Literature and the Web: The Potential of Digital Soundscapes

by Marina Warner*

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In the present climate of discouragement that threatens all of us who hold the Humanities dear, one of the worst threats, or so it seems, has been the dumbing down consequent on digital media and the rise of hate speech on digital platforms. Yet in spite of the instinctive recoil and bristling horror some feel for social media as currently used, it is possible to consider and reframe the question of reading on the web. In this article, I ask: can the Internet's reach and capaciousness help build "a country of words" where the humanities can flourish? And, at a time of high tension in the world, flourish beyond the borders of nation and language and economic interests? How does the www work as a vehicle for literature? How are women writers, especially poets (Caroline Bergvall, Warsan Shire), using their voices to take up occupation of this global communications system and explore experiences both personal and more widely political?

Keywords: spoken word, online archive, women & poetry, www.

Introduction

During the lockdown, digital media gained a dominance in all our lives worldwide, as culture in every genre, including literature, migrated to the screen, with consequences that are likely to continue after the threat of Covid-l9 has retreated. Like the Lady of Shalott who in Tennyson's poem can only see the world reflected in her magic mirror, many of us – those of us privileged to have access to Wi-Fi, computers, tablets, phones – have been in communication with the outside world

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only through the mirror of digital information and reproduction. The representations flowing into these glassy prostheses are mediated according to certain fundamental and interrelated properties of the internet, and in relation to changes in the making and the receiving of literature, these medium specific properties include:

– first, the multiplicity and connectivity of digital media give scope for hybridities and grafts between genres and forms of creative expression;

– secondly, archival capacity leads to rediscovery of lost voices and preservation of current work;

– thirdly, proximities and connectedness across distances offered by the web allow writers and their audiences to leap over cultural boundaries, such as linguistic difference;

– finally, purpose-made multi-media "writings" involving sound and image as well as words, bypass print in favour of virtual space, and I shall look at some examples by women writers.

In the present climate of widespread depression and fear, I want to offer some reflections about the www and hopes for its potential as a forum for writers and their audiences/readers. It is my contention – perhaps my Panglossian hope – that the Internet is spurring writers on to creating things with words that are not primarily aimed at silent readers, but at an audience that is listening and viewing and feeling, and maybe also reading all at the same time, participating in word-events channelled through the electronic media. After a brief spell of silent reading from the page – an era that lasted, roughly speaking, from mass printing and mass literacy to the invention of radio and the wireless technologies that followed – literature is returning to its ancient habit of performed events, orally communicated. The web has made possible new forms of acoustic and oral performance – records of everything from elegies to stand-up comedy. It has become a forum for innovatory literary work.

The internet and mobile phones can muster vast crowds behind a slogan or a cause; for the most part, we have seen many damaging consequences. Yet it is a mistake, I believe, to take dominant current products of the web as ineluctable results. Indeed, the metaphor of the web is itself misleading, because the Internet is more of a loom than a net or a web; it is a tool and its products can take myriad forms: many varieties of fabric – and fabrication. «The medium is the message», Marshall McLuhan's historic aphorism, expresses an ideological *partipris*, and accepting it now, in such profoundly altered conditions of mass communications, offers a counsel of despair (McLuhan 1964).

Digital media are open doors – so far. They invite entry, and the space beyond asks for occupation.

1. Out loud: generic hybridities

The web offers a performance space, a virtual electronic theatre, and is providing writers in various genres with a medium that includes sound, gesture and image as well as words. "Spoken word" performances differ fundamentally from web-based artefacts, but the original live event can be uploaded into the cybersphere and perpetuated in digital form. The symbiosis between these two manifestations replicates the movement between the bard Demodocus' recitation of the epic which he knows by heart and sings at the banquet held by the Phaeacians in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, and the memory of his song as written down in Homer's epic, which has survived in a manuscript made at some point long after the events evoked in the poem, long after the scene of its recitation, and its creation/recording by the figure or figures we know as Homer. The poem we know is a transcription, and in some profound way its immateriality shares a kinship with the immateriality of the new medium, the Internet. In both media the original performance still breathes through the phantom-like ethereality of the trace; the memory that the work once happened as an embodied event in time gives life to that document – it feeds the ghosts, if you like.

The classical scholar Florence Dupont in *The Invention of Literature* (1999) does not set up the conventional straightforward contrast between the written and the oral, but argues instead that some of the greatest works of human imagination were created as texts, as written literature, but that these texts were scripts towards a performance – of a tragedy, a public speech, a funeral oration, a love song, a satirical jibe. Voicing was an art of living creators, who would use one of these scripts and take off from it, as singers or players explore a score or, perhaps, even more closely, as jazz soloists riff on a tune. The voice of the writer/storyteller was multiple, and the different recitations or events created from the script were all distinctive, though the text was the same. Immutable inscription – writing – was used for tallies, edicts, business contracts, and other reckonings intended to be solid and permanent. But narration and poetry and acts of persuasive speech belonged to the different order of time – flowing time, mutability, chromatic harmony. In turn, every listener can become a potential maker of a new version. Early written literary materials, Dupont declares, consisted of storytellers' scrolls, pattern books, aide-mémoires. This explains the

nature of a mythological handbook such as Apollodorus' *The Library* – the stories aren't fleshed out, but pointers to further development (Dupont 1999: 11).

Writing, according to Dupont's reading, represented an attempt to capture the breathing living voices of the recited texts. The book was therefore a kind of early phonograph, which could preserve the dead and bring them back, living and audible, into time present. When printed books established canonical, fixed texts, they acted like death masks, she suggests, fixing the once animate beings who had made the sounds of the words. In the absence of those bodies, Dupont writes, a work of literature, enclosed in a book, is fated to draw attention endlessly to that absence.

Live literary events have been rising strongly in popularity over the last twenty years. (When the pandemic brought a halt to all literary festivals, concert hall readings and other authors' appearances, thousands of audience members who had hoped to see and hear the living voice of a favourite writer, had their expectations crushed.) This vigorous renewal – of literary readings and performances, including "Spoken Word" events and Poetry Slams – has been accompanied by digital recordings and reproduction; in some cases, the work begins on-line, designed for web dissemination as well as live incarnations. The potential for communicating such recitations and artefacts has grown beyond all previous imaginings: nobody expected the popularity of podcasts, for example.

The comparatist Haun Saussy, in his important study *The Ethnography of Rhythm* (2016), also emphasises voice rather than script as he reviews the history of literary expression and the communication of stories, poetry and, sometimes, history (Saussy and Soloviev 2016). Like Dupont, Saussy argues that oral embodiment – rhythm, rhyme, meter, beat, cadence – transmits words more memorably than silently read words. Images are also included in webcasts, to structure the flow of the recitation, as in the past storytellers in Indonesia and India unfurled pictured scrolls or unfolded *kavaad* boxes with painted scenes on the wings. This oral embodiment literally enfleshes the text by projecting it through a narrator: «Rhythm is the technology of oral inscription, and the human body with brain and muscle […] has been for ages its material base,» as Olga Soloviev comments (Saussy and Soloviev 2016: x).

The role of the bard and the skald is being self-consciously re-occupied by poets and writers in other forms who perform their work by heart as if they were born digital, and publish the text as text later, as the

cast sheaths of the live creature they filled literally with their breath during the performance. In the lacerating narratives of Kate Tempest, which she writes «to be read aloud», rock music meets Ovid, and both Samuel Beckett and Kathy Acker are remembered. The poet-artist-performer Caroline Bergvall creates installations and mixed media publications to communicate her work; her performances are live, enacted in the moment with a ritualistic emphasis on unique presence, but they are also filmed and recorded for webcasting. She has mounted multi-media shows which are then streamed online; during the pandemic, she also created a collaborative writing workshop, called *Night & Refuge* (see elsewhere in this journal). Among her earlier complex experimental works, a major achievement is the remarkable art and sound essay-poem and installation *Drift* (2014), which I shall explore in more detail later. Alice Oswald recites her work by heart with incantatory intensity; however, in her case, her commitment to live Homeric recitation has led her to avoid digital records of her performances (though there are bootleg videos on the web) (Oswald and Tillyer 2019; Oswald 2019; Oswald 2018; Oswald 2012). In cultures of the Middle East and the Caribbean and the continent of Africa, historical traditions are being reclaimed: the Palestinian-Egyptian poet Tamim al-Barghouti is purposefully reoccupying the role of the *rawaii* or reciter, and re-invigorating the Arabic bardic tradition, with impassioned, agile – and often caustic – variations on ancient prosody that are reaching audiences in the millions through his Al-Jazeera channel.[1]

The book in which the work is printed and published offers one state of existence; the YouTube or online *vimeo* keeps an archival memory of a performance of it, a brass rubbing off the acoustic track of the event. Several performer-writers today, these new rhapsodes, have audiences online that run to the hundreds of thousands, even the millions, beyond the wildest dreams of the most famous print poets in the world. When publishers begin to bring them out in print, the passage from the web to the page replicates the appearance of print editions of bards and skalds in the past. The book version becomes a record, not the primary state of the work.

Such contemporary poets' voices and/or their texts blur the generic boundaries between pop music, rap, entertainment, film and even dance, on occasion. For example, the 2018 hit music video *This*

[1] For a discussion by al-Barghouti in English, see also his talk at the first workshop of the project Stories in Transit: https//www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHiY2X-¬AKEGE; last accessed 15 June 2020.

is America, which Childish Gambino made, epitomises the generic multiplicity of such word-events: it is an incendiary thing – a fiercely ironical danced poem on digital film online.[2] Dedicated platforms, such as Button Poetry provide showcases for writers and poets whose popularity equals rock stars, and sometimes also for writers of fiction, essayists (bloggers), and dramatists.

By a sharp paradox, the immaterial digital Internet has become the vehicle of record for literature that overcomes technological media's lack of tactile, sensuous qualities, the way the smooth screens and their uniformity of presence fail to hook its contents into the mind (I am not alone in finding that when I read a work of literature on a Kindle or on the screen it slips from memory as if the ink were instantly dissolving in water, or indeed, the words were written in invisible ink). Katherine Hayles comments that

> understanding literature as the interplay between form, content, and medium, Medium Specific Analysis (MSA), insists that texts must always be embodied to exist in the world. The materiality of those embodiments interacts dynamically with linguistic, rhetorical, and literary practices to create the effects we call literature (Hayles 2004: xi).

Listening to an actor or author performing a work imprints more deeply: the combination of sound, gesture and image wakes up attention and the capacity to absorb and commit to memory. Delivering words on the vibrations of the voice, and attending to the writer in person helps overcome the fugitive character of words on a screen; the timbre, the accent, the musicality of the reciter all inflect the words with meaning, in the same way as a pianist will enrich a piece in a new performance, even when it is familiar.

2. Archival capacity

No matter how distant geographically, the Internet makes materials of all kinds accessible to a degree we could never before imagine. With the expanding digitisation of archives, as well as books, it is possible to land with quicksilver speed and a simple ping or swipe on an item that would have taken a distant journey, and long days' trawling through dusty boxes. If you have a Wi-Fi connection, you can access manuscripts, photographs, film and ephemera organised by some librarians and

[2] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY; last accessed 15 March 2020.

curators with a sense of the global genealogies and elective affinities the web has made possible. The remarkable website UbuWeb (https://ubu.com) continues to accrue an ever growing anthology of avantgarde texts in several languages; on Asymptote (https://www.asymptotejournal.com) and Babel (https://www.babelfestival.com), compendia of works in translation are judiciously selected and presented, introducing visitors to literature from distant points on the globe, difficult to obtain or know about. It is telling that Asymptote's editor is based in Taiwan: the web contracts the globe and diminishes distinctions between periphery and centre. In connection to literature on the web, sound archives now play an ever growing and important role. The British Library Sound Archive continues to build its wide-ranging reserves of writers' recordings: among the earliest, Alfred Tennyson can be heard reciting his poetry, his thin quaver making him feel much closer to our time than the portraits taken of him by Julia Margaret Cameron.[3] Alongside this official collection of recordings, the poet and academic Andrea Brady has established a body of contemporary poets in performance, *The archive of the now.* This archive is a vast anthology of poets who sometimes perform their work specially for the site or have been recorded during appearances at festivals. The collection spans a huge variety of voices and styles of writing from poets of different backgrounds.[4]

Brady's editorial interests do not lie with spoken word poets as such, nor do the recordings attempt to be artefacts made for digital broadcasting like music videos. By contrast, several other platforms, such as Button Poetry, as mentioned above, specialise in spoken word material created with digital transmission in mind – on phones, tablets, computers. Button Poetry is based in America and its stars, for example Neil Hilborn and the British-born Suli Breaks, reach – literally – millions of views, followed by a terrific rise in book sales for the writers involved.

The archival capacity of the web has meant that many past artefacts such as films, stage productions, concerts can be seen when for decades they lay hidden in the shadows. In relation to literature, performances have been unearthed, and a resuscitation of forgotten figures takes place, as if a death mask were suddenly to move and breathe and speak. For example, the poet and balladeer Helen Adam

[3] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkqUq26z1CEz; last accessed 21 June 2020.

[4] *The archive of the now* can be found here: https://www.archiveofthenow.org/; last accessed 15 June 2020.

was born in Glasgow in 1909, and carried the tradition of Scottish faerie and the metrical music, lapidary line and rich folklore of the Scottish ballads to San Francisco when she went to live there around 1940; she became very close to Robert Duncan and Allen Ginsberg and the Beats and was one of the very few women in their circle (at times, she was accused of condoning their laddish, misogynist side) (Prevallet 2007). It is true that her poems deploy – with splendid relish – many of the stock figures of fairy tale, the wicked stepmother, the loathly lady, various Loreleis and fatal chatelaines. In this vein, her writing foreshadows the writing of both Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood and their cruel, sparkling retellings of myth and fairy tale. Adam clearly savours the terrible things going on in her songs and poems, colluding with us in the shivery pleasures which we know we should not be feeling, and tightening the screw on the twisted and sad events overtaking her characters. She had all but disappeared from view. However, her weird performances have now been uploaded and she can be heard again, performing her archaic-sounding poems in a kind of quiet, inveigling, naïve singsong, rising now and then to a determined crackling crescendo at points of high drama. She seems to be cultivating the same "plaintive coo" as her menacing heroine in *I Love My Love*.[5]

Her fake decorum and incantatory old woman's frail warblings and whispers are a little reminiscent of Stevie Smith, while her stylish artifice recalls Edith Sitwell. But Adam casts too flinty an eye on the world for her whimsy to be simply charming. She is Gothic; she knows about menace and likes hiding in the dark:

> Is it dark down there, Prince Horrendous?
> Dark down there with Betsy Skull?
> Is it dark down there
> Where the grass grows through the hair?
> Is it dark in the under-land of Null? (Prevallet 2007: 187-188)

Helen Adam died in Brooklyn in 1993, mad, poor, and forgotten. She believed she had somehow angered the god Anubis and he was taking his revenge. Her papers were subsequently found in a rummage sale by a second-hand book dealer. They were deposited in the archives at SUNY, Buffalo and have been admirably edited by Kristin Prevallet, but the anthology is hard to find.

[5] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=re0m3bskuVk; last accessed 2 June 2020.

Norwegian on her father's side and French on her mother's, the poet-artist Caroline Bergvall has adopted English as her language and London as her home and explores her own chosen *dépaysement* through multi-media artefacts that explore territories of language and sound. She performs in person, intensely and hypnotically, pressing hard on her own pronunciation of English to strike harmonics off other cultures and their linguistic expressions. She revels in those parts of speech that might elude, one might imagine, robotic recognition software: «the materiality of voice, its tics, spit, accent, errors» and installs her works with complex scenarios of beamed images and live music (Heisler 2016).

The interconnectedness of the Internet across the globe and its capacity to bring people together in the room however far away they might be, has inspired her current, ambitious project to create a «sonic atlas», a map of linguistic and aural characteristics of different peoples and countries and regions[6]. To this end, she began collecting *aubades*, or dawn songs, from all over the world, looking for poems composed in "small" languages, languages that are not the giant world dominators such as English and Spanish. Provençal was a starting point, as these farewells of lovers as they part at dawn possibly originate from Provence (via Arabic). She has since included Breton, Maltese, Icelandic, Welsh, Cornish and will carry on recording others in more tongues, some threatened with extinction. I heard her in performance at the Poetry Festival in London in 2017: she recited her text, quoting some of the poems, and was accompanied on trombone and electronic music. Her interest in languages focusses on their acoustic character, and she listens in to the music of the words, as what they say cannot and should not be attended to as distinct or separate from their meaning. It is very striking, for example, when you look up a poem on the web, the explanation of what it is saying that often appears alongside it as helpful teaching notes, in fact denatures the original, missing altogether the reasons for the poem's beauty and effectiveness.

In an early work, *Alisoun Sings*, reissued this year, Bergvall speaks in the voice of the Wife of Bath and creates a Babel-like cascade of words, which she calls, «glottic profusion» (Heisler 2016; Bergvall 2020). The acoustic maps she creates are absorptive and ritualistic enactments, which oppose themselves deliberately to the losses and

[6] See this volume, pp. 105-114.

fissures that are reducing linguistic richness and attenuating collective belonging in the riven circumstances of global war and disasters. Bergvall is also conscious that the music of a language sets ringing political reverberations, and has been concerned with the intersection between language and ethnic cleansing since an early piece, called *Say Parsley* (2001), which explores the ever-present threat that «How you speak will be used against you», by revisiting the hostilities that took place in 1937 in the Dominican Republic, when *perejil*, the word for parsley in Spanish, became the brutal test: if you could not pronounce the "r" in the Spanish way, you were murdered (Heisler 2016).

In the remarkable installation-cum-book *Drift* (2014), she experiments with multi-channel, multi-media expression to produce a tormented testimony that turns outwards to events in the world and inwards to her own specific conditions of identity (Bergvall 2014). The complex, layered work tells the story of a boat full of refugees who in 2011 set out from Libya; they were abandoned by the traffickers without fuel or water, and left to drift in the Mediterranean, were given no help by anyone including many who noticed them, until everybody on board died of thirst or drowned. It gives an account of this contemporary event – a matter for horror and shame – on many levels of language and visuals – frantic repetitive Cy Twombly-like drawings, aerial reconnaissance photographs of the doomed *gommone* or rubber boat, charts and log of the boat's terrible lost wanderings on the open sea, reports of the coast guards as they tracked its drift, and the accounts of sighting and failures to come to the passengers' rescue. All these elements, now starkly registered and documented in official jargon, now scrambled in anguish, wrap around the core of the book, in which Bergvall reworks of the medieval Anglo-Saxon poem *The Seafarer*, an epic narrative of heroic sea voyaging. Besides *The Seafarer*, she also mixes in – mashes up – the Vinland sagas, the epics of Erik the Red and the poetic Edda; she invokes sea drifters of the Christian past: Saints Brendan and Cuthbert; she is enthralled by ice. She jumbles and scatters and cuts up what she is making so that meaning leaks out of the gaps, according to William Burroughs' principle that «When you cut into the present the future leaks out» (Burroughs 1986). Bergvall quotes this as: «The future leaks through the cuts of the present» (Heisler 2016). These sections of *Drift* consist of archaically spelt blocks of sounds and unfamiliar words which mimic the wreckage they evoke when she performs the piece. If you are reading the book version, you are forced to sound them in your mouth to get at the sense.

> Then the wind ddroppe and they were beset by w inds from then orth and fog for manyd ays they did not know where they were sailing Thef air wind f ailed and they wholly l ost their reck their reckoning did not not know from what direction D riven here and there (Bergvall 2014: 37).

Drift closes with a meditative essay on Bergvall's motives and sources, including impassioned passages on linguistics and phonetics. The cumulative effect is symphonic, and like such a work for full orchestra, plunges us, the audience, to depths of anguish and pity and terror and amazement. The multiple elements in the whole build up intensity as Bergvall engages with the critical issue of forced migration and rich world callousness. The displacement and disappearance of the refugees in their boat and the acts of appalling indifference which sealed their fate are woven in with forms of storytelling that admit the inadequacy of our means of remembering and yet carry, like trace dyes in a medical analysis, the vivid, splintered traces of the past and the sea crossings of our forebears.

Bergvall's work touches on a contemporary experience that affects us all, but most especially the refugees who are living away from their homes, either in camps or in new countries. Displacement brings with it encounters with unfamiliar tongues. She is very alive to the difficulties of acquiring a foreign tongue and inhabiting it: her own adoption of English also showed her, she has written,

> the extent of the negative and destructive hold language can have on us. And this, of course, applies to all sorts of majoritarian or segregational histories. So it is crucial and really exciting to me that a writer's language can both release these and also create new linguistic connections and emotional fields. Renewed worlds (Bergvall 2014).

With this work, Bergvall has also made a truly harrowing act of witness as she sounds out anonymous writings from the past and other bearers of memory.

4. The new original orality

While the Internet is amassing a global, digital archive of great richness, and conserving the creations of Helen Adam and Caroline Bergvall, the www is also changing the ways we make literature and encounter it altogether. At a more radical level, the web and its digital potential has been changing the modes of literature itself, the ways writers put it out for their public. Recording and storing work, even performance and

spoken word differs from creating poetry and stories for dissemination by digital media in the first place.

The poet Warsan Shire is Somali-British; she was born in Kenya, probably in the huge refugee camp Daabad, and was Young Poet Laureate for the Olympic Games in London in 2012. I first came across her when a friend sent me a postcard, which proclaimed:

I'M WRITING TO YOU
FROM THE FUTURE
TO TELL YOU
THAT EVERYTHING WILL BE OKAY.

The words are printed on crinkly gold sweet paper, like the wrapper of a Mackintosh toffee, and I was very struck by the gentle but incisive irony of their reassurance, and the way Shire took up occupation of the prophetic role.

Her work has been published in book and pamphlet form, but she primarily writes for the screen, with a colloquial register that has drawn fire from critics. *Teaching My Mother to Give Birth* includes informal poems – the term informal here provoking adverse critics to rail at the flouting of rules – and they move to colloquial unstructured rhythms (Shire 2011). Her irregular diction and take it or leave it line breaks intentionally sound like someone talking; the poems flaunt their orality. They could be tweets or text messages strung together.

Warsan Shire might have languished in the corners of poetry festivals, but her work was noticed by Beyoncé, the world star and singer, lately turned feminist champion, who invited Shire to California where she worked with her on adapting some of her poems for Beyoncé's music video, *Lemonade.* The album-film is called after her husband Jay-Z's grandmother Hattie White, who had a saying, «I was served lemons but I made lemonade». Grandmothers feature prominently, lovingly, mythically in the work of many of these writers on the web: they embody tradition and, above all, orality: old wives' tales, proverbial wisdom, down home knowledge.[7] Shire's hit poems, *Anger* and *For women who are difficult to love…*, inspired Beyoncé's reworkings.[8]

The results are artefacts that combine the words, spoken by the singer, with her songs and performances.

[7] See http://realblackgrandmothers.com/arts-jay-z-beyonces-grandmothers-serve-us-lemonade/; last accessed 28 February 2019.

[8] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7Agwv-RTew; last accessed 15 June 2020.

Shire's rightly celebrated poem, *Home*, protests rising racism against refugees and immigrants; it's a witness statement, truthful, angry – in one recording her voice breaks with feeling that sounds true.

It opens:

> Noone leaves home unless
> home is the mouth of a shark
> you only run for the border
> when you see the whole city running as well (Shire 2018).

Towards the middle the work includes this unforgettable sentence

> [...] no one puts their children in a boat
> unless the water is safer than the land (Shire 2018).

The voice is Shire's, but its tone sounds all over the web: it transmits defiance, protest, testimony; these forms of direct address and declaratory rhetoric suit the medium, for it shares in the historic character of the agora, the forum, the soapbox and the pulpit. The writers respond to the moment, usually in the first person and frequently drawing on personal experience: the witness statement and the lyric are the grounds of their work and it is made to be performed instantly – immediacy is of the essence. Often, the poems or stories are only recited once, but then their life continues on the web, uploaded to YouTube by fans, and often supplemented with a montage of images and drawings responding to the material.

Susannah Herbert, the director of the Forward Poetry, points out that these are «communities of affirmation», and that several of its orators have religious backgrounds in childhood and have even been child preachers. Techno-orality asks for works with a speaking quality – not prose or poetry mouthed silently to oneself when reading or absorbed quickly by sight alone. The medium favours cries and groans, what Samuel Beckett calls, referring to Lucky's railing, his *vociferations*. Its grandfather is Allen Ginsberg, the author of *Howl*, its family the Beats in general, its scripture Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. It is close to prose that imitates music, jiving, scat, free form jazz and now hip-hop. The lineage offers itself to cultures where books are very expensive and lending libraries poorly served: the continent of Africa has a flourishing literature online – performed, to sound and gesture. (In 2018 the BBC made two well researched programmes with a Johannesburg poet, Thabiso Moare, the first called *Another Kind of Stage*, the second *Breaking the Window with a Poem*, in which Moare

interviewed and discussed the work of poet-performers from Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa; these writers are unlikely to find their way into print there or anywhere, really, not because of the quality of their work, but because it is composed for this medium, the Internet, and because poetry publishing struggles everywhere.[9]

Writers on the web have assumed the role of *porte-paroles* for society's conscience, the ancient role of the memory-keeper, fulfilled by the skalds and bards and griots. They are writing down things they have heard, the susurrations of the tribe, or passing on things they have only sensed, the task being to catch them before they vanish. Writing has often involved private writers in public lamenting – and, less often but sometimes, in jubilating, too. Their work could be assigned to the category of protest song or lyric, to slam and rap and doing the dozens. But in my view, these practices lie at the heart of a much older global literary tradition. Think of those poetic jousts at which the poets of the medieval Abbasid court had to excel when they were pitted against one another by their masters: these writers – and they were prized for their exquisite calligraphy as well as their wit – were bought and sold as slaves (al-Sai 2015). Or consider flyting, in Scotland, a practice which still continues. Or the modes of calypso and rhapso and improvised rapping in the Caribbean and elsewhere (Warner 2019).

This voice has a proud tradition in cultures once perceived as subaltern, and it expresses the impulse to defy that perception and for individuals to speak in their own voice.

In *Thinking with Literature*, the comparatist Terence Cave applies cognitive psychology and consciousness studies to the written artefact and stresses the crucial role played by «kinesic intelligence», that is understanding through embodied, mobile, and sensory processes (Cave 2016). The digital devices that have become so indispensable to our relations with one another as well as our communings with our own thoughts are being used to offer a kinesic experience as performers on the web are evolving a literature in collaboration with the medium.

Conclusion

Not long before she died, the novelist Toni Morrison published a powerful meditation, *The Origin of Others*, and in a chapter called "Being or Becoming the Stranger" she writes:

[9] The programmes were broadcast on 17 and 24 March 2018.

The resources available to us for benign access to each other, for vaulting the mere blue air that separates us, are few but powerful [...]. *Language (saying, listening, reading) can encourage, even mandate, surrender, the breach of distances among us*, whether they are continental or on the same pillow, whether they are distances of culture or the distinctions and indistinctions of age or gender, whether they are the consequences of social invention or biology. Image increasingly rules the realm of shaping, sometimes becoming, sometimes contaminating knowledge. Provoking language and eclipsing it, an image can determine not only what we know and feel but also what we believe is worth knowing about what we feel. *These two godlings, language and image, feed and form experience* (Morrison 2017: 35-36, emphasis added).

I am not sure language and image are mere 'godlings': I fear them and respect them because they are more powerful than that sounds. They are closer to principles of energy, to light and gravity, pulsing and firing through the world, and literature and art are their most powerful vehicles; they can now be ridden on the waves of the Internet.

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