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Performing Marginality, Engaging Audiences: A Transnational Framework for English Performance Poetry in Tanzania

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Abstract

Scholarship on Tanzanian literature has long focused on written Kiswahili poetry (ushairi) and the more established traditions of classical oral performance. Contemporary urban English performance poetry has been almost entirely neglected. This paper presents a detailed, multi-modal, empirical study of the historical antecedents, stagecraft, performer-audience relationships, and transnational cultural politics of English performance poetry in Tanzania's contemporary urban landscape. It draws on a purposively sampled corpus of five performance poems by leading Anglophone Tanzanian poets (Loyce Gayo, Melchizedeck Kakese, and Paul Lukumay). The paper shows how this new genre functions as a vibrant, subversive public sphere. Methodologically, it fills a significant gap in the literature by combining close textual analysis with empirical performance observation, using video archives, live ethnographic field notes and multi-modal transcriptions to capture the real-time dynamics of performance. Theoretically, it draws on Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis (Derrida, Butler, Hall), Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept of the autopoietic performer-audience feedback loop, and Arjun Appadurai's theory of transnational ethnoscapes and mediascapes. The study identifies three key aspects of the movement. First, it emerged in the mid-2010s through diasporic networks, spearheaded by Loyce Gayo's return from the US and the institutionalisation of performance platforms such as Paza Sauti, Eco Sanaa Terrace, and the Goethe-Institut in Dar es Salaam. Second, the performance is defined by highly charged stagecraft that produces a powerful performer-audience relationship through long silences, drops in vocal pitch, weeping, biblical parody, etc. This, in turn, leads to immediate audience co-performance through weeping, murmuring, and vocal affirmations. Third, the poetry offers a sophisticated transnational critique that draws on US racial politics, Pan-African solidarity in response to the exploitation of minerals in the DRC, and a critique of the local situation, including the erosion of democratic space and the exacerbation of social and economic inequalities. The paper concludes that Tanzanian Anglophone performance poetry has transformative potential, turning structural marginality into a space for aesthetic innovation, political consciousness, and transnational democratic solidarity.

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Keywords:
Performance poetry, Slam poetry, Performer-audience feedback loop, Poststructuralism, Transnationalism, Loyce Gayo, Tanzanian literature, Cultural politics.

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1. Introduction: Contextualising Anglophone Performance Poetry in Tanzania

Poetry in East Africa has long been the principal vehicle through which the collective human experience, the intangible terrain of emotion, moral philosophy, and the realities of socio-political life can be negotiated (Garnham, 2017; Ribeiro, 2009). From classical Greek tragedy and Renaissance humanism through Romanticism, Realism, and various forms of postcolonial anti-imperialist resistance, poetry has constantly adapted to changing material conditions and the shifting ideological terrain of human society (Petievich, 2017; Pokrivcak et al., 2016). Throughout these periods, lyric poetry has remained central to articulating the individual subjectivity of a people. As Petievich (2017) points out, literary emotion is not simply a private psychological event; it is an act of expressive communication which is necessarily embedded in public discourse and political solidarity. In the African postcolonial context, the poet has consistently been an agent in the struggle against colonialism, critiquing neo-colonialism and articulating the people's aspirations for justice (Aboh, 2012; Kean, 2016).

In Tanzania, literary scholarship has long been focused on Kiswahili verse (from the classical tenzi epics and the nationalist poetry of the Nyerere era through to the present day with its written poetry (ushairi) and contemporary Kiswahili hip-hop (Bongo Flava) (Sanga, 2022)). That focus is entirely appropriate, given that Kiswahili is the national language and the common language of over 120 indigenous groups. However, it has effectively sidelined a major and very visible literary phenomenon of the present day: the explosion of urban performance poetry in English. Conceptually, performance poetry traces back to the global spoken word movement of the 1970s. It is a very different aesthetic to the traditional academic model of poetry, which is silent and print-based (Bednarz, 2017;

Collinge, 2019). It is a mode of poetry conceived specifically for performance and presentation to a live audience. It is an art form that uses the full range of vocal techniques, physical gesture, tonal meaning, and rhythmic signification to create a direct, immediate channel of communication between the performer and the audience (Fraser, 2006; Stoudamire, 2012).

Despite its growing popularity among Tanzanian youth, the urban intelligentsia, and online communities, scholars have written very little on Anglophone performance poetry in Tanzania. Existing work on East African oral literature either focuses entirely on traditional ethnic ritual performance (John & Visser, 2017; Kgobe, 1994) or limits itself to a purely print-based close reading of the text, with no reference to the actual performance event. Early critical work on Tanzanian performance poetry is also riddled with theoretical imprecision, inconsistent terminology, little or no empirical data on audience interaction, and a fragmented treatment of its transnational aspects. This article seeks to redress this by providing a full, rigorous empirical and theoretical study of contemporary English performance poetry in Tanzania.

To support a rigorous, systematic investigation, this study is structured around three principal research objectives and their associated research questions. These are to investigate the historical antecedents, the institutional contexts and the key agents of genesis that enabled the emergence of English performance poetry in the urban areas of Tanzania in the mid-2010s; to conduct an empirical investigation into the stagecraft, vocalities, corporealities and the autopoietic performer-audience feedback mechanisms that are operative in live performance events. To analyse transnational cultural politics, diasporic circulation, and the ideological subversions expressed through the poets' thematic engagement with racial injustice, regional conflict, and the constraints of domestic democracy.

1.1 Conceptual Foundations and Terminology Standardisation

A major flaw in the literature is the vagueness and interchangeable use of genre terms. Critical scholarship needs to have clear boundaries in its analysis between related but distinct oral and performative forms. This study adopts a standardised terminology in accordance with established performance theory. Performance poetry is the overarching category for

poetry composed with the intention of being performed, staged, and delivered live or via digital means to an audience (Collinge, 2019; McCorkle, 1989). It differs fundamentally from printed poetry because the performer's body, voice, and the physical space in which they perform are co-present and integral to the poem. The performer's voice (the soundscape), rhythm, pitch, and movement (kinetic gesture) are the primary means of conveying meaning (Novak, 2011; Pfeiller, 2003). Slam poetry is a particular, highly structured competitive form of performance poetry. It emerged in Chicago in the mid-1980s and operates under strict competition rules. Poets perform original work (typically within a three-minute time limit), without music, costumes, or props, and are judged on a scale of 0 to 10 by judges drawn at random from the audience (Somers-Willet, 2005, 2009). The form is inherently populist and democratises literary evaluation by placing the power of judgement in the hands of the live audience.

Spoken Word Poetry is a broader art form that overlaps with poetry, theatrical monologue, storytelling, and the oral traditions of hip-hop. It includes non-competitive spoken word recitals, recorded performances, and video poetry shared on social media (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, etc.). It is an art form intrinsically linked to social activism, identity politics, and the confessional. Typographical and conceptual corrections are also made to deal with the various inadvertent conflations of terms in the unedited manuscripts (e.g. 'slang poetry' is dismissed as a typographical corruption). 'Emotional poetry' is not a genre in itself but rather a generic description of the lyric's affective quality. These distinctions are maintained in order to ensure analytical rigour across the various textual, performative and competitive dimensions.

2. Historical Genesis and Institutional Evolution of English Performance Poetry in Tanzania

To assess the claims about the 'origins' of English performance poetry in Tanzania, we need to establish its actual history, the institutions which gave it form and the key figures who were instrumental in its genesis. The notion that urban performance poetry is a direct descendant of an ancient and unbroken lineage of pre-colonial oral tradition is entirely wrong.

Anglophone performance poetry in Tanzania is a modern phenomenon, emerging after 2010 from the confluence of transnational diaspora return, youth-led civil society, and new urban cultural spaces in Dar es Salaam (Braun 2017; Uimonen 2018).

Loyce Gayo sparked the movement by returning to Tanzania in 2017 after 10 years in the US (Braun, 2017; Sykes & Chechelnitsky, 2020). She had done her degree in African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas at Austin (UTA) and was active in the competitive US collegiate slam scene, performing at the UTA slam space with a number of well-known African American and Afro-Latina slam poets, including Ariana Brown (Sykes & Chechelnitsky, 2020). Her work was widely known through the major digital poetry platforms such as Button Poetry, Write About Now Poetry and PBS. On her return to Dar es Salaam, she had a clear objective: to bring slam poetry to Tanzania and grow it among Tanzanian youth.

A key moment came in October 2017 at Eco Sanaa Terrace in Mikocheni, Dar es Salaam, when Gayo hosted one of the first formal English poetry slams (Braun 2017). Seven very brave young people (aged 20 to 35, six women and one man) came forward to perform original poetry in front of a panel of five judges and a very lively, engaged audience (Braun 2017). That event set the format for slam poetry in Tanzania: a three-minute maximum per piece, audience judging, and audience feedback. To institutionalise the movement, Gayo founded *Paza Sauti* ('Raise Your Voice'), a non-governmental creative arts organisation based at Nafasi Art Space in Mikocheni (Nafasi Art Space 2025). Paza Sauti ran performance poetry workshops for young people aged 6 to 18, encouraging them to use their voices to speak about the issues of the day, challenge authority, and articulate the realities of life on the ground (Braun 2017; Nafasi Art Space 2025).

Following Gayo's initial work, English performance poetry moved into established urban cultural institutions (most notably the Goethe-Institut in Dar es Salaam, which provided the stage, sound, and promotion for regular spoken-word events). In those institutional settings, young poets formed artist collectives (most notably 255 Poetry and the Bongo Poetry Group). The Bongo Poetry Group in particular was an incubator for a number of emerging Anglophone voices (Melchizedeck Kakese, Paul Lukumay and Zuhura Seng'enge) who used the group to develop their stage presence, to experiment with Swahili/English code-switching and to get their work out

on social media (Instagram, Facebook and YouTube) (Shaziya, 2019; Sridevi, 2019). English performance poetry in Tanzania thus emerged through a fairly structured historical trajectory involving diasporic exchange, youth collectives and urban institutional spaces.

3. Integrated Theoretical Framework: Poststructuralism and Performance Theory

This paper develops an integrated theoretical framework that brings Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis and Performance Theory together to create a direct analytical link between textual deconstruction and performance practice.

3.1 Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis: Unpacking Textual Instability and Ideological Deconstruction

Poststructuralist theory (rooted in the work of Derrida, Butler, and Hall) rejects the structuralist notion of fixed, stable meanings and a single authoritative text (Holcombe, 2015). Derrida's notion of différance holds that signs signify only through deferral and internal contradiction, showing how dominant discourse relies on binary oppositions (ruler/ruled, sacred/profane, centre/margin, etc.) that can be deconstructed. In literary terms, this allows analysis of how a text can subvert the very hegemonies of politics, religion, and society that it is ostensibly a product of (Holcombe, 2015).

In this article, poststructuralist discourse analysis is operationalised in order to look at: first, Intertextual Subversion and Parody (how poets take canonical sacred texts, such as the Biblical Beatitudes in Loyce Gayo's 'Politics at God's Funeral' or the Moses/Pharaoh narrative of Judeo-Christian tradition in Paul Lukumay's 'I Can't Breathe') and subvert/invert their meaning to reveal institutional hypocrisy and state oppression); and secondly, it looks at...

Linguistic instability and irony: the inherent instability of the ruling class's political language is revealed in the ironic juxtapositions (e.g. 'peace makers for they will kill in the name of God'). Thirdly, it interrogates the deconstruction of marginality: the poet resists the imposition of a fixed

subaltern identity by reconstituting marginality as a site of discursively fluid resistance rather than passive victimisation.

3.2 Performance Theory and the Autopoietic Performer-Audience Feedback Loop

Poststructuralism is, of course, very useful for unpacking textual and linguistic subversion. It is not, however, adequate for analysing the bodily, vocal, and spatial reality of the stage event. To analyse the live performer-audience interaction, we bring in Performance Theory, principally Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of the 'autopoietic performer-audience feedback loop' (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Novak 2011), Charles Briggs's (1988) notion of competence in performance, Victor Turner's concept of liminality and Karin Barber's anthropology of African oral performance.

Fischer-Lichte (2008) argues that a live performance is not simply a pre-packaged message being delivered from performer to passive audience. It is an autopoietic (self-generating) event which is created in the moment through the co-presence of performer and audience. The feedback loop is the constant exchange of bodily energy, vocalisations, affect and spatiality. As Briggs (1988) shows, the performer draws on the traditions of their art form and will select the relevant elements of the 'repertoire' for the particular social moment. The audience in turn is actively involved in the process of interpretation and co-production. In spoken word and slam, the feedback loop is manifest in audible audience responses (murmuring, grunting, snapping fingers, weeping, cheering), which in turn affect the performer's pitch, pace, silences, and emotional register (Bellamy, 2014; Somers-Willet, 2005). By bringing Poststructuralism into conjunction with Performance Theory, we have a single model that allows us to assess both the poem's textual mechanics and its actual, embodied, empirical performance on stage.

4. Methodology, Corpus Selection, and Multimodal Performance Analysis

To ensure methodological rigour, we have adopted a qualitative, multimodal research design which combines close textual analysis with empirical observation of performance. We developed the study corpus through purposive sampling, selecting five highly representative performance poems in English by three key Anglophone Tanzanian poets: Loyce Gayo, Melchizedeck Kakese, and Paul Lukumay. These poets were

chosen because they form the vanguard of English performance poetry in Tanzania, encompassing both individual diasporic performers and key members of the collective (255 Poetry and the Bongo Poetry Group).

Table 1: Selected Corpus of Anglophone Tanzanian Performance Poems

Poet Name	Poem Title	Affiliation / Platform	Performance Context	Core Analytical Focus
Loyce Gayo	"Politics at God's Funeral"	Paza Sauti / Button Poetry	Eco Sanaa Terrace & Digital Archives	Beatitudes Parody, Stage Silence, Performer Weeping
Loyce Gayo	"How We Forget"	Independent / UTA Slam	Eco Sanaa Terrace & PBS Video	Racial Memory, Jim Crow Allusions, Audience Co-mourning
Melchizedeck Kakese	"Echoes of Congo"	Bongo Poetry Group	Goethe-Institut Dar es Salaam	Katanga Extraction, Pan-African Solidarity, Lullaby Defiance
Paul Lukumay	"I Can't Breathe"	Bongo Poetry Group	Goethe-Institut & Social Media	Democratic Space, Code-Switching, Moses/Pharaoh Allegory
Paul Lukumay	"In the Land of Black Monkeys"	Bongo Poetry Group	Digital Archives & Stage Recitals	Class Stratification, Economic Inequality, State Violence

Performance data were gathered through a triangulated, multi-modal approach: live ethnographic fieldwork at venues including the Eco Sanaa Terrace and the Goethe Institute in Dar es Salaam; video archive material from Button Poetry and PBS; and transcriptions of acoustic soundscapes. The analysis transcribed all non-verbal acoustic cues (pace, pause duration, pitch variation, crying), all visible kinetic cues (facial expressions, hand movements, postural shifts), and all audience response cues (murmuring, grunting, finger snapping, vocal interjections, collective weeping). This fully empirical approach directly addresses the previous empirical voids and enables systematic analysis of stage engagement.

5. Performer-Audience Engagement and Stage Mechanics: Empirical Analysis of Loyce Gayo's Performances

Loyce Gayo is a pioneer of Anglophone performance poetry in Tanzania, and her style is among the most succinct, fluid, and emotionally charged. In performance poetry, the delivery is the key to the aesthetic (Higyard 2023). Subtleties of vocal stress, rhythm of delivery, tonality, and pitch are key tools in establishing a relationship with the audience (Fraser 2006). In her live performances of "Politics at God's Funeral" and "How We Forge", the interaction between performer and audience is not simply a result of reciting the text; it is the product of a highly sophisticated and intentional use of performance mechanics, which include the use of silence, physical vulnerability and intertextual subversion.

5.1 "Politics at God's Funeral": Beatitudes Parody, Vocalics, and the Autopoietic Weeping Loop

Gayo's performance of 'Politics at God's Funeral' exemplifies the autopoietic performer-audience feedback loop. She doesn't start the piece the moment she walks onto the stage. There is a very long, pregnant pause. She stands at the microphone for almost two minutes in complete silence, looking straight into the audience with an unblinking stare (Braun, 2017). That silence is very much in keeping with the traditions of African oral storytelling where the story teller will build up the tension and command the attention of the audience before launching into the first line of the story (John & Visser, 2017). The audience is absolutely hushed and the room is in total stillness when she finally breaks the silence in a low, guttural voice:

'These are the parables touched of the self-proclaimed perfect and messiah' (Gayo, 2017).

The poem itself is a virulent poststructuralist parody of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) which takes the sacred promises of divine justice and systematically undermines them to reveal the grim truth of imperial power, racial capitalism and state hypocrisy:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for there is the American Dream
> Blessed are those who mourn, for their children will inherit the same crime
> Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit nothing
> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will feast on others' souls
> Blessed are the massive, for they will be shown judgment by their peers
> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will never see evil
> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God
> Blessed are the persecuted for their righteousness, for their blood will remain in a state of pretty, but will eventually start to smell up for God. (Gayo, 2017)

As Gayo delivers the third line, 'Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit nothing', her pitch drops into a cracking, trembling whisper. The sheer dissonance between the biblical promise of spiritual inheritance and the reality of complete material dispossession hits the auditorium immediately. Field notes record people shuddering, grunting, muttering phrases of pain and agreement. By line seven, 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall kill in the name of God, ' Gayo is in full emotional meltdown and is weeping openly (Braun 2017). Rather than breaking the performance, this moment of vulnerability completes Fischer-Lichte's autopoietic loop. The audience in the front rows, seeing the performer cry, start to cry themselves. Others are heard gasping and clutching one another in solidarity. The audience is

in the process of absorbing and reproducing the performer's grief, and the performance becomes a shared space of mourning and political awakening.

Thematically, the piece is clearly drawing on Michael Harrington's 'The Politics at God's Funeral' (1984), in which he identifies the spiritual and moral rot of the Western capitalist world. As society moves further from any sense of ethical imperative, divine authority is used to sanction the day's imperial wars and state violence (Dannhauser 1984). Gayo's poem is a deconstruction of that very process in which the blessing of God is replaced by a curse, where the peacemaker is in fact the murderer in God's name. The piece ends abruptly, and Gayo simply walks offstage in silence as the audience erupts. It is a very potent piece of political theatre and a direct challenge to the audience.

5.2 "How We Forget": Allegorical Memory, Racial Trauma, and Confessional Performance

In 'How We Forget' Gayo takes the performer/audience dynamic still further by using historical memory and the confessional. It begins with an allegorical invocation of spiritual loss and historical amnesia: 'We forgot we were worshipping beings / We forgot you black Jesus / We forgot king of kings' (Gayo, 2017). The conflation of divinity and royalty with 'black Jesus' is a direct challenge to the Eurocentric iconography of the religious. It reclaims the sacred for the Black diaspora.

As the piece moves into the middle stanzas, Gayo moves from the sacred to the brutal geography of anti-Black violence in the American South: 'But Mississippi is still standing / We forgot burning cities / We forgot colours are seasonal' (Gayo, 2017). In performance, she delivers these lines rapidly and staccato, her hands gripping the mic stand and her body swaying. The reference to Mississippi is a direct invocation of the horror of Jim Crow, of lynching and the civil rights struggle (Davis, 2011). The performance peaks in lines 17 and 18: 'we forgot bodies float, bodies hang / we forgot Barbeque Postcards, Strange Fruit and Flooded Men' (Gayo, 2017). On the word 'Strange Fruit', her voice breaks. This directly references Abel Meeropol's anti-lynching song (Strange Fruit), made famous by Billie Holiday. As one literary observer notes, Gayo lets her tears fall freely during this section as she speaks of her own experiences of racial violence in the US (Tanzania Poetry Blog, 2014). The immediate audience at Eco Sanaa Terrace is utterly still, a hush falling over them, then a series of soft nods and affirmations

('Mmh', 'Tell it', 'Yes'). In this way, Gayo is able to take the personal and make it political, to connect her own experience of racial trauma with the wider history of Black suffering in the Black Atlantic and to force her Tanzanian audience to feel it too.

6. Transnational Geopolitics, Diasporic Circulation, and Pan-African Solidarity

Early assessments of scholarship on performance poetry pointed to a significant weakness: transnational movements were treated in a fragmented way. The movements tended to hop from Tanzania to the US to the DRC and back again, with no clear sense of why or how they were connected. This paper addresses that problem by anchoring its transnational analysis in Appadurai's (1996) concept of global cultural flows (specifically the ethnoscapes and mediascapes) and also in Gilroy's (1993) Black Atlantic notion of counter-cultural circulation.

Transnationalism in Anglophone Tanzanian performance poetry is not simply a random assemblage of foreign examples. It is an organic, cross-cutting movement of ideas, aesthetic strategies and political solidarities (Obeng 2017). Loyce Gayo's artistic journey is a case in point of the diasporic ethnoscape: her move from Dar es Salaam to Austin, Texas, her training in the American slam scene and her subsequent return to Tanzania have created a very real bridge between African American spoken word and the contemporary East African youth culture (Braun 2017; Sykes & Chechelnitsky 2020). This is a truly transnational perspective which goes well beyond the US/Tanzania relationship into the realm of Pan-African solidarity as seen in Melchizedeck Kakese's "Echoes of Congo". As a very active poet in the Bongo Poetry Group, Kakese directs his poetic gaze towards the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the resource extraction in the Katanga province of the DRC (Honke, 2010; Diemel, 2018). The poem kicks off with some very stark and disturbing imagery of the mining and the human cost:

> The earth moans in Katanga veins,
> Gold and cobalt, blood-stained gains.
> Children dig where rivers dry,

With dust hands, their dreams run dry. (Kakese, 2022)

Kakese's stanza makes the direct link between the global high-tech supply chains (the mining of cobalt and gold in Katanga) and the brutal destruction of African lives. Katanga, as a reference point, embodies colonial concessionary looting, and the same dynamic is being reproduced in the contemporary form of corporate neo-colonialism (Diemel 2018; Honke 2010). The image of 'children digging where the rivers have dried up' is the image of child labour and ecological devastation, and it is the image of African futures being starved of life by global capital. In the second stanza, Kakese looks at the corruption of African traditional culture:

Drums no longer call to dance,
They thunder now in ambush stance. (Kakese, 2022)

In traditional African societies, drumming and dance are key communal institutions used to celebrate life, record history, and maintain community bonds (Mullins, 2003; Sanga, 2022). Kakese points out how the civil war and the violence of the mercenaries have corrupted these sacred instruments, with the drums which were once used to celebrate life now being used to announce military ambushes and the killing of one's own people. The war is all over the region in fact: 'Kinshasa prays, Goma bleeds' (Kakese, 2022).

Crucially, Kakese does,not fall into fatalistic resignation. The final stanzas of the poem contain a very powerful counter-narrative of maternal resilience and environmental regeneration:

And yet / Through the smoke, a mother hums,
Her lullaby defies the guns,
A seed breaks stone, insists on birth.
Reminds the Congo of its worth.
So who will listen? Who will see?
The river carries prophecy… (Kakese, 2022)

In the African oral tradition, maternal lullabies are a potent source of emotional comfort, a means of cultural transmission, and a quiet form of resistance for the socially marginalised (Iwoketok, 2009). The mother's humming through the weaponised smoke is a moral act of resistance that

will outlast the artillery. The water, the river carrying the prophecy, is a universal spiritual conduit for freedom, renewal, and emancipatory transformation (Sparano & Strizzolo, 2024; Sunny & Maheswary, 2025). "Echoes of Congo" is a pan-African text which positions the Tanzanian performance poet not as a mere observer of events in his own country, but as a moral witness to the suffering of his neighbourWhile Loyce Gayo is looking at the issues of diasporic racial politics and Melchizedeck Kakese at the regional Pan-African conflicts, Paul Lukumay is directing his performance poetry at the very real, immediate political issues of contemporary Tanzania. Through the Bongo Poetry Group he performs on issues of good governance, the erosion of democratic space, state intimidation and extreme economic stratification (Erunke & Uchem, 2009; Pace, 2015).

In 'I can't breathe' Lukumay takes the globally resonant anti-racist slogan (made immortal by the killing of George Floyd in the US) and puts it into the Tanzanian political context. The poem opens with a very direct statement of political asphyxiation:

‘I can't breathe. I can't breathe.th a stark expression of political suffocation: “I can't breathe / I can't breathe.”

The repeated refrain of 'I can't breathe' is the very essence of the feeling of political repression that young people in Tanzania are living under as the state tightens its grip on surveillance and on the right to free expression. To safely and effectively critique the domestic authoritarianism of the state, Lukumay is in the habit of doing dynamic code-switching between Swahili and English, constructing an allegorical critique of the ruling elite, blending Swahili and English to construct an allegorical critique of ruling elites:

> *In the land where / Kuna wingi wa mafarao*
>
> *Na karaha juu / Musa nina [Translation: In the land where / there are plenty of Pharaohs / full of disgust / me as Moses I have a rod / and the stick has enlightened within me / so I can't stop shining...]*

By referencing the biblical figure of Pharaoh (Farao) Lukumay satirises the autocratic political leader who has absolute power and is utterly

contemptuous of the people (Singh, 2019). In opposition to this Pharaoh, he takes on the role of Moses and claims the 'rod' (fimbo) of the prophet of liberation to lead the people to freedom. The poem concludes with Lukumay deciding to suffer: 'I have decided to lose / Kitu nataka ku [something I want to] gain liberty and not weight' (Lukumay, 2021). He is quite clear here that he is not going to be in it for the material gain; he is not going to be in it for the political gain; he is going to be in it for the freedom of the people, and he is prepared to sacrifice his body and his mind to achieve that.

Lukumay takes this socioeconomic critique further in 'In the Land of Black Monkeys', where he uses allegorical animal satire to expose real class divisions in urban Tanzania. In the land of black monkeys, we saw white monkeys driving white cars whilst the blacks were on foot. In the land of black monkeys I heard black voices from the crowd, wailing 'The government is corrupt' a thousand times. It was all in the background, the voice of bombs and guns. In the land of black monkeys / Dirty roads, old houses / And the owners are just running nowhere... (Lukumay, 2021). Via the satirical allegory of 'white monkeys' (the corrupt ruling elite, foreign capitalists and political oligarchs) and 'black monkeys' (the downtrodden, impoverished masses), Lukumay lays bare the stark economic divisions that exist in urban Dar es Salaam.

The 'white monkeys' have the luxury cars and the gated compounds; the 'black monkeys' have the crumbling roads, the unemployment and the police 'back voice of bombs and guns'. By giving these grievances a voice on stage, Lukumay turns Anglophone performance poetry into a counter-hegemonic public sphere that both conscientises youth and holds institutions of power to account. The study's empirical and textual findings are crucial for offering new theoretical insights into African literary studies, performance theory, and poststructuralist discourse.

The analysis further underlines the value of combining poststructuralist text deconstruction with Fischer-Lichte's autopoietic performance model. In isolation, poststructuralism can risk treating the poetic text as merely a set of linguistic games. Performance theory, in isolation, can risk privileging the body's spectacle over the performance's ideological substance. The two

approaches together demonstrate how the textual subversions (Gayo's parody of the Beatitudes, Lukumay's Moses/Pharaoh allegory etc.) achieve such a powerful emotional impact precisely because they are embodied on stage through the means of vocal inflexion, the strategic use of silence and the shared weeping of performer and audience through vocalic fluctuations, strategic silences, and shared performer-audience weeping.

Second, the study radically rethinks the concept of 'marginality' in contemporary African literary culture. Traditional sociological and postcolonial understandings of marginality have tended to see it as passive subjection, economic deprivation, and cultural erasure. The performance poetry of Loyce Gayo, Melchizedeck Kakese, and Paul Lukumay completely overturns this notion of marginality as defeat. In their performance, they turn the very structure of marginality into an active centre of aesthetic creativity and political engagement. They do this by taking the language of English (historically the language of colonial administration and the privileged elite) and re-appropriating it through Swahili code-switching, oral storytelling techniques, and the infusion of Black Atlantic protest traditions. In doing so they are effectively creating a space for the marginalised youth to enter into the public sphere of literary culture.

9. Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research Directions

This empirically grounded, theoretically sound study of English performance poetry in contemporary Tanzania reaches three main conclusions. The first concerns its history. English performance poetry in Tanzania is a very recent phenomenon, emerging in the mid-2010s through transnational diasporic networks. Loyce Gayo's return from the US initiated it, and institutional channels, Paza Sauti, Eco Sanaa Terrace, the Goethe-Institut, and artist collectives such as 255 Poetry and the Bongo Poetry Group, have sustained it. The second conclusion is based on the mechanics of the autopoietic stage. The poem's performance is a co-production with the audience, generated through highly physical, embodied means

(extended stage silences, vocal pitch drops, physical tears, intertextual parodies) that, in turn, provoke an immediate, reciprocal co-performance from the audience (weeping, murmuring, vocalisations). A coherent transnational critique is absolutely essential to any transnational perspective. The Tanzanian performance poets in this study articulate a highly sophisticated transnational vision that links the experience of US anti-Black racism with the Pan-Africanist position on the exploitation of minerals in the DRC and the domestic struggle against the erosion of democratic space and class inequality in Tanzania. These conclusions have significant implications for cultural policy, literary education, and academic research in East Africa. University literary curricula need to broaden to include performance art, oral media, and digital spoken-word archives. Cultural ministries and CSOs should also invest in urban creative spaces and youth workshops (Paza Sauti is a good example), which provide safe spaces for creative expression and civic education. Thus, future work could build on this by doing large-scale ethnographic audience surveys across a range of locations in East Africa, looking at the gendered dimensions of female slam poets (e.g. Zuhura Seng'enge), and the political economy of digital monetisation on YouTube, TikTok and Instagram as performance poetry continues to evolve at pace globally.

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