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### Recasting Slam Poetry: Busisiwe Mahlangu's Début Poetry Collection *Surviving Loss*

**Abstract I:** Il rapporto tra oralità e scrittura in Africa ha generato dibattiti di ampia portata. Tuttavia, in questa vasta letteratura non esistono studi significativi sulla transizione dai palchi della slam poetry ai libri stampati. Analizzando i problemi inerenti al processo di traduzione delle performance orali in testi scritti, Scheub (2021) sostiene che i traduttori devono riconcettualizzare le opere originali, creando opere completamente nuove: devono cioè riformularle. Sulla base di questo principio teorico, questo articolo esamina l'evoluzione di Busisiwe Mahlangu da campionessa di *slam poetry* a poeta della carta stampata, analizzando la sua opera d'esordio *Surviving Loss*.

**Abstract II:** The debates on the interface between performance-centric and scripto-centric texts in Africa are far-reaching. Yet, a gap exists in this vast literature, with regards to the transition from slam stages to printed books. Unpacking the problems arising in the process of translating oral performances into written texts, Scheub (2021) argues that the translators must reconceptualise the original works into completely new ones, i.e. they must recast them. In line with this theoretical standpoint, this article examines Busisiwe Mahlangu's evolution from slam champion to published poet, and examines her debut collection *Surviving Loss*.

**Keywords:** Slam poetry, orality, scriptotherapy, Busisiwe Mahlangu, *Surviving Loss*.

For it is not the story that counts. What matters is the way you tell it. The important thing is to know just at what moment you must knock out your pipe [...] Another necessary thing is to know what part of the story to leave out  
(Bosman 2008: 58).

### Introduction

In a previous article (d'Abdon 2022)<sup>1</sup> I discussed specific aspects of slam poetry, with a focus on slam sessions as liberated zones, healing rituals and holding spaces created by and for the South African youth. The article also celebrates Busisiwe Mahlangu's approach to slam poetry, an art form which she embraced at the dawn of her career to interrogate her vulnerabilities,

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<sup>1</sup> See also Schimke (2017).

perfect her craft as a writer, and gain confidence as a public speaker. In her view (and mine), slam sessions are therapeutic happenings that empower silenced/self-silenced voices and allow young writers – women in particular – to tell their stories in honest and creative ways. This article tackles Mahlangu’s unique contribution to the advancement of slam poetry and poetry in South Africa by analysing her evolution from slam champion to published poet. This transformative journey is foregrounded in her debut collection *Surviving Loss*<sup>2</sup>, making this a case study on the “recasting” (Scheub 2021) of “performance poetry”<sup>3</sup> into a printed medium, to clarify the relationship between performative texts designed for a competition and their reconfiguration for communication to anonymous readers.

### The Poet as Translator: Recasting Slam Poetry

In his essay “Translation of African oral narrative-performances to the written word”, an update of the namesake study published 50 years before (Scheub 1971), Scheub (re)examines the complications inherent in the reduction of oral performances into written texts (Scheub 2021). Oral performances are designed for interactive contexts shaped by circular dialogues between the performer and the audience, while the latter generate a solitary, silent communion between a reader and the page. This “shift from the ear to the eye” is equivalent to a “translation”, and the challenges it presents are “considerable” or even “insurmountable” (Scheub 2021: 99). Yet, if a translation is to be achieved, poets “must seek a solution by developing a hybrid art-form, neither the original narrative performance, not a short story, yet borrowing from both art-forms [...] Whether or not this can be done in a pleasing way”, he adds, “depends on the artistic skills of the translator” who “is doing more than translating a work of art: he is rebuilding it in a new and foreign context, he is recasting it” (Scheub 2021: 104-108).

Busisiwe Mahlangu, the article argues, has fully succeeded in this ‘recasting’ enterprise, and the vitality of her poetry resides in her answers to Scheub’s dilemmas. Previous attempts at this by slammers have produced scant results, but Mahlangu has carried out this generative process with a large degree of success. Her metamorphosis from slam sensation to trailblazing author is unpacked in the following sections.

### Step 1: Unlearning the Slam Modalities

The circumstances of slam tournaments are different from other literary practices, since participants are mostly beginners unpractised in the difficulties and complexities of writing, competing for a prize in front of audiences and panels of judges (Rivera 2013). The necessity of generating proleptic approval exerts a profound influence on how contestants write and perform, and this pressure determines that the armamentarium of admired slammers (images, themes, performance style, etc.) is instinctively appropriated by other contestants. As popular performances are widely consumed, they become widely imitated, and those imitations produce their own imitations: tropes become clichés and slammers’ ideas of what

<sup>2</sup> As anticipated in her reading for The Red Wheelbarrow Poetry Collective, Mahlangu is currently finalising her second collection, *A Body Makes Fire* (The Red Wheelbarrow 2022).

<sup>3</sup> As argued elsewhere (d’Abdon 2018), the definitions of “performance poet” and “performance poetry” are problematic. For practical purposes they are used bracketed in this article.

counts as great (slam) poetry ossify. Slammers are derivative poets, but this is a predictable outcome in an environment that is geared towards confrontation and acquiescence.

The creation of a loyal fan base is also crucial: crowds' warm responses secure victories in competitions and, more importantly, boost the slammer's marketability in "performance poetry" circuits. Consequently, slam events have widened the boundaries of the literary community and brought devoted, ardent audiences to the poetry scene, but have also simplified the way poetry is received: the crowd-pleasing ethos ingrained in the art punishes experimentation and produces conformism, and this tendency toward uniformity is more pronounced in slam than in other expressions of contemporary poetry.

Due to this mimetic *modus operandi*, young scribes who use slams as entry points to poetry tend to uphold a writing style that is convoluted and over-charged: to saturate their performances, they embrace a linguistic *horror vacui*<sup>4</sup> according to which the writer must touch upon as many topics as possible, and offer as many punchlines, rhymes/half-rhymes/internal rhymes, allusions to popular culture, biblical references, similes and metaphors as possible in the standard three-minute slot at their disposal.

Slam pieces seek profusion, a heterogeneous, ill-assorted, breathless grasping at different thoughts. Operating within this imaginative landscape is a severe limitation for a writer, and this idiosyncrasy is reflected in the form of slam poems, which are typically long, ornate, liturgical compositions shaped after a standard tempo, rhetorical devices, grammar, tone, cadence, rhythm, diction, choice of language and images, which the slammer has observed as a winning "formula". Such rhapsodies are devoid of the breaks and silences that make room for imagination, allowing texts to "breathe": the curse of verbosity hovers over suffocating pieces, not in a Joycean sense (where linguistic inventiveness creates musicality), but in the sense of an obsessive metaphorisation, as wittily articulated by Szymborska:

The fear of straight speaking, the constant, painstaking efforts to metaphorize everything, the ceaseless need to prove you're a poet in every line: these are the anxieties that beset every budding bard. But they are curable, if caught in time (Szymborska n.d.).

As this excerpt from the poem "Parkinson's" by eminent slammer Mutle Mothibe attests, pieces penned according to these criteria strike audiences as rich entertainment, but suffer from the blight of over-writing when eradicated from live settings:

during our love  
making she was like a certified  
buildings inspector testing how stable  
my beams were like she were looking to  
park her love safely between my skin and bone  
she was a beautiful child at times  
jumping on the shaky ground of our

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<sup>4</sup> "Horror of empty spaces", an aversion to emptiness in artistic designs.

relationship with sunlight spinning out  
of her pockets my sockets soaking up  
what little radiance slipped out from  
time to time but it seems she'd only  
signed up for the healthy years not the  
second ones we put in the fine print of  
our marriage contract it seemed that  
she couldn't take the shaky earthquakes  
and something had to give so now I am  
living in light of this dark spin kin to  
Parkinson's where broken telephone is  
parking since between the shark's will and  
fins where darts and pins are felt by my  
heart and shins fishing across the sky  
for clovers hoping to find peace within my skin (Mothibe 2012).

Expatriation is a slam vice, and alienating devices such as logorrhoea, digressiveness and tautological associations appear also in another much-fêted slam piece, Apiwe Mjambane's "When Hunger Strikes":

[...] i have broken into molecules  
of pain digging permanent graves inside of myself  
[...]  
i want to look like god yet god is painless  
and i am here seated like water  
waiting for the right time to flow into my depression  
[...]  
I'm a pizza slice of confidence and two  
people underweight yet people are dead  
quiet  
the awkward silence is loud enough to gang rape me  
with pain inside of the kitchen  
the kitchen knives fold their arms  
over table spoons remain standing  
affirmed to feed me  
feed me food that won't throw me off like tantrums  
shaped like index fingers down my throat that are out in the  
insides of opinions about  
black little girls' sleeping pillows made of bones in my  
belly button my belly button serves me  
no justice it collects hunger strikes like  
fallen skeletons on the front porch of my stomach  
[...]  
i carry myself like a coffin  
[...] we are the disciples of pain (Mjambane 2015).

These pieces epitomise the technical fixity of slam poetry. Straying thematically far from what audiences expect is risky, so competitors end up focusing on anodyne tropes that win safe plaudit, i.e. trauma and/or identity narratives; in addition, the epidemic presence of words belonging to juxtaposed semantic fields, i.e. death, grave(s), pain, skin, bone(s), body, blood, scar(s), stitches, chains, scream(s), tears, drowning, fire (and related images) pinpoints creative anaemia. Unfortunately, these strategies testify to the verbal and conceptual platitude that has become the hallmark of slam poetry.

Despite this, the sphere of performance makes the problem of one-dimensionality of slam even more accentuated: the concept of “slam voice” (Donaldson 2017) denotes a standardised way of reciting poetry and often gives slam an unhappy status. This ubiquitous, affected vocal delivery indicates the artificial cadence and timbre used by performers, and is characterised by mournful tone, fast pacing, and long crescendos deployed to enhance the overall dramatisation of the act. Pitch patterns and rhythms are repeated to produce a vibrato sound, which is designed to capture strong emotions. Common linguistic factors are pitch and intonation, since slam voice is pitched higher than regular speech and has an unnatural-sounding pattern that tends to recur throughout the performance without necessarily being informed by the content. For these reasons, slam poetry is what Monaghan (via Artaud) calls “spatial poetry”, that is poetry that “exists and has its effect on the spectator’s senses and consciousness quite independently of words” (Monaghan 2010: 241).

## Step 2: Filling a Gap in the Publishing Industry

The difference between slam pieces and their versions as recast for publication are as follows: the former prove effective in circumscribed environments (live competitions), while the latter prove amenable in shifting cultural circumstances, where new audiences place different demands on them.

Poetry collections published by slammers are generally weak, for many reasons: a lack of prior engagement with formal literary spaces (most slammers are scarcely published in volumes, journals, magazines, if at all); superficial knowledge of the publishing dynamics; poor professional guidance in the editing process; a combination of some or all these factors. Bypassing the first of these “rites of passage” (which is fundamental for a writer’s growth and self-awareness) is often fatal for slammers who decide to venture into printed publications.

All poets know that the stage is the ultimate judge of one’s work; yet a “performance poet” who excels in live spaces cannot expect to be equally successful in the muted context of publication without going through a laborious process of study and adaptation. When non-literary audiences are the only quality control system a poet is accustomed to, and their work is not tested regularly against the judgement of detached critical readers, it is easy to get seduced into evaluating slam works as fit for publication.

In general terms, “performance poets” seem to ignore, gloss over or underestimate the crucial principle that a collection is a transaction between a writer and a reader, not between a performer and a listener. In an artistic milieu in which the cultural currency is the monetisation of live acts, the printed book runs the risk of becoming a decoration of the

stage, or another tool in the performer's marketing package<sup>5</sup>: a means to an end, rather than an artwork to be handled with conscious craft.

Poets belonging to the élite of South African slam who have published poetry collections or chapbooks are Vuyelwa Maluleke (2015), Emmah Mabye (2017), Ashley Makue (2017), Katleho Shoro (2017), Koleka Putuma (2017; 2021; 2024), Xabiso Vili (2018), Tshepo Molefe (2020) and Zizipho Bam (2022)<sup>6</sup>. Putuma is the only slammer in this sub-group whose written output has generated critical acclaim and attracted extensive academic attention (Boehmer 2018; Haith 2018; Pieterse 2018; Williams & Molebatsi 2019; Burger 2020; Byrne 2021; Sibisi 2021; Guarducci & Terrenato 2022; McBride 2022; Mohulatsi 2023; Brusselaers 2024); all the other works, including – surprisingly – Mahlangu's have received sporadic commentaries or gone unnoticed<sup>7</sup>.

Some of the collections listed above are fine works (Shoro's and Bam's *in primis*), but none of them, including Putuma's renowned *Collective Amnesia* (reprinted multiple times, translated into several languages and winner of the 2018 Glenna Luschei Award for African Poetry), possesses the finesse, the depth and the vigour of *Surviving Loss*. I argue that Mahlangu's success can be attributed to the fact that, in the interest of lyric economy and functional intensity, she is systematically concerned with what can be left out, or rather left implicit rather than made explicit. To elucidate this statement, the next section examines exemplary poems featured in it.

### Step 3: Creating a New Style

In multiple occasions Mahlangu has highlighted the redemptive power of poetry and her use of it as "scriptotherapy" (McQuail 2009; Tembo 2014; Osamnia & Djafri 2020; Hejaz & Singh 2023; d'Abdon 2024; Hooshmandasl *et al.* 2024): "The centre of everything I am creating is healing", she reiterated in a recent interview with poet and scholar Makhosazana Xaba (2024). This medicinal approach to writing embodies the philosophy of the publisher of *Surviving Loss*<sup>8</sup>, and Mahlangu's reading of pain as a black woman is an intersectional articulation of stories of groups long victimised by bodily, economic, racist, sexual and psychological violence. As the poet learns about the long historical chain of suffering that binds her to her family, black women, and her race, she realises how it serves and informs her

<sup>5</sup> When conceived as such, poetry collections are treated as transcriptions of stage scripts and, in the most extreme cases, as stage ornaments. Once I attended the launch of a collection written by a popular slammer: despite holding a copy in her hands, she never read from it, and the "book launch" consisted in the recitation of some poems memorised by the author. The supposedly celebrated object, displayed on the nearby table, was nonchalantly ignored, with the event turning into an awkward, small-scale replica of a slam performance.

<sup>6</sup> The much-anticipated debut collection of slam champion Pakama Mlokoti has not been released yet.

<sup>7</sup> The book is mentioned in Xaba's chapter in her seminal *Our Words, Our Worlds. Writing on Black South African Women Poets 2000-2018*, released in the same year (Xaba 2018: 35). The only critical piece currently available on *Surviving Loss* is an insightful review by Vuyelwa Maluleke (2019), to which this article will return later.

<sup>8</sup> Impepho Press is an independent publishing house run by two prominent South African writers, poet-healer Vangile Gantsho and poet-historian Sarah Godsell. It is named after a local herb burnt by traditional healers in rituals, also used as a natural remedy against anxiety and depression.

own subjectivity: “My mother’s mother has done this suffering for my mother / My mother has done this suffering for me / This is how I inherit a scar”, she writes in “Birthmarks” (Mahlangu 2018: 19).

The collection documents the re-birth of a wounded girl into a healed woman through the only passage afforded to her: the unfolding pain of her own and her ancestors’ lives; it contemplates the genesis of trauma, its ramifications, and the creative efforts envisioned to heal from it, a curative process chronicled in a ground-breaking body of avant-garde poetry.

Innovative art sets itself consciously in opposition to existing aesthetic assumptions: as a slammer, Mahlangu already displayed an unusual alertness to the liminal spaces that magnify the value of silence and the unsaid, making poems evocative. She understood that, to liberate slam from the anathema of inundation and excite spectators who had become inured to vapid offerings, she had to work by subtraction: the pace of the performance had to be slowed down, the pitch had to be tuned down and the texts had to be stripped of congesting elements; astutely, in *Surviving Loss* she uses these poetic methods to an even broader extent.

Slammers tend to add more and more elements to the text in an effort to captivate audiences, producing cluttered pieces: this “more is better” approach, perhaps influenced by contemporary “maximalist” music<sup>9</sup>, aims at barraging listeners with full-on aural assaults, and pays off in slam competitions. Mahlangu’s poem “Less” (reproduced in full-length below) shows a radical departure from this mindset, and a decisive shift towards minimalist writing. Both in its title and architecture, it points towards the principle “less is more”, according to which removing superfluous phraseological units and overwhelming details allows the main parts to shine through clearly, expands the spectrum of possibilities of a concept, emphasises clean aesthetics and enhances imagination; the poem also reveals Mahlangu’s virtuous use of spatial design, her attentiveness to the placement of images, variable margins, intra-linear spacing, breaks and caesurae, the visual continuum down the page, the rhythms and inflections with which the poem is to be declaimed when read aloud<sup>10</sup>:

I open my eyes and see half                      of everything I look at:  
  
the glass on the table is filled to the middle,                      while the other  
half is broken.                      the table is  
smaller than before                      and our house is left with one room.  
  
my father walks into the room with some of his mistakes.                      he  
shrank his way to forgiveness  
with his left side stuck to the past.                      today he is the right man my  
mother loved.

<sup>9</sup> On the topic, see Graves (2014), University of Denver (2021) and Taruskin (2024).

<sup>10</sup> This skill is praised by Maluleke in her analysis of the poem “Rusty knife” (Maluleke 2018: 125). Other poems displaying Mahlangu’s mastery in fashioning accurate layouts are “Lost shelves” (Mahlangu 2018: 4-5), “After school” (2018: 7), “Boy breaking” (2018: 15) and “Busy” (2018: 54-55).

we spend our days happy.      half ourselves.      selflessly on the  
 clock.    we stop digging each other's graves.  
 we don't hurt enough to start    preparing for death.

I can teach you how to feel pain less:

flail your eyelid                      use half your pupil                      close your  
 other eye  
 this is the best way      to run away                      from home without  
 leaving (Mahlangu 2018: 49).

Mahlangu's clever engagement with the page is also evident in the poem "Fathers who are water" (2018: 40-43), which may be slam audiences' preferred poem. I think that Maluleke misses the point when she avers that this poem and "House" (see below)<sup>11</sup>, which lie vertically on the page, re-orient the eye of the reader to unsettle "the numbness that often comes with reading traditional poetry" (2019: 125). Despite being "traditionally" designed, most pieces in *Surviving Loss* do not fuel this pernicious feeling; therefore, I propose that Mahlangu and her editors, conscious that "Fathers who are water" is the poem most adherent to slam form, have adopted this layout as a disguise, to minimise the off-putting effect printed slam poems usually have on readers.

this house is a culprit  
 watching us bleed without moving.  
 [...]  
 This house  
 will watch us get killed and say nothing.  
 The walls wear our blood like paint  
 our DNA washes off into colour,  
 [...]  
 This house will watch us get killed,  
 the floor will swallow our skeletons.  
 This house is a graveyard  
 dry bones pull us back when we walk  
 [...]  
 There is a memorial service in each room  
 old obituaries hanging like curtains  
 [...]  
 We have touched death every evening.  
 We have bled out eulogies and goodbyes ("House", Mahlangu, 35-37).

As the poems above indicate, the connections the poet creates are mental or psychological, rather than verbal or grammatical. Indirection, forms of expressive reticence

<sup>11</sup> In order to comply with a "portrait" page layout, I have typed the lines horizontally, instead of reproducing their original vertical layout.



and symbolic association convey extreme emotion, and occupy a large space in Mahlangu's poetry. An awareness of the principles of association or analogy by which the metaphors are organised, the ambiguities and the syntax by which the terms are controlled, is necessary not only to appreciate her poems, but also to grasp their full effect.

With its central emphasis on trauma and identity, thematically *Surviving Loss* does not depart from the conventional offerings of slam competitions. The collection insists on the trite extended metaphor of the body as a battlefield ("Forgetting home", "If your father was a nightmare", "Wash me with fire", "Process", "Fixing a daughter", "My body spells happy different", "Worship", "Magic wonder", "Scraps", "Soldiers come home from war", "Violation", "Unbecoming", "Needles", and "Wake up"); in addition, as in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (for instance), it presents the homestead as a symbol for women's intergenerational traumas and everyday struggles for survival ("Safe house", "House", "Fathers who are water", "Less", "Busy", "Come with air"); it also returns to commonplace slam topics like fathers' absence ("Fathers who are water", "Less"), toxic masculinity ("If your father was a nightmare", "What the man stole", "Boy breaking", "Alone"), gender-based violence ("After school") and body shaming ("Worship"). These overlapping themes are no novelty, but it is not for the subject matter that this recuperative literary gem stands out: what underpins its originality is technical prowess and the maturity of the writing style.

In the recasting process Mahlangu reshapes the slam modalities she inherited by judiciously altering and curtailing the oral literature at her disposal. Her persistent focus on the economy of language, manifested in the controlled elimination of the grammatical and syntactical elements that make slam pieces redundant, produces poems characterised by succinctness, sobriety, precision, and therefore effectiveness.

*Surviving Loss* is an imperative collection for readers interested in South African poetry and/or in the interface between orality and the written text, and a seminal work in post-apartheid literature. In my view, Mahlangu's style echoes that of Jackie Kay, one of the most imaginative poets of our times, also preoccupied with issues of trauma, identity, memory, blackness, and womanhood. Most likely independent from Kay's oeuvre, *Surviving Loss* nonetheless comes to the same remarkable results in terms of concentration and inventiveness:

My grandmother is a Scottish pine,  
Tall, straight-backed, proud and plentiful,  
Her hair tied with pins in a ball of steel wool.  
Her face is tight as ice  
And her eyes are amethysts

("My Grandmother", Kay 2007: 12)

We are holding grandmother's face close to her eyes  
We watch her turn from paper to tree      an all that  
She lost is just leaves      and this is autumn  
Have you seen an empty library breathe?

("Lost shelves", Mahlangu 2018: 4).

### Conclusion

In recasting her slam repertoire into a book, Mahlangu revisits the key aesthetic choices surrounding slam poetry and is occupied with the struggle – which is vital for any poet – to transmute her private agonies into something richer, impersonal and relevant to a broad readership. In the process, her agency and autobiographical accounts are generalised and stripped of the contingencies of live competition, her sensibility is intensified and her vision is widened by the awareness of different audiences. The works of young poets are mostly archived in the digital space, yet, because of the systematic disappearance of poetry platforms and websites, and the fleeting nature of social media, the paper book can (paradoxically) still be seen as the most reliable tool for the archiving of literature. Most slammers do not publish their works, much less venture into the production of printed collections; once they have reached a mature phase of their artistic trajectory, they either give up on poetry to pursue other paths or get trapped in sterile circles of “performance poetry”, whose offerings have become staler and staler in recent years. The South African poetry scene has produced several outstanding slammers, whose contributions have diversified and energised the literary scene: Mahlangu’s ingenious storytelling defies a codified system and a pre-existing form, producing something radically different. It shows that using discernment in engaging with the complexities of the written text is a *conditio sine qua non* for poets who wish to keep evolving and exploring their full potential not only as performers, but also as writers. Such stylistic reconfigurations are redemptive and generative, and Mahlangu’s example should stimulate and guide the narrative genius of a generation of oral-art performers who wish to keep innovating the art of slam, but also speaking in socially critical and artistically compelling ways to readers who may be unaccustomed to slam spaces and the poetics of slam.

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