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Pan-Africanism and the Poet, Imagining the Space Between

By Jamila M. Moore

It all began with a conversation. There I was sitting across from a microphone, the red light above the door signaled we were “on air.” I sucked in a deep breath, exhaled and waited for my cue, I was on “The Frontline,” or at least that is what the host called his talk-radio show—which aired weekly on 104.5 fm UCT Radio, Cape Town South Africa.

The University of Cape Town’s campus was buzzing over a headline that appeared on the front page of the *Varsity* newspaper, which read, “DJ Nigger Comment Raises Debate.” The “debate” mostly centered on why black American students were so upset with a UCT DJ’s use of the infamous N-word on air. Comments drifted through classrooms and lunch circles such as, “Americans are so sensitive,” and “They use the word all the time in music, I don’t see what the problem is,” and yet for some people there was no debate, just a couple of self-righteous ‘American’ students trying to cause problems for the local race relations. Two days after the *Varsity* article appeared, Gama, a chemical engineering student from Malawi, who hosted “The Frontline” asked another black American student and I to speak on his show, to “clear up some of the myths about black America.” At first I looked at him skeptically, unsure of where to begin and asked, “How much time do we have?”

There is so much misrepresentation and media propaganda floating back and forth between Africa and America. Before appearing on the show I had to consider essentialism, and how to avoid becoming the voice of black America, and instead just be one black voice from America. After the show aired, I was worried that I had said too much, and at the same time said nothing at all, but then the conversation grew, and I soon realized that for good or bad, I, being a poet stood right in the center of it.

I found myself discussing issues related to Pan-Africanism such as national identity, gender, struggle, and representations of blackness in nearly every social situation. Those dialogs did not evolve into an honors thesis until months after I left South Africa, my friend Simba emailed me from UCT, and in a long and complex letter he returned to the issue of Pan-Africanism stating,

There seems to be two parts to the Black Cause, there is the Black-American Cause and the African Cause. In light of this where are your people?

As I read his email in its entirety, I realized that this Pan-African conversation he was proposing is not new, and in fact there is a thick trail of Pan-African dialog that precedes us, from scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois, C.L.R. James, Eric Williams, Jane Nardal and Walter Rodney, to political activists such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Kwame Nkrumah. However, as I began to form my response to his question in the form of a poem, an oral poem at that, I became fully aware that I was not only drawing upon the works of scholars and activists, but from the work of oral poets as well. Although many of the scholars I mentioned have contributed to some of the theoretical ideas in my response to Simba's question, the very form of my response, its structure and power, and

its ability to be more than just a juvenile reflection of Pan-Africanist ideology, can be attributed to the oral poets who came before me.

In both the U.S. and South Africa, oral poets formed verbal performance spaces that addressed topics of blackness within white hegemonic societies, and created spaces for Pan-African dialogs on those topics. Poets such as Inagoapele Madingoane, Alfred Temba Qabula, Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo, Nice Malange, Mzwakhe Mbuli, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Don. L. Lee, and The Last Poets have such diverse national and personal backgrounds, that they can only be brought together through the physical or figurative performance spaces they created. For it is through the act of oral communication, that these American and South African poets extended the dialog on Pan-Africanism and shaped the ways in which we are able to revisit these transatlantic conversations in 2004.

Revisiting the Pan-African dialog between black Americans and black South Africans is of particular interest to me because they are populations, who twisted and turned under Jim Crow, Apartheid, pass laws, comb tests, segregation, school bussing, forced removals, lynchings, assassinations, political imprisonments, fire-bombings, church bombings, rape, murder, violence, and race suicide; years after they witnessed other black nations receive independence. Also, the multi-racial make up of both societies makes them ripe for this type of discussion because as George Fredrickson, author of *Black Liberation* notes,

It is this predominant assumption of biracialism or multi-racialism that makes me suppose that comparisons between black ideologies in the United States and South Africa can be more fruitful, at least for some

purposes, than comparisons of either with anti-colonialist movements in typical black African countries. (Fredrickson 7)

The oral space can be used to revisit Pan-Africanism for two reasons. One is that it is a socially constructed space, and therefore can be as diverse as the Pan-African experience. Secondly, the oral space produces a Pan-African discourse through discussions and expressions of black identity. Imagine the oral space as that existential space between Pan-Africanism and the poet that is constantly modified and changed with each new social moment. My belief is that the oral poet helps to sustain Pan-African dialogs, which I refer to as the transatlantic conversations, by creating various performance spaces that embrace black cultural productivity, without perpetuating intellectual, class, or gender elitism. This is possible because, as I will illustrate, the poet is a socially constructed member of society rooted in organic intellectualism.¹

This notion of “organic intellectualism” developed by Antonio Gramsci refers to a certain type of intellectual whose, “thought was consciously and explicitly rooted in the struggles of the social group to which they belonged” (Fredrickson 8). For this reason, the poet’s interaction with his/her audience or social group is key to the efficacy of any verbal performance. In allowing themselves to be moved, inspired, and carried away by the performance, the audience gives power to the poet and the poem. The power that is conceded to the poet during a performance does not generate from thin air, rather it is taken from one element in society and transferred to the poet. In this sense, power is a lot like energy, it is never created or destroyed, only transferred. To this end the poetic performance has the power to change the social structure in a society.

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Since the earliest days of oral performance in Africa, Praise Poets, have maintained social order within their communities by publicly addressing the needs of the people to the ruler, and vice versa. Power was never static, rather it ran back and forth through an invisible cable that went from the ruler, through the poet, and then to the people and back in the opposite direction. The oral performance space, like Pan-Africanism developed within an oppositional discourse² to either the state or the people's ideas of identity, and sometimes even to both. This was the case with Black Nationalist and Black Arts Poetry, when what was considered black was questioned on all sides. Through this negotiation of power, the performance space entered the field of identity politics³.

During heightened periods of racial struggle in both South Africa and the U.S, the oral space informed a diasporic identity through which Pan-Africanism was manifested, cultivated and shared with black people. In turn the poet came to represent who Sidney Lemelle refer to as the type of "Revolutionary Pan-Africanist [who does not] conflate or essentialize the issues of class, culture, gender, and identity...but instead put[s] them into a context of working class struggles" (347), because oral poets whether in the U.S. or South Africa mobilized oral devices for purposes of resisting, re-inventing, or reaffirming social order within their communities. Richard Bauman writes that, "in a very real sense... [The poet]...emerge[d] from the performance encounters in a different social position (45)." In essence, the poet enforced the belief that change could be made manifest to the community through spoken word.

²Sidney Lemelle and Robin Kelly underscore this point, in their text *Imagining Home* by writing, "One thing is certain, no matter how conservative or atavistic the rhetoric, Pan-Africanism was intended to be an oppositional ideology" (2).

³ See the introduction to *Imagining Home* for a formal discussion of identity politics.

Understanding this dynamic relationship makes it easier to comprehend why the role of the black poet in society has to be given critical study, because the black poet is a cultural worker who articulates and stimulates change within the social structure. For this reason, the black poet is also a threat to the culture of the ruling majority in South Africa and the U.S, as is the case with poets Mzwakhe Mbuli, once called “The People’s Poet,” and now sits behind bars for a crime many believe he did not commit; Amiri Barraka, leading architect of the black arts movement who was asked to resign as Poet Laureate of the state of New Jersey for his poem, “Somebody Blew Up America,” and Sarah Jones, whose poem “Your Revolution,” which addresses the sexual exploitation of women in popular music was censored by the FCC for so-called explicit content. Ironically, in all these cases the threat against the poet is wrapped up in social politics. In their own artistic ways, these poets have used their performance space to provide commentary on issues needing adjustment within their communities. In this light, the attack upon the poet is interchangeably an attack upon change. Bauman writes, “If change is conceived in opposition to the conventionality of the community at large, then it is only appropriate that the agents of that change be placed away from the center of that conventionality, on the margins of society (45).” There is a distinct connection between art and individual freedom, which cannot be ignored, and in censoring and incarcerating poets like Mbuli, Barraka, and Jones, their governments not only stifle these artists but compromise the very freedom of expression as well. Since these artists are only speaking aloud, the thoughts and experiences of many citizens, one must now ask, is it then justifiable to censor a representative of the people?

In actuality, the submergence of oral histories in the mainstreams of South Africa, and the U.S. signifies that the voice of the people has already been censored to some degree. Read's states that "capitalism does not challenge poetry in principle—it merely treats it with ignorance, indifference and unconscious cruelty (23)," contains some truth, as one notices the lack of documented information on oral culture and history. Read also writes, "In England or in Russia, in America or in Germany, it all comes to the same: in one way or another poetry is stifled. That is the world-wide fate of poetry (22)." I am inclined to agree with his statement to some degree; however it demonstrates the very Eurocentric point of view that he was writing from, for there is no mention of the important role of poetry in African, Asian, Latin American and Native American societies. Unlike Read, I do not believe that all is lost in poetry, especially oral poetry, for it has been appreciated and continues to be appreciated by black communities in both South Africa and the U.S. for centuries. Over time, the essential role of poetry and the poet has changed, but appreciation for the oral tradition and the power of the spoken word continues to shape each new generation who discovers the importance of oral history.

In South Africa, Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Swati and Ndebele praise poets have commanded a highly communal oral space since before the arrival of western settlers. However, it was not until the onslaughts of colonialism and apartheid that the oral space began to inform black identity politics. Colonialism interrupted Praise Poetry's communal dialog, causing black identity to suffer under western racial hierarchies, language, and notions of culture. In response to this, worker poets began to mix praise

poetry with protest, as they advocated institutions such as labor unions and cultural collectives on the shop floor.

By the 1970s and 1980s Nationalist Poets incited a greater pan-African dialog in South Africa. In connection with the brutal events of the Soweto uprising and the rise and fall of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, Nationalist poets created a shift from protest to resistance as they did not ask for, but instead created cultural institutions such as magazines, arts collectives, and other community projects to assist in the spread of the Pan-African ideology, Black Consciousness. The oral space was then used to transmit vital information on the liberation struggle that would otherwise be suppressed by the racist apartheid regime. This evolution of the oral space differs from that of the U.S., where poets had been having pan-African dialogs since the Harlem Renaissance, but only in closed performance spaces. In the U.S. poets began speaking a Pan-African dialog in small social structures where black identity was being informed by conversations of The New Negro during the Harlem Renaissance. However, these small circles of elites and intellectuals were not penetrating deep enough into the black community, but over time, with the budding of black radical thought during the Black Arts Movement, the performance space blossomed wider and wider until it became essential to the sustenance of black cultural activity. A growing performance space in black American poetics interrupts western convention, and its literary approach to poetry. Thus, in South Africa, we see the oral performance space develop a wider Pan-African discourse and in the U.S. the performance space develops into a socially constructed space, however both societies use orality as a tool to construct and inform identity politics.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. fully embraces the performance space during the Black Arts Movement, and South Africa begins to speak a Pan-African discourse during the Black Consciousness Movement. These two decades mark the first time that U.S. and South African poetics overlap with a resounding Pan-African voice rooted in a socially constructed oral space. Stylistically, these spaces share many similarities, for they both convey Black Consciousness ideologies. Had the tumultuous times of the seventies and eighties not changed, it is my belief that these poetics would have eventually blurred nationalistic lines in both style and message and poets would have begun speaking a similar poem. I say this because cultural workers in the U.S. had a growing awareness of the injustices in South Africa through the anti-apartheid movement, and may have aligned their earlier struggle for civil rights with that of black South Africans.

I believe the black poet's ability to maintain the oral space in society comes from a learning process that is steeped in the knowledge of Black Consciousness and the oral tradition. Equipped only with his/her own experiences and voice the black poet goes into the world bearing rhetorical witness to events two-hundred years past, and thousands of miles away. The poet evokes an ancestor in a single frightening call and gives re-birth to a community in eight simple phrases. It is my belief that the poet can offer Pan-Africanism to the people, without getting caught up in the debates and shortcomings affecting earlier tropes of Pan-Africanism. For example, a major criticism of previous Pan-African movements in Africa was that it did not provide a sense of being or purpose that was relevant to the ordinary African. Rather than address the needs and circumstances of the African Continent, the Pan-African sense of being stemmed from

the concerns of Western-Oriented black individuals” (Ackah 103). In black oral poetry, because the role of the poet, function of the poetry, themes within the poetry and the performance spaces are all socially constructed, there can be no exclusion of members from the black community, without compromising the very soul, or fundamental nature of black poetry.

So where does all this leave us in the year 2004? South Africa is now a democratic country exercising free and open elections, and anti-war movements against the War on Iraq have replaced the voices of protest and resistance that the Black Power movement developed in the U.S. Black oral poetry itself has been pushed to the background of popular culture, as the “great-granddaddy” of a younger aesthetic movement known as rap, yet young people like my friend Simba and I are still trying to connect on this extended Pan-African dialog. I believe that my poetic response to Simba’s question on unity and representation of the black cause was no accident. Both of our cultures have mobilized oral devices to combat western cultural hegemony in the past, manipulating style, voice and performance to stand within the oral space of a Pan-African dialog. Our poets have been organic intellectuals, deeply connected to the places and faces of the community, and our individual links to Black Consciousness have served to bridge our struggles. Frederickson writes in *Black Liberation*,

Politically aware African Americans and black South Africans did not conceive of themselves as simply engaged in isolated combat with their own particular sets of white oppressors. From the early to mid-nineteenth century onward, they were keenly aware of the larger struggle of Africans and people of African descent throughout the world against the efforts of

Europeans or people of European ancestry to enslave, colonize, disfranchise, and segregate people designated as black. Hence, African Americans and black South Africans shared in a larger Pan-African discourse and responded to changing international currents of black thought and opinion. (6)

Over time we tend to forget the acts Frederickson lists above such as slavery, colonization, disfranchisement, and segregation, as actual events that have had tremendous impacts on the way in which black identity was formed in both nations. As time passes it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine ourselves in shackles and bondage, until another episode of racial profiling takes place, or the President of the U.S. declares affirmative action unconstitutional, or until the number of people unemployed in South Africa is only worsened by the number of people living with AIDS in the same nation. We tend to forget that we were enslaved and subordinated longer than we have been “free,” and so we allow our most important conversations, our transatlantic Conversations to fall to the wayside, until the next major controversy to shock us back into consciousness unfolds.

I went back to poetry in my response to Simba’s question because it provided me with both a contemporary and historical voice, one that did not forget the past, but signified off of it, toasted it, boasted it, and made parallels between it and my life. In poetry I was able to say, that we need to not only speak our own poems, but begin speaking one another’s as well and sharing this space of pride and prejudice that affects us all. In recognizing poetry as our global weapon of choice against oppression, I enacted a powerful phenomenon, that not only put poetry to work, to change our lives

and contribute to this ongoing dialog of Pan-Africanism but I began to do something truly remarkable, I began to create the next chapter in this long and complicated history.

I feel that my generation of poets has the ability to extend the dialog even further, towards embracing Pan-Africanism not only through style but message as well. Our vocal intonations can match our articulations, and our voices can not only debate the ways in which we have been in conflict with our oppressors, but also engage the very internal conversations about how we have been in conflict with one another. Often times in black movements internal conflicts are suppressed by the need to present a united front against outside oppression. In speaking to each other through the oral space, perhaps we can sort through much of the inner turmoil that still plagues our internal relationships as black people. Although I have highlighted the ways in which black poets were speaking against white notions of blackness, there is also a very grave discussion also taking place amongst black people about blackness in black American and South African poetry. Today, issues of the color complexes, gender, and the tension between “Africans and African-Americans” are all internal dialogs that need to be discussed within the communal space.

I feel that there is no neat and tidy way to end this discussion, therefore I will not try to end it, but to leave it as a work in progress, for, I can not tie up the ends of something that is continually growing and transforming itself into a another shape, another moment. As a poet, I believe the best thing I can do for my people is to believe that our transatlantic conversations have the power to speak to the hidden, painful, and complicated dialogues of our past, as well as, inform the ways in which we will shape our future conversations. Thus, as a response to my brother’s question, this piece does not

resolve all the uncertainties that a South African and black American may have about one another, but it articulates the necessity of cultural work within the black community, and advocates for us to understand the oral space as a sight to constructively engage and revisit our Pan-African dialogs, because sometimes, words are just enough.

Freedom, Hedsole, Uhuru!

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