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Navigating Cape Town: A Poetic Cartography

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Navigating Cape Town: A Poetic Cartography

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Abstract

Cape Town has long been the site of conflicts over urban space. This study explored the potentials of a place-based poetry workshop as a tool for critically engaging with the urban environment. With the assistance of a well-established local poet, the researcher facilitated a poetry workshop that brought three young and emerging poets to contested public spaces including District Six, Company Gardens, and Church Square. After the workshop, poets submitted their writing to the researcher, who compiled and narrated a poem that showcased the voices of these poets while drawing attention to salient ideas evoked by the poets' work. The researcher also wrote reflexively during the entire research process and included reflexive writing samples in the book of poetry that contained the longer narrative poem. The poetry written by participants and researchers alike, as well as the researcher's observations from the workshop, indicate tremendous potential for place-based poetry workshop methodology. Participants engaged in a critical, self-reflexive process in which they learned about their own identities in relation to contested public space. Their poetry represented a form of democratized, interdisciplinary qualitative research, producing knowledge marked by critical engagement with memory and a focus on human and geographic bodies. The group writing process allowed participants to find commonalities that transcended their differences in identity and illuminated a common ownership of history and public space. This methodology shows promise as a tool for personal and social change in any urban locale, and should be adopted by researchers, activists, and artists alike.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of my bhuti, Jonathan Abrahams, Jomo. Thank you for showing me a love that knows no boundaries.

Acknowledgements

Thank you,

Cape Town's poetry community, for welcoming me in like one of your own, Roché for your invaluable partnership in this project, Afeefa, Alison, and Ruby-Mae for adding your voices and your souls to the workshop, Thobs for the friendship and advice along the way, my flatmates for creating a home with me these last four weeks, Laura for listening to every poem I felt like reading, Tabisa and Stewart for organizing the last three months, the Somtsewu family for making me a member of the family, all the people in Langa who made me feel at home, Emma for believing in this project and sacrificing tirelessly to make it work, and Malika for inspiring me, guiding me, and, most of all, believing in me.

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Introduction

Since I the age of 16, I have turned to poetry to navigate my identity, attacking topics ranging from race to nationality to gender. When I entered Freshman year at Brown University, I discovered spoken word poetry, a form of performance poetry infused with Black artistic thought. Surrounded by critical discourses around race at university at large and in spoken word spaces specifically, I took up the task of unpacking my racial identity. The first poem I performed was a response to the question, “What are you?” My subsequent poems have dealt with topics like race, aging, and family histories. Poetry has served as a tool for exploring history, identity, and belonging, in part because it encourages me to make a whole out of disparate pieces.

The same year that I began performing poetry, I learned about *spaza* rap, the Capetonian hip hop movement promoting rap in indigenous African languages. Fascinated by Cape Town’s multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, post-colonial environment and its apparently vibrant poetry community, I aspired to some day study abroad in the “mother city.” I realized this dream this semester.

I quickly learned that Capetonian poets work within a city starkly segregated along lines of race and class, and that their work is a product of and a response to these divisions. Living with homestay families in Langa, Tshabo, Stellenbosch, and Bo-Kaap, I noticed that my families held deep prejudices against and little understanding of the neighborhoods that people of other racial groups occupied. I, a Chinese-Jewish man deeply committed to the ideal of inter-ethnic understanding, continue to be troubled by the racial rifts in Cape Town, which I take to be the locus of a global phenomenon.

In Stellenbosch, Adrian Van Wyck presented a poetic solution to these rifts: the InZync poetry collective. InZync explicitly commits itself to bridging divisions of race, class,

and language, and it pursues this ideal in its youth workshop and its performances (Wamuwi, 2014). After learning of InZync, I decided to use my Independent Study Project to explore poetry's potential to bridge social boundaries.

Although I am interested in how poetry can address social divisions caused by race, class, language, and gender, I decided to focus my work on Cape Town poets' relationships to urban geography. Zayd Minty (2006) writes that in Cape Town, the ultimate source of racial and ethnic struggle is a struggle for resources, manifested in conflicts over space. For the purposes of this project, geography is a lens through which Capetonian poets examine a host of other contentious topics, including but not limited to memory, race, class, and religion.

I could have approached this topic from many different methodological angles: for example, I considered rapid ethnographies of spoken word venues and in-depth interviews with spoken word poets. I decided instead to facilitate a poetry workshop that brings local young and emerging poets to several public spaces and asks them to respond through poetry. The goal of this workshop was twofold: first, to provide a platform for Capetonian youth to explore and express the relationships between their bodies and public space in Cape Town; second, to uncover complex, subjective, critical accounts of Cape Town public space that can only be revealed through the inherently critical, interdisciplinary medium of poetry. I will justify this methodology extensively in the literature review that follows, but my basic belief is that young Capetonian poets are critically engaging with their environment all the time, and that this process has tremendous potential for the poets themselves and for the future of the divided, healing metropolis that is Cape Town. I assumed – correctly, I will argue – that a group workshop would directly benefit a group of young Capetonian artists, produce new, accessible knowledge about the Cape Town's geography, and provide insight into the powers of poetry as a tool for critical research and identity development.

Rather than presenting the workshop's subjective, interdisciplinary, and deeply critical poetry as detached academic research, I decided to take the process of poetry-as-research to its logical conclusion: I compiled the workshop's poetry into a poetry book, which I scaffold with my own poetic narration. I also included samples of reflexive writing compiled during my month of research as I moved between different urban spaces in Cape Town. This method continues my exploration of poetry writing as critical urban research while producing a piece of art that is accessible to the public.

First, I will ground my paper in a review of relevant literature. This literature review will paint a picture of Cape Town as a divided urban space while providing background on poetry and art as social tools. Because my methodology is an uncommon one, I will spend much of the literature review explaining the theory behind this methodology. This section precedes the actual Methodology section, which outlines the workshop process and its ethics in more detail. Next, I will explain how and why I presented my findings as a reflexive poetic narrative showcasing participants' voices. After that I will critically analyze my writing, participants' writing, and my observations of the workshop, identifying salient ideas that arose out of the workshop. In my conclusions section, I will argue that this place-based poetry workshop methodology has tremendous potential as a tool for personal and group identity development and democratized urban studies research.

Literature Review

Battles over urban space in Cape Town

In exploring the geography of the city of Cape Town, it is impossible for poets not to run up against a complex, contested history. Minty (2006:423) puts it succinctly when he describes the way in which artists at large deal with Cape Town geography. He writes,

It is virtually impossible for artists working in public art in South Africa to escape the burden of history embedded in the landscape. In Cape Town, this is more so: the city has a considerably longer urban history than other South African cities, a unique geography and a racial composition more in common with other port cities on the Atlantic than with the interior. (423)

Mackey (2016) argues that in the so-called “mother city,” a narrative of a European paradise in an exotic African landscape has often prevailed and silenced realities of inequality and racism. Geographic segregation has allowed this narrative to flourish, removing suffering from the sight of white tourists and Capetonians alike.

Cape Town, founded at the locus of the Dutch East Indies trading Empire, is built on unjust land claims, the violence of which reverberate today. I look to Mackey’s (2016) thesis for an outline of the ways in which Cape Town is a city characterized by conflicts over urban space that silence the oppressed majority. During the foundation of Cape Town, Europeans, greedy for trading and farming land, dispossessed the indigenous people of their land over the course of many pitched battles. Mackey describes how this reality was always obscured by Cape Town’s global image as a controlled, structurally European oasis in Africa. Many of the people who populate Cape Town today, furthermore, did not come by choice. Rather, their ancestors were taken to the Western Cape as slaves by the Dutch East India company from countries including Madagascar, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In an environment of violence, they intermixed with European settlers and indigenous Khoi-San alike, forming the antecedents of Cape Town’s majority so-called “Coloured” population.

For the last 300 years, Mackey (2016) writes, a wealthy, usually white elite has maintained control over Cape Town’s majority and the promoted a hegemonic narrative of a sterilized European paradise that obfuscates the brutal oppression undergirding the city. This

type of rule relied for many years on strict segregation. During British rule, *de facto* segregation kept apart people labeled as “black,” “coloured,” “Indian,” and “white.” During apartheid, this segregation was codified into a comprehensive legal system. In all cases, segregation separated whites both physically and psychologically from the people of colour on whose backs their affluence rested.

Post-apartheid, the elite have wielded a similar power over Cape Town, buffeted still by the image of Cape Town as a colonial tourist attraction. Furthermore, the group of people wielding control has changed in composition. The ANC’s transition to power in 1994 meant that whites no longer wield political control over South Africa or Cape Town. Instead, blacks hold most political power while whites maintain their status at the top of an economic and cultural hegemony. Now, Erasmus and Pieterse write, there “is no longer a single white supremacist enemy against which to unite in struggle” (as cited in Mackey, 2016, 36). In the neoliberal South Africa, narratives of “rainbowism” emphasizing interracial harmony, and “Africanism,” emphasizing Black triumph, mask the fact that the nation’s economic and cultural spheres have not changed much. In effect, these narratives allow inequality to flourish under neoliberal rule. (Baines, 2007).

Battles over public space in Cape Town are at their core battles for what some scholars call ‘spatial justice.’ Edward Soja (2010), in his seminal work, “Seeking Spatial Justice,” argues that social justice requires ‘spatial justice,’ or geographies that promote an equitable distribution of resources. Furthermore, he argues, the social sciences can be enlivened by examining the central role that geography plays in any battle for justice. Place-based poetry, I will argue, is at the forefront of a pursuit for spatial justice, as it inevitably analyzes physical geography as the focal point of the intersection of countless other conflicts, including those over race, class, and historical narrative.

This project brings Capetonian youth to engage directly with the city's segregated past and present, looking at the ways in which Cape Town's urban divisions act on the body and mind of individuals. While the "mother city" narrative may be held to the outside world and to some within Cape Town as truth, there are many whose lived realities directly contradict this narrative. Poetry, as I will soon explain, is a platform for individuals to express these realities.

Poetry as critical urban research

The workshop positions itself in a body of critical urban research that aims to democratize knowledge production. This research is critical of the ways in which academic research tends to perpetuate oppressive hierarchical structures, extracting indigenous knowledge to benefit the career of a privileged, educated academic. Tolia-Kelly (2009) argues that ethical urban studies research should be undertaken by those most effected by the local conditions being studied. She writes,

Encouraging and acknowledging scholarship by those 'marked' and those researching in areas of geographical marginality is part of linking a radical agenda of critical theory to the practice of ethical, political and enfranchising academy that is truly 'international'(3).

Poets have long been broadening the scope of knowledge production in South Africa. South African poetry has historically been taken up as a resistance art form, offering narratives from the perspective of the masses that call for change. Cristina Maria Dominguez, in her thesis on queer activist poetry in South Africa, writes that poetry often awakens an activist mentality in writers and readers as it reveals hidden knowledge. Whitehead argues that this is related to the way that poetry "engages the writer and reader in a meaning-making

relationship” (as cited in Dominguez, 2012; 5). Furthermore, she positions herself against scholars who analyze poetry a formal resistance against institutionally enforced oppression. Instead, she views poetry as a ‘grassroots activist medium,’ addressing inequalities in everyday social interactions. Furthermore, in oppressive environments in which an individual’s narrative is largely ignored, the act of writing is in itself political. Writing about literature produced in the third world, Sustar and Karim write, “If there is a generalization that can be made about such literature it is that it’s creating itself is a political act” (as cited in Dominguez, 2012).

This study, then, adopts an anti-oppressive activist politic by providing a space for youth poets to engage with the unpleasant truths of urban segregation. Few other mediums exist for youth to openly explore their relationships to urban space. While I did not explicitly require participants to write with an activist bent, the simple act of youth expressing themselves in relation to contested urban space is a form of activism, catalyzing thought and expression that is normally stifled.

Poetry is a particularly powerful form of research and expression because it is inherently interdisciplinary, requiring the poet to negotiate past and present, self and surroundings, thought and emotion all at once. Indeed, a current trend in ethnographic research examines poetry as a form of critical research. Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) write that in recent years, creative writing has emerged as a crucial component of qualitative research. Objective, scientific writing, they argue, is based on the false premise that one person can determine the absolute truth about something. Qualitative writers, they claim, “can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it” (961). All of the writers in my workshop, then, are like ethnographers, more in

tune with the important skill of qualitative writing than most professional researchers.

Recent scholarly work examines the specific form of poetry as medium for reflexive, subjective meaning-making. David Gilbourne (2011) describes the research benefits of poetry in “Just in Time: a reflective poetic monologue.” His reflective monologue

represent[s] an example of staged and critical reflection, a process that enabled the collation and ordering of random emotions and events; maybe as a jig-saw might be completed by a chance connection. Further to the meanings embedded in the author’s own constructions of time and place, it is hoped that the poem might also ‘reach-out’ to readers in a way that generates new reflections and associations based on the complexities and ruminations of their own life journey (1).

In public spaces in Cape Town, indeed in any city, physical aesthetics, other people, history, and many other factors effect a person’s experience, all filtered through the person’s complex racial, gender, class and class identities and influenced by personal history. Poetry, which attempts to make an orderly whole out of complex experiences, offers a tool for individuals to make sense of it all. Furthermore, given the meaning-making process that occurs as people create and consume poetry, a group poetry process can help people make meaning of their environment in relation to each other (Dominguez 2012).

In fact, poetry does not simply center complex theories on an individual; it centers them on the individual’s body. This, too, is an important trend in contemporary Urban Studies research. Tolia-Kelly (2009) writes that in contemporary research, “the very body of the researcher [is] becoming a tool of the interface between theory and research, thus shifting the ontological foundations of the envisioned research itself” (6). Longhurst writes that “this

enables geographers to begin to talk from an embodied place, rather than a place on high” (as referenced in Tolia-Kelly, 2009). Reporting from an “embodied place” is important because the abstract theories that academics use to describe social phenomena act in real, physical ways on people’s bodies. Furthermore, bodies’ markings according to race, gender, and class, affect the way they experience a given space. Tolia-Kelly (2009) writes,

After all, the body is the site of the politicization of difference which drives securitization and global governance and their accompanied militarization. Questions of race, identity and ‘other’ bodies fuel our contemporary lived environments and world politics. When foregrounded, these questions can unravel a myriad of coordinates, yet to be visited (6).

In examining the markers of identity that can affect the way a body experiences public space, race is unavoidable. Urban theorist George Lipsitz’s (2011) two companion chapters titled, “The Black Spatial Imaginary” and “The White Spatial Imaginary” focus on the ways in which people on different sides of an imagined black-white binary imagine public space in the United States. Although these articles specifically address geography in the United States, the racial oppression and drastic racial segregation that cause people’s spatial imaginaries to differ by race at least as intense in Cape Town, if not more so. It is not unreasonable to conclude that in Cape Town youth experience places like District Six and Church Square differently depending on their race. In Cape Town, then, the marked body is something that must be explored. I hold, based on literature cited above, that it should be explored through subjective writing, not ignored with a false, detached objectivity.

Poetry, in its intense, personal subjectivity, inevitably centers narratives on the body, and in doing so validates the real experiences of urban citizens, prioritizing their bodily knowledge and engaging with impactful markers of identity. Poets act as lay-ethnographers of

the new school, making sense of the complicated social worlds that manifest themselves in physical space. They record sensory details that tell of these manifestations, all in the form of unified narratives that make sense of a myriad social factors that could never be understood through a formal interview.

Art workshop methodology

Although this work takes inspiration from past participatory art workshops, most published scholarship has focused on visual art workshops, not poetry workshops. The closest approximation to poetry art workshops garnering any significant attention in the academic literature is participatory theatre. Visual art workshops, more than participatory theatre, tend to engage with public space, so I will focus on lessons from art workshops for this section of the literature review.

Past participatory art workshops have been implemented as ways of working towards a ‘pluralism of knowledge’ of the type described in the “Poetry as critical urban research” section of this review. In Queensland, Australia, another area that exists in the aftermath of British colonialism, researchers Zurba & Berkes (2014) employed participatory art workshops to include indigenous voices in decision making on environmental policy. Their rationale for choosing participatory art was as follows:

Art as a methodology has the potential to provide a platform for discussion and shared space where participants from different cultural backgrounds feel free to express their values and aspirations because the creative process is often more familiar to people than is science, policy, or the bureaucratic process. Art can synthesise and convey complex information, enable people to look at issues in a different way, touch people’s emotions, and create a celebratory atmosphere (Curtis et al. 2012). An art product from a participatory process involving

partners from across a divide or a boundary (such as scientists vs. Indigenous knowledge holders) is significant as a focal point for deliberation (822).

They also claim that this process can “break down walls” between researchers and participants. Furthermore, they ground their work with Cash and Moser’s statements about ‘boundary objects,’ products of the creative process “valued on both sides of the boundary and provid[ing] a site for cooperation, debate, evaluation, review, and accountability” (as referenced in Zurba & Burkes, 2014, 822). Art, in these cases, acts an object for people to organize themselves around, communicating despite differences. Where these researchers try to create an egalitarian knowledge-sharing space for environmental issues, I try to create a similar space for thinking about urban citizenship.

Researchers have also looked to art workshop methodology as a way of facilitating individual and group thinking about history and memory. A body of literature exists on this subject in Cape Town, perhaps because the intense trauma of apartheid and the post-apartheid national optimism raised so many questions about how to think about the past. Karen Till (2008), in a review of art activism’s relationship to memory studies, argues that art is at the center of contemporary debates over history. Writing about Cape Town’s Prestwich Memorial and District Six Museum, two contentious sites of historical memory, Till (2008) claims that art processes can prompt people to rethink their relationship to a given history as well as the communities they form around those histories. She focuses on the way that art – publicly screened films, for example – can evoke bodily memory, again calling for a rethinking of the relationship between body and theory.

In N.J. Gibson’s (2009) study of artists’ historically-engaged projects for Cape Town’s Iziko Slave Lodge, Gibson found that as artists produced artwork that dealt with

slave history, they transcended racial boundaries in the creation of new, history-based identities. Their artwork functioned as ‘boundary objects’ that allowed people to realize a joint ownership of Cape Town’s slave history. They were engaged in a process of collaborative identity-making. Gibson argues that post-apartheid, identity discourse has favored a more fluid understanding of identity, allowing people to make multiple, changing identity claims. As artists discussed their relationships to slave history during workshops, they developed a new sense of public citizenship, tied to a collective history process.

The specific concept of the present study’s workshop – prompting young Capetonian poets to engage with public space through a poetry workshop – is a new one. It hoped to promote the same pluralistic knowledge prioritized in prior art workshops. At the same time, it hoped to encourage group and individual identity development, creating community around a joint engagement with public history. This process was to be aided by all of the advantages of poetry as a form of critical research methodology discussed earlier. As I will argue later in this paper, it did so successfully, revealing potential as a future method for public engagement.

Methodology

Positionality

The workshop was conceived as a sharing space, not a teaching space. I did not presume to have any knowledge of Cape Town’s physical environment that local poets did not have. I understood myself as a facilitator, helping people uncover and process their own knowledge. I made this clear to participants in the beginning of the workshop and in the workshop invitation. To this end, I was a participant in the workshop, writing with other poets and speaking up a little as possible during discussions.

As an outsider leading a journey through Cape Town's public space, I risked creating a threatening power dynamic with local poets. In full consciousness of this, and understanding that my knowledge of Cape Town's geography gained over the course of three months in the city is miniscule in comparison to that of a born and bred Capetonian, I co-facilitated the workshop with a local poet, Roché Kester. Roché is a prominent poet in the Cape Town spoken word poetry community, and she hosts Grounding Sessions, one of two weekly poetry shows in Cape Town. During the planning process, we collaboratively developed a workshop itinerary and writing prompts. She helped me understand the significance of the public spaces we visited and suggested appropriate approaches to workshopping in them. She also has an intimate understanding of the Cape Town poetry community, and advised me on the process of publicizing the workshop and recruiting poets. She identifies as "black," and she likely could relate more to the racialized experiences of people in the workshop, in which I, a multiracial White-Asian man, was the closest person to White in the group.

Our co-facilitation relationship was not without conflict, though. Some misunderstandings arose around the idea of a sharing space rather a teaching space. She proposed several prompts that would have participants write about very specific, emotionally charged topics: for example, she proposed that participants imagined the forced relocations of District Six, retelling the history while we stood on the site. I, on the other hand, wanted to leave participants more room to choose the topic they wanted to write about. I thought that each participant would have a different relationship to a given space, and that in order to uncover that relationship we should give them free reign over their thoughts. Although we agreed on a set of activities and prompts before the workshop, we ran into some problems during the workshop that affected the trajectory of the day's events. In Church Square, a site laden with slave history, after we engaged with the site independently, Roché read the area's

violent history to participants off of her phone; I had planned on opening up an open discussion on the topic. After this, she prompted participants by asking them to imagine themselves as slave on the site 200 years ago, adding some of her own thoughts about what must have been going on in the square at the time. During the subsequent independent writing session, I worried that we were being too proscriptive, and I resolved to reshape prompts and activities to be more open-ended. When we recongregated, I checked in with participants to see how people felt during the process. One of the participants, Ruby-Mae, said that she was upset by the prompt and the “sanitized” version of Church Square history that was evoked. The history Roché had read said that the Slave Lodge had been a brothel for many years, and also that there was widespread “debauchery” during that era. Ruby-Mae took issue with this, saying that the terms “brothel” and “debauchery” imply consent, which was absent in an environment of sexual violence. Another participant expressed feeling emotionally overwhelmed and unable to put her emotions into words as she tried to imagine slavery. In response, I apologized to Ruby-Mae and redirected our workshop to Company Gardens, where participants could get some breathing room before moving to District Six. In District Six, Roché wanted to prompt participants to think about “Removal, Relocation, and Remembered,” and I offered an alternative prompt about writing bodies and space into existence so as not to force participants into one way of thinking. As the workshop went on, and I would conjecture as a result of my acting reflexively in this way, people became more comfortable with each other, sharing stories and poems in ways that indicated trust.

Workshop structure and schedule

Writers were encouraged to take notes on their surroundings, their bodies, thoughts, and feelings throughout the workshop, engaging as consciously as possible with the places through which we traveled. I brought small notebooks and pens for any participants who did not have them already. This notetaking was to begin as soon as we introduced ourselves in

City Hall, so that even the five-minute walk from City Hall to Church Square could form a part of our research.

The basic schedule of the workshop was as follows: half an hour of housekeeping and introductions in front of City Hall, followed by a walk to Church Square, followed by an hour of workshopping at Church Square, followed by a walk to Company Gardens, followed by a half an hour of workshopping in Company Gardens, followed by a MyCiti bus to District Six, followed by a walk to my house in Walmer Estate, followed by a lunch, followed by a final writing and sharing session. In total, the workshop lasted about five hours. Site-specific workshops featured a combination of independent exploration, group conversation, and prompted writing. Workshopping outdoors in sites like District Six and Church Square inevitably touched on the painful histories of the places. Company Gardens produced a combination of place-based writing and writing that did not explicitly describe the physical environment. The hour-long lunch break in my house allowed poets to build trust and understanding in a less structured environment. After the lunch break, we wrote using words from the notes we had gathered throughout the day, then transitioned into a half-hour long, unstructured freewriting session.

The workshop was designed to benefit participants, but writers were also expected to submit poetry written during the workshop to me to be included in my project, a longer poetic narrative analyzing the role of poetry in navigating urban space in Cape Town. I informed participants at the beginning of the workshop that although the premise of the workshop was that they would submit poems to me, I would not force them to submit poetry if, after writing it, they felt it too personal to share. At the end of the workshop, all of the poets elected to submit their writing.

Participants

The target demographic of the workshop was young, emerging poets. I assumed that these people would be able to express themselves through poetry and would be early enough on in their poetry careers to benefit significantly from the workshop.

Workshop participants were recruited primarily using a public invitation on Facebook (Appendix A). During the weeks leading up to the workshop, I actively reached out to local poets via e-mail, facebook, and in-person networking. I attended open mic sessions and performances, where I met local artists who gave me advice about the project. They shared my event through their personal networks of poets who work with young and emerging poets. My advisor, Malika Ndlovu, is well-established in the Cape Town poetry sphere, and she pushed the event through her local networks of poets. In the end, the workshop's Facebook event garnered heavy online interest, with 234 people indicating "interested," 63 "going," and 98 "invited." In order to RSVP to the workshop, poets had to contact me directly using information listed in the Facebook event.

My goal was to host a workshop with 10 poets in order to maintain intimacy and control over the workshop's trajectory. Keeping the number of participants down also allowed me to compensate everyone for their transportation and provide food for participants. During the first few days that the invite was out on Facebook, I accepted every RSVP I received. After a few days, I realized that I was receiving far more RSVP's than I could receive, so I selected a few participants out of a pool of around 15, looking at factors like interest, race and gender – since I wanted people to explore the ways in which different identities affect the ways they experience a space, I wanted a group with diverse racial, ethnic, and gender identities.

Although I had finalized a list of ten participants in the days before the workshop, on the day of the workshop only three out of the ten people actually attended. In the 24 hours before the workshop several people were called for work obligations and another for a

personal obligation. Several simply did not show up, and when I called them on the phone after waiting for them at City Hall, they told me that they were not coming, treating the workshop as a casual, optional event. My advisor Malika attributed this to a lack of commitment and professionalism in the Cape Town poetry environment. In the end, because of the importance of interpersonal reflexivity during the workshop, I was happy to have such a small group. I think that the workshop served as a powerful pilot study for a methodology that can be expanded to include larger groups.

The following information on the identities of participants was gathered both based on observations from the workshop itself and on a questionnaire I distributed online after the workshop (Appendix B). The three participants had differing racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities, but little gender diversity. One participant, Afeefa, is a 20-year-old woman, a student at CPUT, and lives in a Somali community in Landstown, a Southern suburb. She has lived in Cape Town since she was three years old, and speaks Somali and English with equal fluency. She also speaks some English and Afrikaans. In response to a question about her racial identity, she answered as follows:

For most of my life I've been able to carry two cultures simultaneously (being Somali and being South African) to be honest I think a lot about what makes somebody belong to a certain culture but I haven't come to a conclusion on that topic. I mean I've spent almost all my life in South Africa and this country has shaped me into the person I've become, but when I think about my racial identity I always think of myself as Somali first.

Another participant who I will call by the pseudonym Alison is 25 and moved to South Africa from Zimbabwe when she was 17 years old. She identifies as a black woman, and she speaks Shona and English. She calls Shona her mother tongue and English her main language.

The third participant, who I will call by the pseudonym Ruby-Mae, is 29 years old and a graduate student and English teacher at University of Cape Town. She has lived in Cape Town for most of her life and in Stellenbosch for about seven years. She speaks English and Afrikaans, and in the post-workshop questionnaire elected not to respond to questions about her racial and gender identity. I will respect her choice by not assigning her a racial category in this paper, but in order to be withholding about the thoughts that have influenced my analysis, I will say that when I met her I read her as a so-called “Coloured” woman, and this inevitably influenced the way that I thought of her poetry and her opinions on Cape Town history. During the workshop she told me that she prefers the term “person of color,” so I will refer to her that way whenever it is necessary to refer to her racial identity in the remainder of the paper.

Ethical Reflexivity

I committed myself to ethical reflexivity on a personal and interpersonal level. During the four weeks of research, I engaged in constant auto-ethnography, writing reflexively based on my thoughts and feelings in different spaces in Cape Town. By writing alongside poets, I continued this reflexivity during the workshop itself. In the days before the workshop, this writing forced me to think extensively about the ways in which poets would respond to public spaces during my workshop. It also forced me to grapple with my whiteness; I identify as multiracial, but in Cape Town I am often perceived as white and receive much of the treatment that white people do. It forced me as well to grapple with my maleness, as I found that I am able to move more freely and confidently in public space than my female friends. Lastly, it forced me to grapple with my economic privilege, which, intertwined with my American privilege that gives my US dollars enormous power over the South African Rand, gives me access to most public spaces in Cape Town. I explore the intersection of my male, white, and class privileges in public space in a reflexive writing piece that I recorded while

sitting in Truth Coffee in Prestwich Memorial. I included this in the “Travel Journal” section of the book that accompanies this paper (67-70). All of these identities affect the ways in which I experience public space, and a consciousness of them was necessary for facilitating discussions on Church Square and District Six. This consciousness also made it even more apparent that I would benefit from a co-facilitator who was local, female, and not perceived as white, which I found in Roché.

My reflexive writing process continued as I created the narrative poem that is the end product of this project. I narrate the spaces between the poems, and much of my narration declares my own experiences and identities, bringing them to bear on the larger work. I engage with questions of race, privilege, insider-outsider dynamics, and much more in the narrative; I will address the outcome of these reflexivities in more detail in the Research Findings and Analysis sections.

Lastly, the workshop format allowed me to act reflexively with participants on the day of the workshop. In Zurba & Burkes’ (2014) scholarship on participatory art in Australia, they write that this methodology has the “potential to engage participants who would otherwise be marginalised or disregarded, and enables reflexivity amongst participants and between the researcher and participants” (822). This was certainly true during my workshop, especially since the workshop only had a total of five people. Before the workshop, I emotionally and logistically prepared to change trajectories depending on people’s desires and feelings. I checked in with participants before and after most writing sessions, asking them how they felt about the activities we were doing, how much time they felt they needed, and what they would like to do next. This was particularly important during the incident described in the Positionality section, when Ruby-Mae was upset by the history related and the prompt in Church Square. Checking in with her allowed me to change the workshop in a way that was attentive to her participants’ feelings: I moved us to Company Gardens to relax,

and I gave participants more freedom and less proscription during subsequent workshop activities. At other points during the workshop, I changed activities according to people's preferences. For example, after we walked around alone in District Six, I had planned on splitting people up into free writing and conversation groups depending on their emotional preferences. Each person told me that they would rather free write than talk, so I facilitated according to their needs and made that session into a free write for all participants. As stated earlier, participants progressively became more talkative and open with each other and me, indicating that this reflexivity was successful in creating an environment of trust and safety.

Findings: poetic narrative

The end product of this creative project is a poetic narrative compiling poems written by participants and myself during the workshop. This paper must be read alongside the poetic narrative. The narrative is made to be printed in a pocket-sized, 9x12 cm poetry book. The physical book has still not been printed as I write this, because my printing process relies on other people for assistance. In the meantime, I have made a PDF of the book that can be viewed alongside this paper.

The narrative explores the potentials of poetry as a tool for individual identity development as well as community formation in relation to urban space. Almost all of the poets' poems are included in the book. The narrative in the book pieces together the various poems while expounding on the themes that arise among the different poems. The voice that narrates the poems is unabashedly my own. Poetry embraces the subjective, and I would be foolish to pretend that my thoughts and emotions did not affect my writing process. While each of the poems could stand on their own, the collaged narrative attempts to put poems in conversation with each other and prompt thinking about the potential that this poetry-writing process has for social and personal change.

In creating a piece of art that explores rather than tells, I am positioning myself in a poststructuralist discourse detailed by Richardson & St. Pierre (2005). Poststructuralism, according to the authors, holds that “because the individual is subject to multiple and competing discourses in many realms, one’s subjectivity is shifting and contradictory – not stable, fixed and rigid” (962). This means that both the writing and the reading process are dependent on the individual’s specific knowledge and identity. This framework privileges localized knowledges: “knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical local knowledges” (962). By presenting poetry rather than objective scientific findings, I am embracing this way of thinking. My writing brings my own history and identity into the text, and in writing an emotional creative work I invite readers to bring their own subjectivities to bear on the text’s meaning.

Though the text can be interpreted in many different ways, the narrative expounds on a multitude of key ideas that come out of my analysis of the poems and the poetry workshop. The text is intended to prompt readers’ thinking about these ideas, but I will explain my analysis in the section below to make these ideas explicit. These ideas all point towards the potential of poetry as a tool for individual and group identity development in relation to urban space.

Analysis

In my analysis, I will explain the ideas raised by the poetic narrative. This analysis is divided into topical sections, each representing a specific theme expounded upon by the poetic narrative. Each one of these sections analyzes a broad swath of poetry and observations of the poetry workshop, in turn identifying salient, novel aspects of the group poetry writing process. This analysis represents only a few of the many readings possible of this layered piece of art.

Poetry as interdisciplinary knowledge production

The poets involved in the project acted as interdisciplinary researchers. They performed qualitative research that synthesized thoughts on history, geography, race, class, and much more, all as they engaged with their physical environments. My opening narrative poem, titled “This Poem,” plays with the idea that poetry accomplishes the impossible feat of pulling together myriad strains of thought into one cohesive piece of artwork. As the first line, “This poem is a mess,” implies, this feat is complicated and by no means an exact science.

This poem/ is a mess./ This poem is scrambled./ This poem is a collision/ at the
intersection/ of hurt and healing/ past and present/ graveyards, hospitals/ white skin
black skin/ up for debate skin/ Zimbabwe, Somalia,/ Adonai Jesus and Allah/ it got
hit/ at the robot/ its head is still ringing (21)

In this first section of the poem, I riff on the way that poetry is an embodiment of “past and present,” trauma, progress, race, religion, and nationality, among other things. This poem came out of an understanding that for participants the workshop was, as Gilbourne writes and is cited earlier, “an example of staged and critical reflection, a process that enabled the collation and ordering of random emotions and events” (2011). Richardson and St. Pierre promote ‘Creative Analytical Process’ (CAP) ethnography, which uses mediums like poetry to produce research. In line with poststructuralist assumptions that writing and “knowing” is a process influenced by an infinite number of outside factors acting on an individual, this type of ethnography embraces a variety of sources for “knowing.” Doing away with the idea of ‘triangulation’ in pursuit of an objective truth, they call for ‘crystallization,’ combining “symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach.” The poets in this workshop, I will argue, engage in this “crystallization,” combining an infinite number of thought processes as they produce their own version of a local truth.

The workshop writing process had much in common with qualitative fieldwork. Like qualitative researchers, the poets explored their field sites and took extensive notes on their surroundings, looking not just for physical scenery but also for people's behaviors and for the ways in which factors like history, class, and race came to bear on the geography. Amidst all of this they were self-reflexive, constantly turning inward as they wrote. To illustrate the ways in which poets brought together multiple complex streams of thought, in the way of a critical ethnographer, I will analyze two poems as examples.

First, I will look at a poem Alison wrote while we were in District Six. The poem is featured on page (61) of the poetry book. Alison engages in many types of qualitative work at once in this poem, with a keen attention to language, religion, and history. Reacting to a group of women singing Christian songs that walked by when we were silently exploring District Six, she records the complexities of their existence in a place laden with traumatic history. She zeroes in on the conflict between religion and the site's apparent hopelessness, writing, "Wails of 'God will never leave us!!!'/Clinging to hope even though its leading them to madness." She enlivens the past through her writing, identifying a real, felt conflict over history with lines like "They wonder if they should exorcise this place of demons/though the buildings stand/and grounds are breaking/the haunting remains." Where some people would look at this scene and simply take notes on a group of singing people walking through a quiet historical space, she grapples with the multiple meanings of history, religion, and physical geography all at once.

Similarly, Afeefa's poem about District Six can also be read as a piece of critical qualitative research, combining disparate threads of qualitative observation into one cohesive narrative. This poem is featured as the final poem in the narrative. Where Alison's poem synthesized history and religion projected onto public space, Afeefa's simultaneously grapples with thoughts on religion, race, and segregation. With simple physical descriptions ,

she presents sites of conflict: “An old church stands still in the landscape of district six, near a sufi mosque...someone has sprayed ‘ubuntu’ across a wall in colour/Beneath it someone throws a suspicious glance” (62). By juxtaposing church and mosque, “Ubuntu” and suspicious glance, she questions the sanctity of religious symbols as well as the optimism around “Ubuntu” rhetoric, using physical space as evidence. She presents these places as focal points of segregation, writing “I walk by and Watch complexions passing by never blending/Just on the outskirts of diversity you can sense all unnamed boundaries.” Indeed, she has a keen eye for “unnamed boundaries,” seeing the ways in which countless conflicts tear apart a single spot in District Six. She is practicing CAP qualitative research at its best, using creative language to combine the influences of race, geographic segregation, religion, and much more. This is what I mean when I write in that first poem that “this is a poem concussed” (22). The poetry produced in the workshop grapples with so many different thoughts at once that it seems that poets should be mentally overwhelmed.

This is the type of boundary-crossing, ethical urban studies research that Tolia-Kelly (2009) calls for. These poets are acting as lay researchers, showing us that in they are producing complex, self-reflexive qualitative knowledge without being asked to do so. A democratization of knowledge production would involve privileging the geographic knowledge produced by poets in place-based workshops like these.

Focusing on the physical

One of the hallmarks of the place-based poetry produced in this workshop is that it takes as its focus physical space and physical bodies, exposing what could be abstract thought as visceral experience. The poets involved understand geographic space as a battleground for justice, in line with scholars on ‘spatial justice’ as described in this paper’s Literature Review (Soja 2010). The workshop was designed to prompt this type of thinking: our primary method of research was walking around silently in public spaces, thus bringing all of our thoughts to

bear on the geography of an area. This is not exactly atypical poetic practice, though. As Ruby-Mae said after the workshop while we were discussing its learning benefits, great writers typically go on daily walks for inspiration. This workshop was not introducing a completely new practice to writers, but rather tapping into an existing, albeit underused practice.

Participants' writing displays a nuanced sense of geography that sees physical space as the epicenter of a multitude of other conflicts. In a poetic fashion, writers made their geographic environments into metaphors full of meaning, and in doing so uncovered the meaning that underlies seemingly superficial geographic spaces. Certain metaphors surface themselves repeatedly throughout the workshop. I will focus on one metaphor here to illustrate my point: the metaphor of the bridge. Both Alison and Afeefa focused on bridges in their writing, complicating the meaning of a commonly used metaphor. For example, Afeefa's poem about the drive to District Six points to bridges' multiple meanings:

an intersection between worlds that wouldn't meet otherwise/
There is a road to the old city that tells of a healing country and all that reside within it in the absence of rubble/
There is mud being overturned to create new things/
Newly constructed bridges connect waste fields and clean roads (16-17).

Here, Afeefa looks to bridges as the meeting of healing and hurt, old and new, dirty and clean. In thinking this way she overlays several different maps in her mind. Bridges do not simply represent the joining of two worlds, but rather the site of healing and of economic development.

Alison's poem describing the bus ride from the Central Business District to District Six complicates the notion of bridges even further. She writes, from the perspective of a homeless person in District Six, "Sit and watch where the money is/the view is fancy over the bridge/as the wheels on the bus go round/ your soul cries take me with you/ you see their

faces/ through the windows/ to see your life they came/ but stay they never will” (27). While some idealize bridges as flatteners of difference, Alison uncovers the futility of bridges in a city with extreme geographic inequalities. Furthermore, she points to a danger of bridges as facilitating voyeuristic expeditions rather than meaningful help.

These poems are powerful geographic research. They show that any urban planner who conceives the function of a bridges as simply alleviating urban crowding or increasing traffic efficiency is missing their true meaning. They point to the multiple connections that bridges can make for citizens: they join rich and poor; they allow the rich to practice voyeurism; they provide opportunities for emotional healing in traumatized areas like District Six.

These two poems prompted me to rethink my own assumptions about bridges, so I focused my narrative poem in the same “Bridges” section on the literal and metaphorical meanings of bridges (28-31; 33-35). My first two verses show that I have rethought my idealistic understandings of bridges as automatic solutions to problems of difference. The lines, “Not to cross them at night/ not to cross them alone/ not to cross them a woman” (28), show that I now understand bridges – a metaphor for connections between people – to be contingent on many different factors, and movement over them allowed only to people with certain levels of privilege.

The participants’ poems, as reflexive creative writing focused on subjective experiences in physical space, also uncover a deep relationship between the human body and social conflicts. For example, the poem analyzed above written by Alison starts with the lines, “Dry your blankets the night is coming/ mark your rock get ready to take cover/ soak in the rays/ ignore the breeze” (27). In these lines, Alison shows how stark inequalities act on the body, forcing some people to sleep outside while others drive by comfortably on buses. If some “ignore the breeze,” they are ignoring geographic connections to other parts of the city

because the connections bring them pain. Afeefa, in another poem (40), displays a similar level of body consciousness as she describes conflicting emotions over assimilation in Cape Town. She writes, “No one asks anymore "where [are] you from?" / When you walk these streets / You catch yourself off guard in a mirror, think of the stranger your reflection has become to you lately.” as a Somali immigrant, she is conscious of being “othered” in this urban environment, and realizes that her body is the site of the othering process. That people do not read her body as a foreigner’s speaks volumes about status in South African society, and her own connection to her homeland of Somalia. She even goes further to say that she does not recognize herself. Losing her old identity, then, is not an abstract concept but rather a bodily process.

Much of my narrative poem in the “Archipelago” section of the book is inspired by poets’ writing about the body as a site of conflict (38-40, 42-46). I write, “*Understand? You have this thing called a body. It stands between the winds and the waters. Let it be the language that the two whisper through*” (43-44). This is a reference to the ways in which the body, as referenced in the Literature Review, becomes “interface between theory and research, thus shifting the ontological foundations of the envisioned research itself” (Tolia-Kelly 2009). I also write, “*it is no longer clear who holds who, only that your body holds all of it, your skin and your bones have always known where they come from*” (46) drawing attention to the prioritization of bodily knowledge and bodily memory in the poets’ works.

Enlivening the past

The poets in this workshop write poems that embody complex relationships to the past, exposing the ways in which history acts on individuals in the present. As mentioned in the Literature Review, scholars in recent years have shed light on how Cape Town artists

disrupt discourses about memory and history (Till, 2008). She writes,

Scholars engaged in research about memory have much to gain by paying attention to works by artists, and activists who also acknowledge the ways that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their worlds (101).

These poets are at the forefront of this activist thinking. They do not come to an agreement on how to remember the past, but they do agree on the urgency of the task of rewriting and rethinking history. Each approaches memory from a unique perspective, contributing vital thought to contemporary discourse on memory and history.

It was inevitable that the poets involved in the workshop would engage with history at some level. They were, after all, visiting two sites with publicized traumatic histories: District Six and Church Square. Still, the extent and complexity of poets' writing about history points to great potential for poetry as a tool for memory work. For example, the poem that Alison wrote about District Six, analyzed in an earlier section for its strengths as interdisciplinary research, evokes the past as demons that haunt the area, in direct conflict with religious singers walking by.

Alison's poem (38) about observers in Church Square also illustrates the unseen ways in which history affects people in the present, but in a more visceral way. She uses the word "still" over and over, implying a continuity between the past and present. Further, she writes of African immigrants sitting silently on the edges of Church Square: "battered and bruised/they still stand firm/ ignoring the history/the ships still slave on." Here, she implies a link between the "battered and bruised" bodies of people in the present with the past. She seems to be saying that if people addressed slave histories, the reverberations of the slave ships' violence would stop metaphorically "sailing on" into the present and hurting people

like the men in the square. She ends the poem with a profound statement on history, writing, “As they sit and watch/the history which/still reads their future/unknown.” That history could “read their future” might seem counter-intuitive. Alison is in fact saying that history is a means of understanding the future. In a physical present that she identifies as “battered and bruised,” she is calling for a look back into the past.

A piece by Ruby-Mae (15-16), written in the less explicitly historicized site of the Company Gardens, reveals the insight that poetry can lend into public memory. Although our excursion to Company Gardens was intended to offer relief from thinking of emotional histories, she brought history to life through her poetry. She exposes “an untidy and uncurated/historical narrative” that contradicts the prevailing narrative of what she calls “Madiba’s rainbow nation and what-his-face’s social cohesion.” She lists physical surroundings that alternately contradict and confirm the historical myth of “social cohesion,” jumping from “The homeless resting among the privileged” to “the chess playing children of all races.” In this way, she sees historical narratives not as dead stories for academic books, but rather as continuous stories that become ways of seeing our present realities.

Both poets see history physically manifested in everyday objects, from bruised bodies to chess sets. Like the activist artists who Till describes in her scholarship on memory, these poets have a “multi-sensual, spatial” understanding of memory (101). They see it as intimately affecting their physical environments, and they surface this understanding for themselves and for readers as they write. Much of my poetic narration draws attention to this process. In “This poem,” I personify a poem as a concussion victim who wakes up in a “cold sweat,” dealing with traumatic memories that it can’t forget, no matter how badly it wants to (22). In my narration in the “Bridges” section of the book, I write about the failed promise of bridges in Cape Town: “there had been bridges before,/with different names,/swords,/ships,/whips,/connecting flesh to cruel, twisted minds/Capetonians have

always/been cosmopolitan” (31). This line implies that a history of colonial violence has left a psychological imprint preventing people from being willing to connect across racial divides. In “Common Ground,” which I will discuss in more detail in the section that follows, I describe the ways that poets answer an urgent call for a history that respects victims of colonial violence, writing, “There are so many spirits occupying this square,/ demanding justice through the pens of the living,/ we don’t have room to budge our shoulders,/ so we move the only way we can,/ down...” (56-57). This passage was meant to draw attention to workshop participants’ powerful work to respectfully animate histories in ways that bring past victims into the present.

Reimagining group identities

One of the most powerful parts of the workshop was the group process that occurred during it: poets projected their own distinct, individual experiences onto the sites we visited, and in doing so found commonalities that bridged their differences. Poets had drastically different personal narratives as relating to race and ethnicity, and these surfaced in their works. Each poet reacted to Church square differently: Afeefa wrote about assimilation and language as a Somali immigrant (40), Ruby-Mae wrote about erasures of Cape slave history (58-59), Alison wrote a poem imagining the feelings of a slave from long ago (38), and I wrote about Passover and Jewish slave memory (52). Similar phenomena occurred in each place we visited, with each person relating to the place via their personal histories and identities. On the surface, this would seem to divide people. However, as all participants found deep connections to the same geographic spaces and to certain themes that rose out of those spaces, people found community. In this way, physical objects became ‘boundary objects,’ sites for unification around difference, as did the poems people produced about themselves. Much of this occurred during the workshop through conversation and poetry

sharing, and thus can be more easily understood with a description of my observations than with an analysis of poetry.

Poets developed relationships of trust and understanding throughout the workshop, culminating in our final poetry sharing session in my house in Walmer Estate. I read the poem that I had written in Church Square (52) that grappled with my whiteness in relation to African slavery as well as my memory of Jewish slavery, which I had revisited the night before at a Passover Seder. This poem, which dealt with what I called “hypocrisy” amongst Jewish people who have known oppression, prompted a passionate discussion amongst participants. Each person chimed in. Afeefa said that there is hypocrisy amongst all groups of people, and cited Muslim extremists as an example. Alison described the importance of remembering oppression, and proceeded to criticize the ways in which African-Americans focus too much on their histories of oppression, in the process holding themselves back. Ruby-Mae defended African-Americans, saying that the difference in the United States is that they are a minority group, unlike blacks in South Africa.

This conversation exemplifies honest, personal conversation amongst people with different relationships to a given topic. It is by no means the only way case of this process occurring during the workshop. Rather, it is a verbalization of a process that was likely occurring the entire time as writers walked in the same spaces and shared poetry with each other. As Dominguez (2012) writes, writers and readers of poetry meet each other halfway, both making meaning out poetry.

Participants’ poetry also indicates that despite having distinct personal narratives, participants responded to similar elements of the geographic spaces visited, creating a platform for common understanding. One of the most powerful examples of this commonality comes from a comparison between my poem about Jewish slave memory (52) and Ruby-Mae’s poem about forced removals (49). Although we wrote about completely

different events, we referenced the same exact line in our respective poems: “Let my people go.” Hers was a narrative about the false promise of emancipation, and mine about hypocrisy in the way that Jews remember slavery, but they drew on a similar intense memory of slavery and oppression in Church Square and District Six. That we used the same line shows that despite our differences, there were strong commonalities that enabled mutual understanding.

My narrative poem in the final section of the book, “Common Ground,” deals with the difficult process of finding commonalities around violent histories, among other things. I write, “*I come up shackled to a fellow poet,/ struggling in the square of silence,/ eyes locked like two friends in a duel,/ two foes on a date,/ each scared to let eyes waver downwards/ into what can only be our own personal hells*” (58). This section draws attention to the fact that the process of digging into violent histories is a painful one, but it holds the seeds for connection with others.

This community building process in this workshop reflects the process detailed in Gibson’s (2009) study of artists making public art in the Iziko Slave Lodge. Gibson found that although artists had different racial backgrounds and different personal histories, they were able to craft identities that transcended their differences. By dealing with slave history on a personal level, they found deep mutual connections and developed identities based on a common ownership of Western Cape history. Similarly, participants in this workshop, despite distinct identities, found a common ownership of world histories of slavery as well as of the public spaces that all participants reacted emotionally to.

Poetry writing as reflexive process

Participants’ poetry indicates that writing for them was a reflexive process in which they learned about themselves while learning about the urban environment. Indeed, this is at the core of what poetry is. As the spontaneous collation of myriad thoughts and events,

poetry is a discovery to the writer as well as the reader. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argue, the process of learning about a subject and the process of learning about oneself are intertwined; one cannot exist without the other. A crucial tenant of this paper holds that for each of the new knowledges that poets produced described in the sections above, the poets themselves were also gaining these knowledges for the first time. Thus, the workshop facilitated poets' learning about themselves.

Conversations with poets during the workshop confirmed this. After the workshop, Roché and I asked poets to comment on the usefulness – or lack thereof – of the workshop. One poet said that she really enjoyed the workshop and would love for us to facilitate a second one because it prompted her to think in new ways. Another described how she usually thinks of herself as a storyteller and not an analytical thinker, but that this workshop opened up new ways of thinking and showed her that she could in fact write poems that were complex and analytical. In this way, the poetry-making process helped poets broaden their understandings of themselves and develop as thinkers and writers.

Furthermore, the writing produced shows that poets considered their relationships to others in the urban spaces we visited. For example, when Alison writes from the perspective of homeless people in District Six watching enviously as people with more financial means ride by in a bus, she is in fact writing about herself, demonstrating a level of consciousness of her own positionality (27). Although her knowledge of the prayer “Sizo manyatela ama demoni” indicates a type of local linguistic knowledge, she outs herself as a “stranger” in the eyes of the people walking by, observing, “Eyes anxious at the site of strangers/Well trust is a stranger.” In this line, she identifies her body's affect on surrounding people while destabilizing the idea of a “stranger,” claiming that even the trust between two people is a “strange” thing.

Afeefa's poem about emotional conflicts over assimilation is prompted by a level of self-consciousness in the way that people view her (40). Ruby-Mae's poem about the Company Gardens, written as we sat on a bench with homeless people nearby, notes "the homeless resting amongst the privileged" in its list of ironic juxtapositions. In dividing people into two camps, she places herself in the "privileged" category, loaded with all of its associations that contradict the "rainbow nation" narrative, as analyzed in the Enlivening the Past section above. All of these writers engage in a type of critical self-reflexivity, not simply writing as a passive observer but interrogating the ways in which they impact the urban environment.

My own writing of the book's narrative is ethically reflexive, as well. I consciously make myself a part of the work, revealing my own position and biases in my writing. On one level, the act of writing a narrative that is unapologetically personal is in itself an act of critical reflection. As I pulled pieces together, I thought critically about the role my own voice would play in the narrative. Although I wanted to feature the voices of workshop participants, I realized that I could be most reflexive by making the narrator's voice my own, casting away all attempts to be an "objective" narrator because that would be impossible. Instead, I allowed my writing to surface my own subjectivities that affect the way the book is put together. In this way, my usage of the "I" position in the book's beginning, and my description of my own thoughts that catalyzed the project, is in itself inherently reflexive as it puts my own biases and thoughts in conversation with the larger work.

On another level, some of my narrative poems in the work point explicitly to the thoughts that have come out of reflexivity. My poem (55-58) in the Common Ground section, for example, deals with the problems that arise as I, a white-appearing man, engage with a group of women of colour on the topic of slave history.

*pull up a rock and hear Khoi San screams,/ silenced for centuries by soil crammed
down throats,/ he came up yelling at me, at me, at me,/ my skin the color of the hands
that buried him,/ and when I pull him up he fights himself not to bite me,/ who
wouldn't? Who would choose me for a grave robber,/ me, who looks like his killer's
cousin (57).*

Here, I reveal conclusions about my own position that I reached through reflexive writing processes. Indeed, it was difficult, as one who fits the mold of racial oppressor, to build trust around such emotionally-charged issues. This realization will influence any later participatory research projects that I do, making me more attuned to racial dynamics. It is useful in itself as a snapshot of how racial identity affects relationships to histories.

The last section of the text, titled “Traveler’s Journal,” is composed of two reflexive writing samples written during the research process as I was preparing for the workshop. The first one (63) reflects on my struggles to maintain my multiethnic identity in Cape Town. The second sample (67-70) deals with my coming to terms with being perceived as white, and the ways in which Cape Town is constructed to benefit people who look like me. Both are examples of the critical reflexive process that writing provides for the researcher.

The group process, as it involves listening as well as critical writing, acts as an avenue to interpersonal reflexivity, as well. Much of my consciousness of the significance of my own whiteness in relation to participants came from listening to the emotional and personal ways in which they evoked histories of slavery and oppression, and from hearing participants speak openly about being upset with our rendering of slave history and forcing of an emotionally-charged prompt about the same topic. I elaborate on this process and the way I changed the workshop in response to participants’ thoughts and feelings in the “Workshop Methodology” section. These types of interpersonal reflexivity confirms Zurba and Burkes’ (2014) claims

about participatory workshops offering opportunities for reflexivity between participant and researcher.

Conclusions

This project aimed to explore the ways in which place-based poetry workshops can function tools for knowledge production and change on a personal and social level. Drawing on prior scholarship on participatory art methodologies and critical creative writing processes, the workshop brought together young poets from Cape Town to engage with public space. The workshop is novel for combining three important research methodologies that are rarely unified: participatory art workshops, place-based art, and poetry writing.

This project, implemented in a place famous for its deep social divides along lines of race, class, and language, among others, looked to geography as the epicenter of social division. Bringing people to Church Square and District Six, it made geography into the prompt for thinking about conflicts over topics ranging from race to class to gender. In order to make participants' work accessible to a wider audience, and to continue the process of reflective, critical poetry writing, I compiled the poetry produced into a poetic narrative, in which I was the narrator, contained in small book.

The poets' writing and my observations of the workshop reveal tremendous potential for this place-based poetry workshop methodology. The workshop showed promise in several ways. First, participants engaged in a critical, self-reflexive process in which they learned about their own identities in relation to contested public space. Second, participants' poetry represented a form of interdisciplinary qualitative research, democratizing knowledge production while encouraging new thought remarkable for its critical engagement with memory and focus on human and geographic bodies. Third, the workshop provided a platform for participants to find commonalities that transcended their differences in identity and illuminated a common ownership of history and public space.

This methodology can become a powerful social tool, useful for individual learning, group processing, and for urban geography research. It produced an incredible amount of thought and reflection in just one five-hour session. By the end of the session, people were just beginning to build the bonds of trust and comfort that would allow for deeper learning in the future. In the future, facilitators should host workshops with multiple meetings to build a more significant, long-term relationship amongst participants and facilitators. Furthermore, they should expand to a group larger than my five-person workshop, although I think that a small group is appropriate as a pilot study.

While this place-based approach is obviously appropriate for the divided, contested city that is Cape Town, it has the potential to create powerful new writing in cities around the world. Minty (2006) writes that Cape Town has more in common with Atlantic port cities than with other cities on the African interior; this methodology should be tested, then, in other South African and African cities, and in Atlantic port cities in other countries. Although Cape Town's history of colonialism and apartheid is a part of everyday public discourse, the same rifts exist in cities around the world. I plan on continuing this project in Providence, Rhode Island, the ethnically diverse Atlantic port city in which I attend University in the United States. Facilitators should consider how to address painful histories in places like the where histories of oppression are not as visible, like the United States. Different ethnic, racial, and linguistic dynamics will arise in different contexts, and workshops should be reshaped accordingly.

Although there is a short history of scholarship on participatory art methodologies as tools for social change, the idea of place-based poetry methodologies is a fairly untouched one. I encourage people to implement this exciting project in other locales and environments. It holds promise for researchers, community activists, and artists alike. By harnessing the talents of poets, a group of urban citizens who have been doing their own qualitative research

since before social scientists gave the act an academic term, it democratizes the production of knowledge. In doing so, it has the potential to prompt a rethinking of self and city in the minds of participant poets as well as the wider urban population. Only time will tell whether it works in other cities, but it produced exciting results in Cape Town. Few other cities on the planet are as badly divided or marked by historical trauma, so this is promising indeed.

Appendix/Appendices

Appendix A. Facebook invitation

The image is a screenshot of a Facebook event page. At the top, there's a search bar and navigation icons. The event title is "Call for poets: a journey through urban space in Cape Town" with a date badge for "APR 24". The event is hosted by Sam Lin-Sommer and Roché Kester. The event details section includes the date "Sunday, April 24 at 12 PM - 3 PM" and the location "Cape Town, South Africa". There are tabs for "About" and "Discussion". The "About" tab is active, showing a description of the event: "Calling all young and emerging poets! This is an invitation to a poetic journey through Cape Town's spatial landscape. On Saturday, April 23rd, a group of poets will travel to multiple distinct, emotionally charged locations and respond to them through poetry. As we travel, we will grapple with questions that include: -What is a home - is it a place, a feeling, a person, a language, or something else entirely? -What boundaries divide our world? How rigid are they? -How do our identities change the way we feel in a given place? -How do we shape the places we inhabit, and how do they shape us? This is a workshop for any poet interested in these questions. Participants will each write poems in the language of their choice inspired by the sites that we visit. The workshop will be a great opportunity for poets to produce original work, collaborate with other young poets, and reflect on their relationships to the different spaces in Cape Town. A meal and transportation to and from the workshop sites will be provided! The workshop is a part of a research project that I am designing. I'm Sam Lin-Sommer, a poet and student from the United States. Poetry has helped me understand my identity as a Chinese-Jewish- American man living in New York City and Providence, Rhode Island, and I want to facilitate and study the same process of self-exploration for poets in Cape Town. Poets will be expected to submit copies of their poems to my project to be organised into a longer poetic narrative that deals with identity and spacial boundaries in Cape Town. Of course, participants will be free to withhold their poems if, after writing them, they do not feel comfortable sharing them. With any luck, the connections and poems formed during this workshop will open up doors that will benefit poets for years to come." The right sidebar shows event statistics: 234 interested, 63 went, and 98 invited. There are also related events listed, such as "Cape Town Cannabis legalisat...", "Relay Against Racism", "CHEAP AS CHIPS", "Invitation to Participate - Bey...", "FanCon Cape Town Comic Co...", and "Woman Within Training Week...".

Search Facebook

Sam Home

Sam Lin-Sommer
Edit Profile

MY EVENTS

- Upcoming 24
- Calendar
- Subscribed
- Past
- Create

THIS WEEK

DISPlace
Today at 2:30 PM

Yom Hashoah Speaker
Tomorrow at 1 AM

Political Science Honors ...
Tomorrow at 3 PM

SPRING 2016 (G)ISP FAI...
Tomorrow at 11:30 PM

Let's Talk Feminism in Ch...
Thursday at 12 AM

Project LETS at Brown: ...
Thursday at 8 PM

Project PETS: Furry Frien...
Thursday at 8 PM

11 More Events

Public · Hosted by Sam Lin-Sommer and Roché Kester

Invite Edit ...

Sunday, April 24 at 12 PM - 3 PM
about 1 week ago

Cape Town, South Africa Show Map

About Discussion

Write Post Add Photo / Video Create Poll

Write something...

Details

Calling all young and emerging poets!

This is an invitation to a poetic journey through Cape Town's spatial landscape. On Saturday, April 23rd, a group of poets will travel to multiple distinct, emotionally charged locations and respond to them through poetry. As we travel, we will grapple with questions that include:

- What is a home - is it a place, a feeling, a person, a language, or something else entirely?
- What boundaries divide our world? How rigid are they?
- How do our identities change the way we feel in a given place?
- How do we shape the places we inhabit, and how do they shape us?

This is a workshop for any poet interested in these questions.

Participants will each write poems in the language of their choice inspired by the sites that we visit. The workshop will be a great opportunity for poets to produce original work, collaborate with other young poets, and reflect on their relationships to the different spaces in Cape Town.

A meal and transportation to and from the workshop sites will be provided!

The workshop is a part of a research project that I am designing. I'm Sam Lin-Sommer, a poet and student from the United States. Poetry has helped me understand my identity as a Chinese-Jewish- American man living in New York City and Providence, Rhode Island, and I want to facilitate and study the same process of self-exploration for poets in Cape Town.

Poets will be expected to submit copies of their poems to my project to be organised into a longer poetic narrative that deals with identity and spacial boundaries in Cape Town. Of course, participants will be free to withhold their poems if, after writing them, they do not feel comfortable sharing them.

With any luck, the connections and poems formed during this workshop will open up doors that will benefit poets for years to come.

EVENT TIPS

Use Short Event Names

A short name that represents your event will perform better because important info won't get cut off in News Feed.

Edit Name

Roché, Thandile Craig and 2 other friends went

234 interested 63 went 98 invited

RELATED EVENTS SEE MORE

- Cape Town Cannabis legalisat...
Saturday at Cape Town, South ...
4,489 guests
Interested · Going
- Relay Against Racism
Sat May 28 at Green Point Athl...
306 guests
Interested · Going
- CHEAP AS CHIPS
Fri May 27 at The Shred
2,870 guests
Interested · Going
- Invitation to Participate - Bey...
6 PM at Cornerstone Institute
39 guests
Interested · Going
- FanCon Cape Town Comic Co...
Saturday at The Lookout
1,706 guests
Interested · Going
- Woman Within Training Week...
Fri May 13 at Cape Town, South...
9 guests
Interested · Going

The location and exact time of the workshop will be determined soon, but for now, here are some relevant details:

Date: Saturday, April 23rd
Time: TBD, around noon to around five p.m.
Place: Locations in the greater Cape Town area TBD. Possible locations include: District Six, the Central Business District, and Langa's Guga S'thebe theater.

Co-facilitated by me (Sam Lin-Sommer) and a Cape Town-based Spoken Word artist, TBD.

Please RSVP by Thursday, April 21st by e-mailing me at samsommer95@gmail.com, calling/texting at 0761730652, or whatsapping me at 001-516-672-8193. Feel free to contact me with any questions or thoughts you might have.

And, please please please, PASS THIS ON to all the dope poets you know! Hope to see y'all there!"

Recent Posts



Nes Nc Cin — All of poetry friends in Cape-town, enjoy your poetry day today... I wish I was there... I will following you from the Netherland..

April 24 at 10:58am



Victor Ngqulu — venue?

April 24 at 8:10am



Sam Lin-Sommer — To clarify, only the ten people who I have responded to and confirmed for the workshop can attend this Sunday. RSVP'ing did not guarantee that you cou...

April 22 at 5:19pm

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Feel free to write as much or as little as you want to each of these questions. Write a paragraph or don't answer at all, it's up to you. These questions are meant to illuminate the identities that affect the way that you write and relate to spaces in Cape Town.

Name: _____

Do you want your name to be kept anonymous for my poem and paper, both of which which will include your poetry and my observations about the workshop? _____

Age: _____

What languages do you speak, and what language(s) do you consider your mother tongue? Your "home language?": _____

In what places have you lived? _____

How would you describe your racial identity? _____

How would you describe your gender identity? _____

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Student Signature: _____ **Date:** _____