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Susanna L. Sacks

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Abstract.

Viral Verses investigates the influence of social media publication on the relationship between poetry and community formation in southeastern Africa. As more artists in the global South reach wider audiences through online publication, poetic form has shifted to reflect social media's aesthetic norms, embracing urgency, contemporaneity, and populism. Digital media expands the rhetorical communities produced in poetry performance through self-publishing platforms and large-scale messaging applications. This influence is especially tangible in southeastern Africa, where poetry has functioned historically to define community boundaries and grant political legitimacy. Combining ethnographic observations of poetry events and communities with formal analysis of individual performances and their relationship to shifting media paradigms, *Viral Verses* demonstrates that the logics of new media, which privilege connection, urgency, and populism, have shifted offline poetry production and community formation in Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. To date, most research on digital publishing by African authors has focused on its democratizing potential for print forms, where a growing audience can speak back to content producers. By examining the tension between discursive possibility and surveillant ambivalence that emerges from social media platforms, this project highlights the dual role of performance norms and media affordances in shaping contemporary aesthetic networks.

The first chapter tracks the movement of poetic discourse between social media platforms, political rallies, and poetry performances in order to explore the hypothesis that social media is a democratizing force. The second chapter evaluates the influence of specific social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, on the formation of contemporary aesthetic networks. The third chapter traces the rise of spoken word and poetry slams through southeastern Africa to demonstrate how social media platforms have transformed literary form. The fourth chapter analyzes poetry performances at international arts festivals to illustrate how poetry's historical connection to nationalism emerges in the wake of digital cosmopolitanism. Finally, the conclusion asks how the rise of digital media publication has influence the distribution of cultural capital, analyzing Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* to illustrate the influence of popular forms on contemporary canon formation. Analyzing poetic discourse as it moves between social media and live performance, *Viral Verses* highlights the interpenetration of online and in-person social spaces to demonstrate the power and mutability of form in producing aesthetic communities, even as shifting media affordances constrain literary production.

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INTRODUCTION.

On Poetry in Motion: Reading Performance in the Digital Age

Figure 1. From The Toronto Star, "Protest Poetry Is Alive and Well" (5 Feb 2017)

*No one leaves home
unless home is the mouth of a shark.*

The words appear over and over again: in visual representations on Instagram, written on protest signs, in the titles of news stories and opinion pieces (*fig. 1*). They proliferate in the repetitive logics of the digital, taking on new valences in each iteration. They are

the words of Kenyan-born Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, among the best-known Anglophone poets of the twenty-first century. They come from her 2012 poem, “Conversations about home (at a deportation centre).” The poem has become shorthand for everything its listeners imagine about the trials of migration. Its words circulate, rerouted, as readers repeat the lines to mark their own political and affective investments. In each of the phrase’s republications, it has been reformatted, reannotated, resurrected in ever-varying forms. A digital poem from the beginning, it has become many poems at once, a work of collaboration spoken across many voices.

Poems like Shire’s function across contexts—circulated on social media platforms and realized in live performance—because their tendency towards allusion allows a wide range of readers to read their experiences in its words. They circulate rapidly because they are, generally, shorter and easier to reprint and repost: as Nathan Suhr-Sytsma has written of print poetry’s recirculation, “poetry’s typical concision meant that it could be composed more quickly than long-form fiction and reprinted more widely, whether in little magazines, weekly papers, or mass-print anthologies” (10)—or, comparably, on Twitter, in performance, or on the nightly news. Poems lend themselves to such repetition through their careful use of sound and rhythm—traits that make poetry, as Jahan Ramazani (2014) has argued, interlinked with song and prayer. Thus poetry has been especially suited to digital publication.

Viral Verses is a project about the intersections between poetry, politics, and media. It asks how poetry creates publics connected by its rhetoric, and how those publics, in turn, use poetry to launch their claims to political agency. Focusing on poetry from southeastern Africa, *Viral Verses* argues that social media's aesthetics and logics shape poetic production and social organization today. In doing so, it builds on Carolyn Levine's reading of "forms" as simultaneously aesthetic features and social institutions, which together structure human life and behaviors. In the case of poetry—a genre defined as frequently by its strict formal standards as by a creeping formlessness—Levine suggests that we consider meter "not an epiphenomenal effect of social realities, but capable itself of exerting or transmitting order [...] afford[ing] the imposition of a temporal order" (74). In what follows, I take seriously Levine's suggestion that rhythm can impose temporal order by examining poetic form and meter as they intersect with the lived social experiences of politics, networks, performances, and power. Reading social and aesthetic form together reveals their mutual constitution.

Historically throughout southeastern Africa, poetic forms have been used to critique leaders, define social norms, and tell collective histories. As the continent experienced a "mobile revolution" between 2005 and 2015, mobile phone subscriptions

rose nearly seven-fold, and poetry publication exploded online.¹ The new generation of “born free” writers—a generation who had not known colonialism but had lived the failed promises of independence—seized on the transnational coordination enabled first by internet forums and blogs and later by social media platforms. Digital publication gives African writers independence from either the narratives of impoverishment demanded by print publishers or the congenially moralizing poetry rewarded by newspaper publication and IGO-sponsored prizes.

At the same time, social media platforms have constrained poetry’s forms through platform-specific presumptions about the circulation and consumption of knowledge. The aesthetics of social media platforms, including the newsfeed, the friend list, and the “update,” have led to digital norms of circulation and iteration. These norms in turn determine what form rationed discourse and aesthetic products must take online. Facebook’s newsfeed, for instance, highlights and expands posts that include comments, likes, and shares, implicitly privileging more interactive posts. Twitter’s search function does not return results older than seven days unless they have been retweeted and thus made new. On nearly every site, images and videos take up more space than words, so more users embrace multimodal publication to promote

¹ For an overview of the “mobile revolution” in Africa, see Mirjam de Bruijn and Inge Brinkman, “Mobile Phone-Communication in the Mobile Margins of Africa” (2018), and Sebastiana Etzo and Guy Collender, “The Mobile Phone ‘Revolution’ in Africa: Rhetoric or Reality?” (2010)

their messages. The logics inscribed through social media aesthetics are transforming cultural production. They lead, among other things, to an emphasis on repetition, interactivity, urgency, and multimodality.

As new forms emerge online, poets and writers engage new audiences, in internet cafés and on mobile phones throughout the global South. These audiences often receive the work in nearly the same temporal moment in which it was produced; the speed of these transactions means a work can become “outdated” in a matter of hours. Digital publication thus allows poets to publish work that retains the “real-time” temporality of performance even as it addresses a broader, networked public sphere. Where performance poetry has historically been used in social movements and community organizing, social media genres like the slam poem and the image macro (words superimposed over an image) have been accompanied by a rise of new aesthetic communities. Poems shared online link their audiences through a shared rhetoric of affiliation: whether in Boston, Toronto, or Cape Town, the words “home is the mouth of a shark” unite a host of concerns about migrant rights. Social media, largely created and controlled by corporations based in the global North, nonetheless opens avenues for alternative, counter-hegemonic discourses. The circulation of rhetoric like “Conversations about home” illustrates how poetry moves across social media platforms, lived experience, and broadcast media to offer a rhetoric of affiliation for

disjointed groups, creating new publics whose discourse reflects the affordances of digital communication.

These publics—defined, following Michael Warner, by their shared discursive activity (72)—respond to the affordances of the medium through which they are constructed. Thus, as social media platforms come to dominate poetry publication, the audience addressed through them is shifting the nature of the form, demanding interactive works that reflect the platforms’ populist ideologies. In 2016, for instance, Zimbabwean Pastor Evan Mawarire’s video-poem “This Flag” launched a transnational protest movement against then-President Robert Mugabe. Like “Conversations about home,” the poem’s rhetoric was easily distilled into a single phrase, which could then be transformed into a hashtag: #ThisFlag. Individual protesters across Zimbabwe, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Australia took up the poem’s language to tell their own stories. #ThisFlag created a literal link that bound their discursive actions into a shared public space. The particular affordances of social media platforms transform the connections they build.

Social media’s users find freedom within its restrictions. Even as Facebook publication risks constant surveillance and misuse, for instance, it also allows writers and communities in Africa to share work unconstrained by dominant cultural institutions like the printing press or the NGO. Moreover, because social media

platforms are large, diffuse, and rapidly changing, most governments cannot fully censor or monitor online activity, allowing dissident writers to skirt the state's gaze.² And because social media companies are actively invested in promoting their own growth, many offer free or cheap access to their sites in many African countries, making them a particularly appealing starting point for emerging authors. Writers and social media users must balance the tension between the surveillant risks of social media and the personal freedoms they appear to afford, and between the commercial goals of the corporations that run the platforms and the often anti-commercial attitudes of their consumers.

Viral Verses examines the interplay between the affordances of those literary, media, and social forms that structure contemporary poetic reception. Poetic forms which tend towards brevity, rely on allusion, and reward repetition have flourished in digital spaces: the phrase "No one leaves home / unless home is the mouth of a shark" circulates so broadly because it is short, imagistic, and open to interpretation. It allows a wide range of people to situate their understanding of the world through it. Poetry's tendency to exceed national boundaries, while the poets themselves remain

² As Zeynep Tufekci has noted, those governments such as China and Iran that do attempt to control social media use do so by controlling all internet access; while others do monitor social media use, often through official government agencies like Zimbabwe's Ministry of Cyber Security, Threat Detection, and Mitigation, the proprietary functions of many social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, require that governments secure cooperation from the corporations to monitor use. They have, of course, done so frequently.

“representative” of a national or diasporic identity, make it an expedient form through which to examine how communities imagine themselves on social media. *Viral Verses* therefore investigates how the logics of social media publication have shaped poetic production across the region, even as the poetry itself has offered new forms of affiliation for ever-mobile, increasingly urban and transnational communities. The remediation of Warsan Shire’s “Conversations about home” —first print, then digital, chanted, re-printed, and re-digitized— illustrates how poetic language benefits from the affordances of different media paradigms to address changing audiences. Where poetic forms have historically been tied to communal formations in southern Africa, *Viral Verses* argues that poetic form today —reshaped in the movement between media yet recognizable in its outline— carries collective expectations for community behaviors, articulated and mobilized through public language that operates both transnationally and subnationally.

POETRY AND THE NATION: THE POLITICAL USES OF POETRY IN SOUTHEASTERN AFRICA

In August 2014, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party brought South Africa’s parliament to an early close as they chanted “Pay back the money,” demanding President Jacob Zuma return public funds he had appropriated to build a vacation home (“Malema and EFF” 2015). “Pay back the money” quickly spread beyond the limits of the EFF, as protestors and citizens throughout the country took it up to express

their discontent with Zuma's administration. The rhythmic chant transformed a dissenting public into a cohesive unit whose voices, together, overpowered Zuma's own microphone-enhanced responses. In 2017, as the extent of the president's corruption became clear, the chants returned, this time reminding the public that impeachment efforts had lasted nearly four years. "Pay back the money," as a poetic speech act, created a community whose shared rhetoric enhanced its participants' political agency, launching the EFF as a major opposition party.

"Pay back the money" drew on a longer tradition of politically active poetry in southern Africa, a tradition which has bound individuals within a community through their investment in the poem's message and the repetition of its rhetoric. Historically throughout southeastern Africa, the Ndebele praise form of *izibongo* has rhetorically represented a community's political agency: in reciting a community's lineage, the *imbongi* asserts the community's bounded existence with historical precedence of self-organization—an existence defined and reified through the *imbongi*'s poem, or *izibongo*. Given his power to define the community, the *imbongi* was both advisor to and single authorized critic of the chief, a mediating voice between the people and their leader. As Lupenga Mphande has noted of praise poetry among the Tumbuka in Zambia, Malawi, and Tanzania, "Memory is considered a collective phenomenon of the individual, and private memory is viewed as suspect. Narratives about the chief's heroic deeds may

refer to deeds of individuals, but these deeds are always depicted as collective” (387).

Poetic narratives invest the individual in the communal, creating a public through collective claims to belonging. As artists build on recognizable forms, they interpellate new communities through their address, marking potential counter-publics in moments of political struggle.

The historic strength of poetic forms like *izibongo* indicate that southeastern Africa, as a region, was and remains culturally connected to poetic practices. During the colonial era in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, migrants from across the region furnished cheap labor for South African mines and Rhodesian farms; when anti-colonial organization took hold in the mid-twentieth century, fighters from across the region organized in training camps in Mozambique and Tanzania. They brought musical and poetic forms with them into migrant villages and training camps. During the labor movement in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, *izibongo* entered a new urban sphere of organizing. When workers in Johannesburg went on strike for equal rights, and rallies and protests dragged on with little relief, the poet Alfred Temba Qabula took the stage, performing isiZulu praise poetry to entertain the workers and maintain morale. His poetry, and the poetry of other labor activists, was published in the 1986 anthology *Black Mamba Rising*. Although *Black Mamba Rising* could not be circulated openly in South Africa at the time of its publication, it was not banned, either, and the bilingual

text—published in English and isiZulu editions—helped circulate the protestors’ rhetoric, promoting the integration of *izibongo* into a wider array of political events and rallies.³

Throughout the late twentieth century, independence leaders adapted a range of literary performance forms to anti-colonial struggles—from the *izibongo* adopted by the labor movement in South Africa to the *pungwe* (song and dance form) embraced by Chimurenga fighters in Rhodesia⁴ and the *mbumba* developed by the Nyasaland African Congress;⁵ from the *ukumbi* used to debate the future of the Tanzanian nation (Arenberg 2016) to the *taarab* dances used to celebrate it (Askew 2002). These forms moved with laborers and activists: as Rhodesian and South African liberation fighters trained in Mozambique, they shared both musical lyrics and chants.⁶ These forms supported the independence struggle, entertaining crowds at protests and disseminating the logic of the movement to the far corners of the nations. They

³ For more on the relationship between poetry and the labor movement in South Africa, see Ari Sitas’s “Traditions of Poetry in Natal” (1994).

⁴ As early as 1994, Stephen Chifunyise argued, “an all-night song-dance-political rally called *pungwe* became the medium for the dramatization of the people’s struggle (Chimurenga) and the inevitable defeat of colonialism in Zimbabwe” (54). For a longer history of the development and cooptation of *chimurenga* music, see John Kaemmer’s “Social Power and Music Change Among the Shona” (1989); for more on its development into the twenty-first century, see Wendy Willems’s “Risky Dialogues: the performative state and the nature of power in a postcolony” (2015).

⁵ John Lwanda provides the most thorough histories of the NAC’s use and cooptation of music in his *Music, Culture, and Orature: Reading the Malawian Public Sphere, 1949-2006* (2008).

⁶ Flora Veit-Wild traces the transnational development of independence chants in her *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe* (Mambo Press, 1988).

inscribed national logics in traditional poetic forms, using recognized genres to build new communities. This project focuses on the contemporary reverberations of poetry's political force in order to investigate how new media publication influences its form and its publics.

As the spread of *izibongo* and other performance forms illustrates, each of these nations came into being in conversation with the others. Today, each is shaped by the cyclical migration of people, and the flow of information, between them. To speak of one nation in isolation would obfuscate their connections: how change, activism, and the arts in any one country affect the others. Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe are formally bound by their commitment to the Southern African Development Community (SADC)⁷ in facilitating regional economic and social interactions, as well as through a longer history of migration following the *mfecane*. The Mfecane or Difaqane (both meaning "crushing" or "scattering") refers to the mass migration of Ngoni peoples during the Zulu wars of the early nineteenth century. Communities which had started out on the southeastern tip of the continent moved as far north as Malawi and as far west as Botswana, unsettling cultural and linguistic norms across the regions; the *mfecane* is part of the reason cultural forms such as *izibongo* spread so far. While John

⁷ Made up of 16 southern African states, SADC is among the strongest inter-governmental co-operations in Africa. It has mandated a Free Trade Area since 2008, and legally binding protocols on energy, gender and development, and politics, defense, and co-security.

Wright has questioned the historical veracity of traditional narratives about the Mfecane (1988), the *mfecane* still widely cited as evidence of the region's cultural unity, which suggests its ongoing force as an organizing metaphor.

Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa were further connected by a shared history of English colonial rule, if one that saw different degrees of settlement. They share a history of independence followed by minority rule (by whites in Zimbabwe and South Africa, and by implicit Chewa dominance in Malawi). They share, as well, a post-independence legacy of disappointment and discouragement, and a youth-driven spirit of protest and hope. In each place, a flourishing of music and performance poetry accompanied youth dissent in the early twenty-first century: South Africa has seen the "Fallist" movement, which led to university and government shutdowns in 2015-2016, and to Jacob Zuma's resignation in February 2018; Zimbabwe a range of youth movements leading, ultimately, to Pres. Robert Mugabe's deposal in November 2017; and Malawi an increasing emphasis on poetry criticizing the role of IGOs in the country's governance. By focusing on these three countries, *Viral Verses* maps the connections between them while retaining sight of their divergence.

The three countries differ substantially in their ethnic composition, language policies, infrastructural developments, and post-independence history. Malawi, which gained independence in 1963 but operated under single party rule until 1994, insisted

on a monoethnic nationalism, privileging the Chewa identity and suppressing others—a legacy which has largely been sustained under multipartyism.⁸ Since independence, it has retained a predominantly agricultural economy but has become one of the poorest countries on the continent, with among the lowest internet penetration rates in the world.⁹ Even though the country has officially embraced English as its primary language of instruction,¹⁰ poetry remains primarily Chichewa, with Anglophone poetry popular only in urban areas. Today, Malawi has a multiparty democracy with full enfranchisement, but extreme corruption has depleted trust in the government and generated nostalgia for dictatorship.¹¹ Malawi is often characterized as politically “meek,” with little direct struggle or open dissent against the government.¹²

⁸ Chichewa and English remain the country’s official languages, and the only two in which schooling is offered. However, as of 2009, only about half of Malawi’s population spoke Chichewa as a home language; Lomwe, Tumbuka, and Yao—spoken, respectively, by 12%, 8%, and 6% of the population—have no official recognition. To understand how disenfranchised these linguistic groups are, consider that in August 2018, a range of newspapers took note when a Chichewa-speaking politician bothered to give any of his speech in Chitumbuka while campaigning in the heavily-Tumbuka Northern region.

⁹ According to the World Bank, only 10% of Malawians used the internet as of 2016, putting it in the bottom twenty worldwide

(https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?year_high_desc=false).

¹⁰ Until 2016, Malawian students were instructed in their mother tongues until Primary Grade 4; recent policy changes, however, now mandate English instruction beginning in Primary Grade 1, although studies suggest teachers still move across languages relatively freely (USAID 2016, Mchombo 2017)

¹¹ Reuben Chirambo (2010) notes the rise of monuments to Banda in the early twenty-first century creates “collective memories of a glorious past” at odds with the dictator’s “tyrannical” rule (4).

¹² Many ascribe this meekness to having developed as a nation under a censorial dictatorship. In 2011, a series of anti-governmental protests quickly ended following the deaths of three protestors. Many poets I spoke to explained that they would not publish anything they thought might give offense, because the country is so small.

Zimbabwe, in contrast, has an ethnic identity bifurcated between the Mashona and the Matebele, a tension which Robert Mugabe capitalized during periods of political discontent in the 1990s and 2000s. Since majority rule in 1980, the country has been led by a single party, with multiple contested elections. Though Zimbabwe exports tobacco and nickel, it has faced severe cash shortages due to international embargoes. Its once-strong agricultural economy all but collapsed following farm seizures in the early 2000s.¹³ Nonetheless, a strong centralized government allowed the country to develop strong mobile infrastructure in urban areas, leaving it with over twice the internet penetration rate of Malawi (World Bank). Additionally, Zimbabwe has among the best educational systems on the continent, with a literacy rate of 86.5% as of 2015 (UNESCO). However, ongoing voter intimidation (Human Rights Watch 2013), media suppression (Mutsvairo and Sirks 2015), and limited rural infrastructure (Maungandize and Halsall 2016) have left its citizens effectively disenfranchised. The combination of high literacy and internet penetration with media repression and voter intimidation has made poetry and social media especially important channels for community organizing in Zimbabwe.

¹³ For artistic and political responses to the country's crises, see Praise Zenenga's "Censorship, Surveillance, and Protest Theatre in Zimbabwe" (2008). For a reading of its relationship to international policy, see Fritsch et. al. "The Plight of Zimbabwean Unaccompanied Refugee Minors in South Africa" (2014).

Finally, South Africa, in the fight against apartheid during the 1960s-1980s, sought to unite its diverse ethnic communities under an anglophone rhetoric that resisted both the Afrikaans language of oppression and the dominance of any one Afriphone language.¹⁴ Today, despite nominally offering instruction in all twelve of its official languages, English has remained its primary language of instruction and governance, with home language education offered only until Grade 4 (McKinney 2016). Following the end of apartheid in 1994, the country retained its growing industrial base. Released from international sanctions, it quickly became one of the strongest economies on the continent—second only to Nigeria (IMF 2017)—and companies based in South Africa spread throughout the region, from fast food chicken chain Nando's to the media conglomerate Naspers and the financial services group Standard Bank. It has also become an educational hub, home to six of the top ten universities in Africa. Its cultural influence is commensurate with its economic and educational power, and an increasing range of literary celebrities and international festivals are based in South Africa.

The three countries, in many ways, speak to the broader diversity of SADC: its political leadership, its economic inequality, its diversity of ethnicity and nationalism.

¹⁴ For more on the adoption of English by South African radicals via Black Consciousness literatures, see Mafika Gwala, "Writing as a Cultural Weapon" (1984) and *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, ed. N. Barney Pitso, Ramphela Mamphela, Malusi Mpumlwana, and Lindy Wilson (1992).