedy 1969, 1973; Harrower 1972; Lerner 1978, 1997; Longo 1999, 2008; Mazza 1999, 2003. Furman *et al.* 2002; Campo 2003; Stepakoff 2009; Wakeman 2015; Xerri & Xerri Agius 2015).

Generally, poems rich in therapeutic value directly address universal emotions or experiences, abjure obscurity, lack literary references, offer some degree of hope, and contain plain language: these are the stylistic features typical of the poems offered on South African slam stages, and they point in the direction indicated by Maddalena, according to whom "poetry slam has many similarities to poetry therapy" (2009: 223). Thematically speaking, as deftly suggested by Mahlangu, the healing power of poetry is the topic that has occupied the centre of slam stages (quite literally) in the last decade or so, and influential slammers nowadays use storytelling to articulate mental health concerns, including borderline personality, suicidal ideation, identity issues, abuse, depression, grief, etc.

As the 30 years-long on- and off-stage activity of South African poet Malika Ndlovu has amply proved, researching and practicing poetry, performance and therapy in South Africa puts at the centre of one's imaginary map the indigenous concept of 'medicine', the curative properties of words, and the transformative and inspiring power of poetic narratives. As a narrative form of storytelling, slam poetry taps into forms of oral literature like hip hop and rap, but above all into the local Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and various traditions of oral folklore, in which medicine poetry occupies a central position. Poetry is used by South African slammers in creative, non-linear, and liminal ways, as a resource to heal colonial and neo-colonial wounds, and historical and everyday trauma: seen under this lens, it can be encoded as a twenty-first century 'Indigenous System of Healing'.

“My core work has been healing”, says Xabiso Vili, winner of the 2022 World Poetry Slam Championship⁶, and arguably the most successful competitor in the history of South African slam (Vili 2021). His words are echoed by Johannesburg-based Zimbabwean old school poet and slammer Linda Gabriel who, in her poem “Mad Slam but not war” writes:

We beat box therapeutic beats that soothe and mend broken communities
 We channel our anger and energies into slams
 Turning them mad yet it's not war
 Breathing life into dying souls
 [...]
 poet
 Tend ye to the suffering
 [...]
 Remain akin to the pulse of pain (Gabriel, n.a.).

Gabriel's verses, like most of the verses one hears in slam events, are not impeccably constructed. Yet, poems conceived for healing and self-healing purposes, and to captivate non-academic audiences and activate their empathy, do not necessarily seek artistic or writing quality; rather, they explore the meaning and significance of painful stories in one's life.

With regards to this, poetry therapy theory and practices have actually concluded that insisting on creating a 'brainy' literary poem, may even interfere with the healing quality of the text. The poem “Go to the Limits of Your Longing” by Rainer Maria Rilke, hereby translated by Joanna Macy (Barrows 2005), can help clarifying this principle, central to poetry therapy:

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
 then walks with us silently out of the night.
 These are the words we dimly hear:
 You, sent out beyond your recall,
 go to the limits of your longing.
 Embody me.
 Flare up like a flame
 and make big shadows I can move in.
 Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
 Just keep going. No feeling is final.
 Don't let yourself lose me.
 Nearby is the country they call life.
 You will know it by its seriousness.
 Give me your hand.

⁶ His biographical note on the WPSC website reads as follows: “Xabiso Vili is a multi-award-winning writer, performer, social activist, new media artist and producer *obsessed with how to use innovative creativity for healing and therapy*”, <https://www.worldpoetryslam.org/wps-championship-2022>.

In terms of literary imagination, one can safely state that this is not the most accomplished piece written by the great German poet. Yet, it is an uplifting, empowering, soothing text, embellished by scintillating thaumaturgic images: a fitting piece for contexts in which poetry is used as a therapeutic tool (as I witnessed in my poetry therapy workshops, in which it is always well received).

Slam events are “a forum for shared experience” (Alvarez & Mearns 2014: 263): they are inclusive, because participants do not need to have any prior academic experience with poetry, and communal because slammers explore their expressions with trusted peers, inviting their reflections on the meaning or significance of their life stories. Young people battling with emotions find a holding space in slam events, and benefit from engaging in these healing rituals (Mazza 2003). In these non-clinical spaces, young traumatised South Africans find that poetry restores and makes them whole; they feel that they are not alone in the struggle for everyday survival, that their story is a shared one, and that they are all part of the same family, the poetry family. Slam poetry validates their emotional experiences and improves group cohesiveness by helping them realise that many of their aching experiences are parts of a collective story. It has community-building capacities, since narratives poems facilitate personal growth, healing, and greater self-reflection and self-awareness. Ultimately, it allows the disillusioned youth to redefine their pressing situation by opening up empowering ways of perceiving reality. According to Maddalena:

In order to positively impact an audience, a slam poem must be a narrative that shows that the original painful experience can be borne and does not extinguish the spirit of the poet. Thus, a successful slam poem written “for an audience” will tell the poet that he or she is not extinguished, exists, and can bear the story (2009: 227).

Conclusion

Like many other literary scholars who approach slam from the misleading perspective of textual analysis, I too – initially – fell into the trap of ‘stage fever’. 15 years of field work research in slam spaces have helped me readjusting my focal point, and doubting the value of my early views on the phenomenon. As the analysis of Cox’s poem reveals, I still think that the majority of pieces shared in slam events do not stand the test of the written page; nevertheless, I am convinced that the process of untangling the relationships between literature, society, performance and therapy lies at the very heart of understanding this divisive expression of poetry. The general lack of interest in literature (and therefore on poets past and present that do not belong to the slam scene) implies that the only ‘literary’ references for the average slammer is fellow slammers; in this self-imposed imaginary and formal context, it is difficult for young writers to experiment with the complexities of poetry, let alone develop innovative writing styles. Considering this, it is now possible to address the Hamletian dilemma: to slam or not to slam? Or, to rephrase it: is South African slam poetry a topic that deserves the attention of the literary scholar? The answer to this vexed question is tripartite, and depends largely on the scholar’s priorities and approach to literature:

- 1) For the literary scholars focussing on New Criticism and practical criticism, uninterested in the intersections between the text, orality, performance and other non-literary

domains, the answer is: 'no'; the vast majority of written transpositions of slam poems are unlikely to titillate their critical palate.

- 2) For the literary scholars in search of intersectionalities and edgy post-/de-colonial/gender discourses articulated in the works of young writers habitually ignored by the Western canon, the answer is: 'maybe'; textualized slam poems rarely satisfy the eye of the consummated critical reader, yet they are a rich testimony of the challenges, dreams, aspirations and triumphs of South Africa's historically oppressed groups.
- 3) For the literary scholars engaged in the study of poetry as a multimodal genre and in its therapeutic applications, the answer is: 'yes'; South African slam poetry is a vault that has just been discovered, and its treasures are yet to be fully catalogued, studied and valued. I hope that this article represents a step in the right direction, towards the accomplishment of this gargantuan task.

In conclusion, it is necessary to ponder slam's debatable literary offerings in view of the circumstances in which they are written: this will engender greater recognition of the complexities, diversity and contradictory nature of slam poetry, and help scholars to grasp the extent of the slam-driven revolution of taste and practices that has shaken up the poetry community; it will also enable them to understand the peculiar agenda pursued by the most prominent slammers; Mahlangu's words elucidate this agenda powerfully and evocatively:

undoing my silence
my journey of healing

speaking out does help me dealing with depression and stress

poems to the child I was
the child crying now

cry child, cry
it is a way of healing

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