

# OUT LOUD: poetry, youth voices and social change

Away from the media limelight and academic attention, black urban youth had long been in dialogue on a range of important social, economic and political issues through the Spoken Word movement. In Gauteng it focuses largely on the themes of race, politics, gender, sexuality and religion, declares – *Ragi Bashonga*



Founders of "Word N Sound" Afurakan Mohare, Qhakaza Mthembu and Mduduzi Mvemve.

Credit: [www.wordnsound.wordpress.com](http://www.wordnsound.wordpress.com).

The Spoken Word movement addresses social ills as they affect and are perceived by the youth, and can be understood as a new form of liberation politics employed to serve a social function. A new study, *'Selling narratives: An ethnography study of the Spoken Word movement in Johannesburg and Pretoria,'* portrays this genre as being more than mere performance or self-expression; it is effective in foregrounding and politicising the lived experiences of young artists and their communities, .

## Spoken Word poetry

Popular in the USA and in South Africa, Spoken Word poetry is an international informal poetry movement that is largely dominated by youth groups typically from ethnic or social minority groups.

As a form of performance poetry, this art form encompasses elements of traditional oral poetry, underground USA hip hop, musicality and theatre.

The poetry is most often memorised and performed on stage to a live audience, narrating the experiences of young people and their communities.

## From politics to poetry: a Biko-nian legacy

Steve Biko's ideology of Black Consciousness is known for its contribution to fostering positive black identities. The movement was also influential in using art, poetry, and theatre to imagine a utopian, pre-colonial past and give hope for the return of such a future.

Johannesburg's current Spoken Word scene blazes with colour: African textile print clothing and politically messaged T-shirts allude to ascription to a state of 'consciousness'. Literary scholar D'Abdon suggests that the messages and ideologies of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness, as displayed in the chosen style of dress, continue to be reflected in the narratives of the present

day Spoken Word movement in South Africa.

With a predominantly black demographic, race continues to be seen as a powerful feature in the narratives presented. Apart from the fact that the country's population demographic is predominantly young and black, in South Africa, race cannot be divorced from issues raised in the poetry such as inequality, violence, and political neglect.

In the absence of meaningful dialogue across racial lines, it is further posited that these racial narratives not only produce, but to a certain extent also sustain racial spaces. Nonetheless, more than merely an exclusionary practice that militates against members of other race groups, black poetry circles foster solidarity among a population group that continues to experience both macro and micro-aggressions in the new South Africa, as illustrated in the following extract:



### Open Grave

By Dee Rasedile

... 'my home is an open grave  
We've boxed our state of minds in coffins of dependency  
Carried by the force that drives the shenanigans of presidency  
As they mask their shortcomings with a festive farce –  
Dance, rally and sing  
Pretend that 18 years of freedom can atone for centuries of suffering  
Ring warning bells for the youths  
as their minds are lowered into the abyss  
our parents scold our ways as though they had nothing to do with this  
Stones deluded with fresh cut flowers that once stemmed from reality  
Now uprooted, ungrounded as scarred natives  
endeavour to mark their territories  
economically and socially  
with tender pay checks and BEE fallacies –  
The scapegoated poor must be sent to the slaughter,  
for the rich must get richer, cue the mourners,  
this ceremony just got realer'

### On race and safe space

The perceptions of shared experiences, common narratives and a common identity form a strong basis for the solidarity experienced at Spoken Word poetry scenes. For black people in South Africa, black subjugation is a continuing experience, along with the social ills encountered across the country's demographics.

Johannesburg-based female poet Nova reflects the views of the majority of poets interviewed on the subject, namely that these 'black-owned' spaces allow for uncensored narrations of the black social experience. Importantly, Nova's quote below strongly highlights two important issues: black experiences of social exclusion and the longing for 'safe spaces' in which to share these experiences.

The Spoken Word circle is presented here as a mechanism that enables the

voices and experiences of black youth not only to be heard, but to be validated. Furthermore, there is a clear questioning of the value of poetry by other race groups that do not experience or engage with such pressing social issues.

*'And I know that in Jo'burg we rally around social issues, and I know that we are majority in black there because we feel that when we're speaking, we're being heard and that's not something we feel just generally existing in this country. We don't feel like we are seen, we don't feel like we are heard and so poetry is the safe space that we go to experience those things. Like we go through the most ridiculous micro-aggressions, racial micro-aggressions as well from like, white people. So it's a matter of survival for you to keep quiet, and once you get to a safe space of poetry you can talk about it.'*

Lebohang 'Nova' Masango,  
12 August 2014, Midrand

**The Spoken Word poetry movement is a safe space in which to express and share their frustrations...linked to continued racial subjugation.**

### Black ink: re-righting African literature

In addition to the consciousness-raising and cathartic function of this poetry, it is important that poets be recognised and acknowledged as black writers who are skilled artists and who add value to Africa's creative economy. In the quote below, Masai stresses the importance of this unconventional form of poetry by black authors being taken seriously. To this end, these poets have started organising a range of events to facilitate this process.

*'Currently, I'm gonna be blunt about it, as black writers that we are not taken seriously at some level. That we are from the township, you know and stuff like that. So at this certain moment our objective is to show that we can write, you know, and there's far more beyond than this medieval play that says 'this is poetry', there's much more beneath [laughs]... the objective at this certain moment is to take African literature to another level using slam poetry...'*

Masai Dabula, 5 July 2014, Market Theatre

### Concluding remarks

Contrary to the popular belief that the youth today are politically inactive, young people in Pretoria and Johannesburg are making use of the Spoken Word poetry movement as a safe space in which to express and share their frustrations, many of which are linked to continued racial subjugation. By so doing, poets are able to advocate for their liberation, whilst working out their own catharsis and that of their communities. Importantly, the movement plays a role in raising the stakes of African literature. Finally, despite the dominance of black youth and narratives on the black experience, there exists a yearning to be more racially diverse. That can only be fostered through honest dialogue across racial lines.

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