Transcending Boundaries: Kwame Dawes' Digital Projects

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Abstract
In this new digital era, marked by the proliferation of social networking and advanced media tools, writers have found themselves bound to engage with technology in order to access wider audiences. The Ghanian-born Jamaican award-winning poet and Glenna Luschei Editor of *Prairie Schooner* Kwame Dawes is representative of Caribbean artists whose digital-based collaborations have had an impact on the way his work is shaped and designed. By focusing on major online projects such as "Live Hope Love", "Voices of Haiti" and "Ashes", this paper seeks to show how Dawes uses the digital space as a site where the boundaries between different genres of communication are blurred opening the possibility for poems to perform off the page, thus extending the long tradition of performance poetry. My reading of digital poems in light of their performative potential is informed by performance studies theorists and critics who contend that by virtue of the medium used, both the acts of writing and reading are a performance.

Keywords*:* digital, performance, poetry, Dawes, multimodal.

Introduction:

This essay attempts to explore how advances in digital technology have allowed Kwame Dawes to go beyond physical boundaries and collaborate with people from different fields- musicians, artists, journalists and media entities- and create innovative work. It examines how he uses poetry for documentary and journalistic purposes telling the stories of Jamaican people suffering from HIV/ AIDS and of the Haitian experience of earthquake of 2010 from a new perspective.

Dawes is a Ghanian- born Jamaican award-winning poet and Editor of *Prairie Schooner.* The fact that he was born in Ghana, grew up in England, lived in Jamaica, migrated to Canada and now lives in the US shaped his sensibility as a poet and writer. In other words, his "neither nor" position, to use Homi Bha Bha's words (Bhabha,1990, p. 211), is mirrored in his multidimensional works which speak to multifarious realities, and where not only past and present interweave but also different genres. A close look at Dawes' body of work in general and his digital work in particular reveals the overlap between different genres of communication. In his online works, which this essay addresses, music, photography, reporting and poetry intermingle, resulting in fluid artistic creations shaped by different influences.

Dawes is part of the generation of Caribbean contemporary poets concerned with exploring the contemporary Caribbean cultural experience in light of the past heritage. His body of work translates his effort to engage with different issues which shape his work as a poet, playwright, fiction writer, literary activist, journalist and editor. The themes of identity, race,

faith, gender politics, love, loss, death and migration permeating his work are recurrent themes for many West Indian poets. As victor Chang argues, albeit the differences in approaches and perspectives, West Indian poets share the same concern with roots, history, loss and separation, death, love and protest as they write out of the same history of slavery and colonial legacy (Chang, 2001, p.236).

He is representative of Caribbean artists who became aware that in this era, the new frontier is necessarily digital and that one way to reach wider audiences is to use digital media. However, apart from accessibility, experimenting with the digital is a springboard for incorporating new design mechanisms and poetic practices which blend word, sound and image giving shape to interactive multimedia poems. As Glazier contends, the digital space is poetry's ultimate expression and "true space of poesis" (in Morris, 2006). It is also a way to archive poetry and exploit the "sound explosions", through which Caribbean poetry strives to excavate its own voice and celebrate its cultural legitimacy (Neigh, 2016).

By focusing on major online projects such as "Ashes", "Live Hope Love" and "Voices of Haiti", this paper highlights the impact of digital-based collaborations on the way Dawes' work is shaped and designed. It seeks to explore the way the work performs in the realm of media space pointing to the way the intertwined relation between the visual, the poet's voice and music adds to the performative dimension and extends the long tradition of performance poetry.

1. Performance poetry: An Overview

Experimenting with the performative elements mentioned above is not a new trend. It is reminiscent of Dub poetry which emerged in Jamaica in the early 1970's and was based among other things on music and on an oral tradition deeply ingrained in African culture:

> Dub poetry is a form of performance poetry which makes use of the ancient oral traditions of Africa, with their focus on storytelling, and that has developed out of the reggae tradition in Jamaica and England in the mid-Seventies. In this sense, dub poets soon started to use the same channels of communication - records, live acts - as the reggae musicians, singers and DJs of Kingston and London (Martino, 2010).

One cannot talk about Dub poetry without reference to the Jamaican poets Linton Kwesi Johnson and Louise Bennett. Bennett's incorporation of performative tools makes a lot of critics see her poetry more as a guideline for performance, a "kind of dramatic literature". Jean D' Costa for instance argues that: "Bennett composed for performance, and thus her view of language is that of the oral performer rather than of the writer" (qtd in Rodis, 2009, p.60). The intertwined relation between the written and the oral, in other words between the word and the sound, which D' Costa alludes to, finds its echo in Johnson's emphasis on the importance of sounds in the transcription of his oral poems:

> "I want the poem to look like a poem on the page. I want it also to sound. I want that the reader when he's looking at it he feels compelled to speak the word (instead of having it in his head)" (qtd in Martino, 2010).

In an interview with Gross (1997), Johnson states that his concern to make the poem perform on the page, through the use of reggae music and rhythms, is a continuation of the West Indian poet Kamau Brathwaite's aesthetics:

A revolution was started in Caribbean poetry by Edward Brathwaite where he was trying to create a new aesthetic that wasn't based on the meter of English poetry, the iambic pentameter. He incorporated the rhythms of Caribbean speech... blues rhythms, calypso rhythms and so on. In a sense what I've been doing with reggae, what I call reggae poetry is to consolidate that revolution that was started by Brathwaite in terms of the language and in terms of the aesthetics.

Within the same vein, Dawes builds on the aesthetics created by his predecessors and carries out a journey, a sort of quest for "an aesthetic grounding for [his] writing- and seeks to understand the visceral impact that reggae has had on [his] sensibility"(Dawes, 1999, p. 19). This hints at the fact that music in general and reggae in particular shaped Dawes' poetic expression as he uses the language, tropes and images drawn from Reggae, an influence that he himself acknowledges in his seminal work on Reggae: "Now I also came to understand the music and its value and appreciate its centrality in my creative psyche. Reggae was becoming an aesthetic for me" (ibid., p.27).

Indeed, Dawes is part of the continuum of poets who contend that using music sounds and rhythms as a backdrop to poetry offers the possibility, to use Breiner's words, for "getting poetry off the page" (qtd in Coppol, 2013, p. 13). His use of music as a backdrop to words is thus reminiscent of Brathwaite, one of the first poets to cross the line between the written and the oral. As Coppol argues, it is through the use of African and West Indian drum and jazz music that Brathwaite succeeded in "crossing the borders between oral/ aural and visual / graphic [and] has given voice to the printed creole" (Ibid.,p.13).

Brathwaite champions the transformative and resistance function of language through his theorisation of "nation language" which embodies the process of transformation and linguistic play between two languages. Taking in the African heritage, the word is embedded with oral resonances, rhythms and sound explosions of vernacular speech, thus endowing poems with the possibility to perform on the page and excavate the rhythms of orality. This becomes all the more clear as Brathwaite later experiments with the "Sycorax video style" which he describes as "a use of computer fontage to visualise his sense of dream and morph and riddim drama – videolectic enactment" (Laughlin, 2007). This idea finds its echo in Catherine Hayles' contention that the computer "carries further a digitizing process already begun by the transcription of speech into alphabetic letters" (Hayles, in Morris, 2006, p.189).

In an interview with Brown, Brathwaite views the computer as a "miracle" (qtd. in Brown, 1989, p.86) which can offer new avenues for an aesthetic play with language and blur the boundaries between the written word and the oral by enhancing the visual aspects of words and making oral sounds seen and heard. As Brathwaite points out:

Technology makes nation- language easier...the computer does it all for you... you can make mistakes and correct them or leave them, you can see what you hear ... the spoken word can become visible in a way that it cannot become visible in the typewriter where you have to erase physically (ibid, p. 84).

Hence, the typographical experimentation, via the use of various styles, fonts and typefaces, can be seen as way to "inject the noise into his written "nation language", and "brings his poetry closer to orality, incorporating the visual dimension that suggests the gestures and body language that the written word occludes" (Josephs, 2003, p. 8). Apart from orality, sycorax video style allows Brathwaite to rework his texts and add a visual code that is easily identifiable on

the page. He thus creates, "a process for a new ordering of language" and an avenue for the creation of new meanings (James in Josephs, 2003, p 6).

Through this brief sketching of the major voices of performance poetry, I tried to articulate the significance of reading Dawes' work within a large Caribbean literary tradition and concurrently locating it within contemporary space. This would suggest that Dawes' engagement with the digital is in continuum with a wider tradition of performance poetry as well as West Indian poetics and sound traditions.

Indeed, one can easily read Dawes' engagement with the digital through the lenses of Brathwaite's early experimentation with the visual possibilities that the computer processing offers through the use of his "Sycorax video style". Yet, while Dawes' endeavour to give the written word an oral dimension can be seen as a continuation of previous attempts at textual performance in West Indian print-based poetry, it extends and complicates it further by using the digital space as a writing space, or by rather "writing in a space" (Memmot in Stein, 2010, p. 127), which offers the possibility to rethink the aesthetic qualities of poetry in print.

Accordingly, engaging with the digital not only transforms the writing space by moving it off the page and creating malleable and volatile works but also alters the reading experience, that is the way readers engage poetry. The very nature of these works and their physical specificities makes readers experience their materiality differently. As Katherine Hayles argues, meaning resides not only in the verbal signifiers but also in the kinetic qualities of visual images (2004, p.4).

My reading of digital poems in light of their performative potential is informed by performance studies theorists and critics who contend that by virtue of the medium used, both the acts of writing and reading are a performance (Carpenter, 2017, p. 99). Espen Aaresth, in his theorisation of cybertexts, points to fact that texts are transformed by their medium highlighting the need to take into account the performative qualities of digital texts and the "medium end of the triangle [verbal sign, operator, medium" (qtd in Morris et al., 2006, p. 300).

2. Hope: Living and Loving with HIV, Voices of Haiti, Ashes: A Case Study

2.1. Hope: Living and Loving with HIV

In *Hope: Living and Loving with HIV,* a multimedia interactive reporting project carried out in 2007 aimed at telling the story of HIV in Jamaica through the use of poetry in conjunction with photographs, music and videos, Dawes uses innovative design mechanisms and multiple tools to make poetry serve documentary purposes. In this digital project which is a fruitful collaboration with the composer Kevin Simmonds and the photographer Joshua Cogan, poetry performs off the page not only through blending different modes of expression but also through the assemblage of hardware, software, networks and programs (Carpenter, 2017, p.109).

The process of combining speech and music, for instance, entails the use of music as a tool whereby artistic expression is constructed and words are given more resonance, thus foregrounding sounds inherent in words and giving them a more powerful impact on the listener. Christian Habekost (1993, p.79) argues that dub poetry evolves around the motto of sound, word and power:

> The notion of the word together with the sound of the voice (and musical rhythm) evokes the act of performance, the need to utter-to sound- a word in order to make it alive, to

transform it into a vital experience...the word bewitched by the dynamics of voice, sound, and rhythm is able to set both the body and the mind of the listener in motion.

As one browses this digital platform, one gets the sense that the different entities used co-exist and none takes precedence over another. While music further enhances the musicality inherent in the poems, images reinforce the impact words/ sounds have on the viewer/ reader. This entails a complementarity between the different modes used, where words, sounds and images should not be construed as discrete entities but rather as unified ones (Stein, 2010, p.127). In discussing the effect of multimodal approach to contemporary art making, Gunther Kress (2010, p. 22) argues that:

Using three modes in the one sign- writing and image and colour as well- has real benefits. Each mode does a specific thing: image shows what takes too long to read and writing makes what would be difficult to show, colour is used to highlight specific aspects of the overall message... writing names, and image shows, while colour frames and highlights each to a maximum effect and benefit

The pre-set design modes, hence allow for the text to perform differently each time the viewer clicks on the poems in a different order. A different sequence of images appears on the screen accompanied at times by the voice of the poet alone, and at others by that of the chorus and with a chosen music. It is the choices that the reader makes in the way he / she plays the poem which produce a different experience and effect.

This makes poetry that employs digital modes, as Andrews contends, "an essential act of play [in which] the player interacts with the text- and image-making in a kind of art-game" (qtd. in Stein, 2010, p. 131). This same idea finds its echo in Stein's insistence that readers encounter poetry as a "mode of play" (2010, p. 116), as a "multi-sensory form that one plays as one would a film or an ipod and that one interacts with as one would a game" made possible by the interplay and blending of different genres of communication.

The following example shows the way the digital shapes meaning and makes readers embark in what Katherine Hayles refers to as a "multi-layered reading experience" where "the complex relations between multimedia components and navigational functionalities [make] meaning emerges from their interrelations rather than from the verbal narrative alone" (2004, p.9), thus highlighting the instantiation and mutability of digital works.

Live up for Nichol is a poem about the devastating effect of the disease on both the body and the psyche and describes the state of inertia that the news of being HIV positive provokes. Words are given a stronger impact through the voice of the poet, his intonation, pauses after each line and repetition of words: "how it had me/ I couldn't talk/ how it had me/ I couldn't walk".

The slow rhythm in the beginning of the poem is counterpointed by the speed of the lines: "How it had me/all I wanted was to do/ was crawl in a ball/ and dead like that". While the slowness of the first part parallels the loss of physical and mental strength, the speed of the second part is in line with the image of the ball that crawls up, implying the devastating feeling of shame and fear to fight stigma, artfully described in the line "crawl up in a ball and dead like that". The repetition of the last line "man must live" is an emphatic statement of survival and a cry for hope and a tool, used in conjunction with vocalization and music, to recreate what Brathwaites describes as "the continuum" between the performer and the audience that the oral tradition demands (1984, p.18).

As we hear the poem read as acapella with the poetic voice, we are given, as David McCooey argues, "special access to the poet's subjectivity and intentions" (2012). This points to the importance of poetic voice in relation to performance. As Fur comments (2010, p.9):

> The "presence of the poet" is always at issue, at least for listeners and usually for the reader herself; that poetry readings (and in different ways, recordings) materialize both text and author in ways that complicate twentieth-century literary critical insistences upon separating the two

The poetic voice adds to the emotional impact brought about by the intersection between the poetic voice and the sounds inherent in the words, further enhanced by music and the chorus. All these elements recreate those used in poetry stage performances bringing poetry closer to orality. It is no coincidence that the sound of the drum is used as a backdrop to this poem as it is "the signature that lends the music its strong African character", and has strong "links with the Rastafarian ethos" (Dawes, 1999, p.112). Indeed, it emphasises the dialectic relationship between pain and survival and is in concordance with the content of the poem. As words fade, one is left with the sound of the drum and its rising and rapid rhythm, which is in a sense emblematic of the aggressiveness of the disease.

In another poem entitled *Unforgiveness*, there is a clear layering of music rhythms with poet's voice and multiple voices that enter into a dialogue and tell the story of death. These multiple voices occupy the space, interweave and melt into a cohesive unit. As we listen to the poem, we are moved by the words used and the mental images weaved. The image of "a puppy begging for a morsel" / "reduced to its preening graveyard" and "ask[ing] for his last sip of water/ to be able to take the glass brimming with white light/ and let it spill like libation" creates a forceful and moving image of death so much so that a counter effect is produced. It is the image of life and resilience that one is left with. The poem which is in its essence based on personal narrative departs from the personal, and acquires a universal dimension speaking to truth about grief, suffering and the frailty of human existence. It is this very process of layering that opens the possibility to rework personal narratives through the use of multiple media tools and genres of communication and shows how poetry can be associated with digital storytelling and documentary reporting. As Burgess (2006, p.9) defines it:

> Digital Storytelling therefore works to remediate vernacular creativity in new media contexts: it is based on everyday communicative practices – telling personal stories, collecting, and sharing personal images – but remixed with the textual idioms of television and film; and transformed into publicly accessible culture through the use of digital tools for production and distribution.

Hence, the combination of all these elements, based on the transformation of the verbal and written testimonies into a visual medium, allows for new meanings to be made and offers the possibility to "'thicken' stories and the opportunity to review the emphasis of the narrative" (Gray et.al, 2011, p.35). In other words, it allows us to place these personal stories within a larger narrative bringing to the fore silenced narratives by speaking to dominant narratives centred on stereotypes and clichés and the perception of the disease in relation to a deviant sexual behaviour and homosexuality.

2.2. Voices of Haiti:

In *voices of Haiti*, a collaborative project exploring the lives of Haitian people in the aftermath of the earthquake of 2010, there is a clear intersection between multiple genres of communication. Photography and poetry interweave for news coverage and reporting. In the videos for each created poem, images are layered and reality is represented in a way that is a mixture of subjective and objective rendering. With each click, the reader/ viewer is taken into the complexities of the human frailties, and the feelings of uncertainties, pain and fears. The reader/ viewer is presented with images tainted with hope representing the struggle of Haitian people for survival and the way they cope with the crisis and with the lack of health care systems ravaged by the quake.

The artistic choices, the use of videos, sounds, colours, photographs and music, point to the documentary dimension of poetry and to the way boundaries between poetry and journalism are blurred. This hints at the significance of poetry in rendering reality and learning about "profound truths" (Michaels, qtd in Hughes, p. 149). In an article entitled *Facts and Truth*, Dawes comments on the way he uses poetry in a journalistic way seeking truth even if he lacks the facts, and representing reality in the way he imagines it. Hence, the use of photographs helps to add nuances and allusions to the language and present truth in a poetic style (Dawes, 2011). Alternate narratives, inspired by personal stories, which question mainstream media coverage of Haitian earthquake which reiterate images of poverty and danger and show responses of pity, are created (Taylor, 2009). The rhetoric of communication is negotiated so much so that the emotional impact of the work is enhanced and a "world of empathy", not of pity, is created as Dawes himself puts it in an interview with the reporter Patricia Sagastume (Dawes, 2013).

2.3. Ashes:

This same effort to render 'truth' through poetry can be traced in *Ashes*, a video poetry characterized by its visual effect. It describes the lives of US black young people in the inner city and the impact of poverty, deprivation and racism on their lives. The poem opens with a succession of lines from James Baldwin back dropped by music sounds and come on the screen gradually and move slowly catching the viewer's eyes. The images are layered to the voice of the poet and the spoken words are annotated a visual character through the use of visual effects such as colour and fonts, which makes the poetic text materialise differently (Drucker, qtd. in Carpenter, 2017, p 105). Though there is a movement in the textual alignment, the poem adheres to textual fixity in the sense that the text does not change the way it performs from one viewing to another (Stein, 2010, p.128). The choice of the font and the colour black as well as the repetition of the word black serve to set the scene and introduce the thematic concern of the poem.

The reader experiences a different facet of the inner city which counters clichés that shape and construct the subject position of US black people by foregrounding "stunning images of beauty but also poignant moments of real people struggling with being human" (Dawes, 2010). The images of "scattered ashes", the pulse of the dead bodies, the shadows and ashes" as well as "the dumbness of death [and] the nothingness hovering around" are turned into anthems of hope, "a smile through the tears". The scars that point to the ailments and pains are turned into images of memory and remembrance, of a glorious past that will help build a brighter future.

Conclusion:

The digital space has become a site for the production of works endowed with a performative dimension. In a significant way, Dawes' digital projects, as this essay has attempted to show, are a

good example of how poetry can perform off the page. While he incorporates performance tools inscribed in a long tradition of performance poetry, he complicates them further by exploiting the potential offered by digital media.

His digital work is shaped by the blending of different modes of communication- be it visual, aural or textual- that offer possibilities of aesthetic play with sound, word and image as well as with meaning. This has allowed for the creation of new meanings out of the oral testimonies around which the projects are centred. The digital thus becomes a space in which the silenced groups speak out to mainstream media narratives, and by so doing, assert and reshape their identities.

It becomes clear that using digital platforms is a means to create new forms of expression in which the text is experienced not as a fixed object but rather as an event that moves in and out of time and is performed within a combination of different modes and assemblages of different devices and networks (Carpenter, 2017). As Catherine Hayles argues: "the text is 'eventilized' made more an event and less a discrete, self-contained object with clear boundaries in space and time" (2006, p. 182).

This implies that digital writing has changed the way readers/ viewers engage texts and resulted in new forms of reading practices where the reader is one way or another an active participant in the performance of the text on the screen for each time he/ she clicks, the text performs differently (Carpenter, 2017, p.110). Yet, given the plethora of digital texts which materialise in different forms, the reading experience is not monolithic. As Talan Memmott argues, digital poetry is not a "single recognizable entity" but one with different "strategies of signification" with a potential of playability from both author and reader ends (qtd in Morris, 2006, p. 294).

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