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ARTICLE

Lemn Sissay: Defamiliarisation and Performed Palimpsests

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This article documents the methods of defamiliarisation that Lemn Sissay uses to prove, test, destabilise, amplify, write and re-write his presence on stage. It suggests the term 'performed palimpsest' to describe the introductions, interruptions and splicing together of observation, aside, commentary and self-critique that play a prominent role in Sissay's poetic practice. Viewing Sissay's (a)live writing in relation to Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* offers revealing parallels and prompts a discussion around how and why Sissay defamiliarises himself/the moment of performance through performed palimpsests, vocal techniques, self-estrangement of gesture, and failure as a generative tool.

Keywords: Lemn Sissay; live writing; Brecht; defamiliarisation; poetry in performance; black British; identity politics

1. The Presence of the Poet

The first time I saw Lemn Sissay perform I was frustrated by his long, meandering introductions. I calculated how little time was available for the 'actual poems'. Was he putting off reading poems because he wasn't happy with them? Was he taking this performance, at the Exeter Poetry Festival, seriously? Had I wasted my train fare from Birmingham? Sissay commented on the whiteness of the audience, and of Devon. I was uncomfortable to be a white person in this white audience. I imagined the thoughts of the programmers and other audience members. It felt on the edge of failure, but then a curious thing occurred. I began to experience a dark enjoyment in his play on that edge, in watching conventions being tested. My focus shifted to his introductions and interruptions, and I realised these were as much a part of his writing as his poems.

During our interview for the British Library, I asked Sissay about his extended introductions. Sissay said it was when performing to a white, middle class audience that he realised: 'oh shit I'm being paid to be angry to the people that I'm being angry with. I can't continue on that basis'.¹ He remembered interrupting a performance of his poem 'Gold from the Stone' for the first time. He stopped 'in the middle' and asked, 'is *this* performance? Is this okay?'² Sissay's interruptions prompt his audiences to consider and confront the ways they view him. He explains, 'it's like: Is this how you like to see me? ... Is this the black poet is this the jazz poet is this the dub poet is this the blah poet?'³

Sissay uses the word 'deconstruct' to describe this practice. He comments on the theatre work of Tim Crouch, whom he admires because of how he 'deconstructs' the moment of live performance, examining it as it happens, working with 'layer after layer'.⁴ Crouch's theatre work has prompted comparisons with Brecht.⁵ Claudette Sartiliot observes that Derrida's 'deconstruction' and Brecht's 'defamiliarisation' share a preoccupation with inhabiting structures in order to reveal contradictions. Both are concerned with changing 'the way we think', making 'the familiar appear strange' and deconstructing 'particular systems of thought from the inside'.⁶ The absence of reference to the sonorous voice in Derrida's writings makes Brecht's 'defamiliarisation' more applicable to Sissay's performances.⁷ Brecht writes that within 'epic' theatre, 'defamiliarisation' is 'required to make things understood'.⁸ Brecht believed that defamiliarisation could prevent his audience from empathising unquestioningly, as was the convention within twentieth-century European theatre. For Brecht, defamiliarisation 'reveals the conventions' of theatre, helps achieve an 'admirable distance from the events portrayed' and removes action 'from the realm of the self-evident'.⁹ Brecht thought defamiliarisation necessary 'for the criticism of society'.¹⁰

As Sartiliot writes of Brecht, Sissay 'quotes the conventions' of the poetry performance, not 'simply to parody them and reveal their obsolete character, but to deconstruct the bourgeois values embedded in them and accepted by the spectator as reality'.¹¹ Sissay defamiliarises the poetry performance to examine the institutional racism, structures of funding, and bureaucracy behind it. Through his interruptions and extended introductions, Sissay makes the familiar conventions of the live poetry

performance *strange*. He inhabits and defamiliarises these conventions, removing the rules that normally allow an audience to relax. Sissay explains:

Oh so you're clapping at the end of the poem which is about being angry about x, y and z, there's some contract here that nobody's talking about, and I'm being paid to be here, so don't we need to look at that?¹²

Sissay is one of many poets to use extensive introductions as part of their poetic performance practice. Starting in the 1970s and continuing for the next two decades, the American poet David Antin improvised discourses on various topics, which he described as 'talk poems'.¹³ Although Sissay's 'talk poem' style introductions invite parallels with avant-garde poetic practice, his work is not mentioned within the 'black British avant-garde' speculated upon in the writings of Romana Huk, Lauri Ramey and Victoria Arana.¹⁴ This may be because, unlike Antin's talk poems, Sissay's introductions and interruptions are not in print. Cornelia Gräbner writes that Sissay shows the audience what is 'done' in a typical poetry performance, thereby presenting 'a performance of the poetry performance':

[Sissay's] seemingly chaotic 'recital' of two poems – which was accompanied by interspaced comments, stuttering, apparent indecision about which poem to recite, breaking off a poem after a few lines because he did not like the way he was reciting it, and other 'failures' – was in fact a performance of the poetry performance: an attempt to show what goes on in the poet when he has to perform, and to deconstruct his own authority as a poet while claiming, instead, that of a human being.¹⁵

Sissay's introductions and commentaries appear to be improvised, and are filled with the hesitations, indecision and restarts that Gräbner describes as 'failures'. In her doctoral thesis Gräbner suggests Sissay's performances 'fail' because his audiences do not 'open up and cooperate'.¹⁶ She describes this as a staging of inevitable failure, due to the conventions and contexts of the poetry performance, within which the audience does not actually respond and so his performances 'must fail as a performa-

tive speech act'.¹⁷ Sissay often vocalises his insecurities through a rehearsed skit: 'I have an inner voice saying "you're rubbish!" another saying "you're doing good, carry on!" and one in the middle saying "Oi, you two, separate!"'.¹⁸ In our interview Sissay confirmed that these moments of 'failure' are deliberate, intended and often repeated. It is also not always the case that his audience does not 'open up'. Sissay reports, 'they often say, "no you're doing OK, don't worry!"' Only at the end does he tell them: 'look I knew what I was doing earlier on'.¹⁹

Sissay's use of 'failure' is a defamiliarising strategy that generates live writing and the *appearance* of risky improvisation and spontaneity. This sense of risk makes the audience alert to the (a)liveness of Sissay's performance, to the extent that they 'often' respond to his rhetorical stagings of failure. In her study of the poetics of failure, Sarah Jane Bailes writes that failure 'works' and not only works but is productive: 'strategies of failure in the realm of performance can be understood as generative, prolific even; failure produces, and does so in a roguish manner'.²⁰ Although Sissay performs 'indecision', he does so in a charismatic way; his energy is expansive, he jokes with the audience, exploring ever bigger and absurdist gestures and tangents. Sissay does not use the same aesthetic of delivery (extreme naturalism) heard in the work of Bailes' case studies (such as *Goat Island* and *Forced Entertainment*), however the use of failure as a defamiliarising strategy to generate material, roguishly, as if breaking some unofficial law, is applicable and contextualises Sissay's performances within wider contemporary performance practices.

Julia Novak points out that taking aspects such as 'body language or audience interaction' into account when analysing live poetry requires 'a paradigmatic shift in poetry criticism from a system of thought that privileges the written mode' to an approach 'that fully acknowledges live performance as an alternative realisation mode'.²¹ Novak adopts the term 'audiotext', as offered by Charles Bernstein, to refer to the sounds that occur in a poetry performance outside of the voicing of a poem. Bernstein suggests the audiotext would consider as 'semantic features of the performed poem' not only 'highly artful' sounds but also accidental sounds that 'fall into the body's rhythms – gasps, stutters, hiccups, burps, coughs, slurs, microrepetitions, oscillations in volume, "incorrect" pronunciations'.²² Both intentional and

accidental aspects of an 'audiotext' impact the audience's experience, but is it not necessary to differentiate between unintentional sounds (such as coughs and microphone knocks) and intentional choices that are part of the poet's writing in performance? Sissay's multiple failures to begin his poems are intentional, as are his meandering introductions, his accentuated breath, vocal timbre and gestures. These choices need to be considered not only as part of the audience's experience, but as part of Sissay's *live writing*.

As Sissay narrates in his autobiographical solo show, *Something Dark* (first performed in 2003), his Ethiopian mother left him in the care of Wigan social services whilst she studied; this was her intention, however his social worker, after naming Lemn 'Norman', after himself, told his white, Baptist foster parents to treat it as an adoption.²³ His foster parents returned him to Wigan social services when he was eleven – after attempting to cast the 'devil' from him.²⁴ He didn't see another black person until he was fifteen. At eighteen years of age he finally had access to his birth certificate, discovered his name was not 'Norman' and learnt, 'the only truth I knew, my name Lemn Sissay'.²⁵

For eighteen years of his life, his identity, his name, was incorrectly 'written'. In *Something Dark* Sissay describes identities as literally and metaphorically written into his body, as if he is a living palimpsest: 'folding up my darkness and gently placing it into my inner child's mouth' and 'we punctured our skin with blunt pins and blue Indian ink'.²⁶ Later he tried to get the letters 'LOVE' out of his knuckles: 'now they lie beneath my skin barely visible – like ghosts'.²⁷ He describes himself as tattooed into his birth mother, as a scar: 'I had scared the living life out of her. I had the life scared out of me. I was the life that was scored into her, scarred into her'. Sissay comments on his acts of self-inscription, 'I was the only proof of my own existence, my own echo, tattooing myself into myself'.²⁸

The events and themes Sissay explores in *Something Dark* can be found in many of his performances and talks since, culminating in *The Report* in which his life story is reported from three perspectives (his own, the documentation of social services, and a psychologist).²⁹ Sissay told the psychologist who compiled the report, 'my writing was my identity'.³⁰ In an interview with Deirdre Osborne, Sissay explains:

If you have nobody, how do you know that you exist? [...] I wrote, therefore I exist. [...] On the most fundamental, base level, writing proved that I was somebody – it meant that I was alive at any given time.³¹

Having 'proved' he exists, as he told Osborne was his reason for writing as a young person, now he is testing that existence. In our interview he asks 'so what am I in this?' The 'I' in all this is not a stable, authoritative 'I', but a sense of self that is connected to contexts, society and the expectations (real or assumed) of his audiences. In the moment when he might be seen to have 'arrived' he shakes this certainty, asking what this means, what function he has fulfilled. He prevents his audience from being 'all okay with this'.³² Osborne writes that within *Something Dark*: 'Sissay literally and literarily performs himself into being'.³³ Extending this observation I suggest that Sissay uses performance not only to prove his own existence, but also to test, check, amplify, write and re-write it, questioning how different contexts and audiences change how his presence is perceived and the ways he behaves on stage.

This emphasis on Sissay's writing of his own presence in performance seems at odds with Charles Bernstein's description of a poetry reading:

The poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet; it materializes the text not the author; it performs the work, not the one who composed it. In short, the significant fact of the poetry reading is less the presence of the poet than the presence of the poem.³⁴

Bernstein's emphasis on the 'presence of the poem' rather than the poet chimes with Caroline Bergvall's discussion of performance writing during a Keynote speech in which she highlights 'the materiality of writing'. When speaking of 'writerly work which extends beyond the page' Bergvall focuses on 'writing' rather than a 'writer' and asks 'is it writing that performs not writes'. She casts writing as 'another performer' that might be 'addressed explicitly'.³⁵ It is this sense that writing is something independent, something that might be 'activated for and through [...] a performer's body, the body of a voice or the body of a page' that informs Bergvall's use of the term 'live writing'. She asks: 'can one turn the hour-glass and argue for the specificities of a

live writing (I use the term with caution) where the performer's presence is cut open, emptied out, absented by the writing's own presencing'.³⁶ Bergvall and Bernstein echo Roland Barthes who, in 'The Death of the Author', writes:

it is language that speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality [...] to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'.³⁷

The postmodern displacement of authorship from 'author' to 'reader' presents, as Jane Fenton Keane puts it, a 'contradiction' when it comes to the signification of the body within the poetry reading,³⁸ and is also problematic when applied outside of a white Western, predominantly male canon. Romana Huk states that postmodernist theory is 'a largely white western phenomenon' and asks how the avant-garde of poetry is compatible with those poets with literary heritages that 'are not part of that continuous western cultural imagery and its post-modern deconstruction, and whose places exist neither on their own outside it nor happily hyphenated within it?'³⁹ The poet David Marriott suggests that avant-garde white poets are able to minimise their own presence because their presence is already inscribed into a literary tradition; their identity has historically been the default identity for a Western poet: 'The avant-garde poet emerges as a figure (invariably male, invariably white) that history and culture no longer need to put in question'.⁴⁰

When Sissay interrupts his renditions of his own poems using a voice with differing attributes of pitch and timbre, as well as a contrasting style (conversational and hesitant rather than authoritative and lyric), we could say that the 'poet' interrupts the 'poem', *preventing* the poem (the writing) from speaking for itself in the ways conceptualised by Barthes, Bernstein and Bergvall. Sissay's long introductions stage the failure inherent in any attempt at pinning down a statement about a self. By disrupting his own poems, Sissay disrupts any sense that his is a stable, authoritative, 'found' identity, and that his poems are stable and authoritative lyrics. Peter Middleton writes (inspired by Hannah Arendt): 'Who one is will always be unfinished while alive, so self-description is always undone'.⁴¹ Denise Riley speculates on the discomfort of the lyric I when she writes that the 'borderline inauthenticity of the lyric

“I” gets relieved only inside the performed I’s speaking, where everyone, you hope, finally sees the truth of the matter – that it isn’t you’.⁴² Both writing and performing in order to prove one’s own existence and writing and performing as an attempt to disprove or minimise one’s existence reveal Riley’s uncomfortable sense that ‘it isn’t you’, that no such stable proof can ever be attained. Both are ways of exploring or revealing ways in which the familiar (the self, the poetry event, the gaze of the audience), is *strange*. Throughout his childhood Sissay was effectively *written* by the state, not even his name was his own, and so his writing and re-writing, testing and destabilising of his own presence is a political as well as an aesthetic strategy.

2. Performed Palimpsests

A transcript of Sissay’s performance at the Library of Congress in 2015 shows he introduces his poem ‘Invisible Kisses’ numerous times and each time breaks off to comment.⁴³ He begins the first line of the poem twice before eventually reciting it in full. This section of his performance, from the first introduction of the poem (‘This poem is called Invisible K... sorry for speaking...I speak a lot...’) until the end of the ‘poem itself’ contains roughly 900 words, only 258 of which are the poem in its published form.⁴⁴ A ‘palimpsest’ usually refers to the erasure and overlaying of texts on the page; we can describe the 642 words that introduce, contextualise, critique and reflect on ‘Invisible Kisses’ and Sissay himself, as a ‘performed palimpsest’ – writing that is effaced, re-written, overlaid and corrected in performance.

Sissay’s attempts and re-attempts at introductions and opening lines, his asides, tangents, corrections and elaborations, exploit his and his audience’s ‘residual awareness’, requiring them to hear the poem in the context of his extensive commentary. In *Psychophysical Acting*, Phillip Zarrilli describes ‘residual awareness’ as integral to the actor’s technique, enabling them to control how they continue or cut off their energy moment to moment. He describes that as an actor shifts their attention, they ‘must nevertheless maintain a residual/secondary awareness of the feel and quality of one’s relationship to the previous moment’.⁴⁵ During poetry performances the audience experiences a form of ‘residual awareness’, as each spoken phrase connects to their awareness of the ‘feel and quality’ of what came before. Zarrilli’s notion

seems more applicable to the psychophysical way we experience poetry than the somewhat cerebral principle of 'working memory' referred to in cognitive poetics, which posits that we hold an allocation of actual lines in our memory as we hear a poem read.⁴⁶

During his performed palimpsest at the Library of Congress, Sissay takes on a role of self-critic. He contextualises himself, referring to his career and status: 'I think of myself as a radical poet, and I like to read love poetry, I read it at the Pan African Congress, Conference, at the LSE in the mid-1980s'. He points out that reading a love poem is 'a radical thing to do'. He compares himself to the rapper, Tupac Shakur, 'a love poet'. He invites us to view his decision to read a love poem as 'radical', and indeed to view love as 'radical'. He tells us: 'This poem gets read at a wedding once every two weeks, somewhere in the world', indicating his popularity and commenting on the life of a jobbing poet whose poem is used without royalties: 'So they pay me? No'. Having pointed out the injustice, he foregrounds his success and generosity with: 'It's all good, it's online if you want it'. Sissay discusses his relationship to love, and the connection between love and anger, 'anger is an expression of the need for love'. He shifts from self-critic to self-therapist, telling us 'I refuse not to love', in spite of 'everything that I've been through'. This is why, for Sissay, a love poem is 'radical', an expression of his refusal to allow his past treatment to diminish his capacity for love.⁴⁷

The performance is in front of a predominantly African and African American audience that includes Prince Ermias of Ethiopia. Sissay is aware of his context, 'I'm sorry, Prince Ermias'. Osborne writes that Sissay's 'deprivation of any sense of origin, which a biological family context offers, produced a sense of disembodiment and insubstantiality'.⁴⁸ Growing up surrounded by white people foregrounded Sissay's experience of difference and lack of community. On stage he may be expected to embody 'the Black poet', when watched by a white audience this re-stages the experience of being the only black person he knew growing up, when watched by an African American audience he is the 'black British Ethiopian poet'. He questions what the Library of Congress expects him to represent, de-contextualising his physical gestures, repeating and exaggerating them:

I spent my life with people saying, (*nasal voice*) you're not black, you're a human being. It's like saying, you know, it's just er. That's people I don't know just stopping me on the street you know what I mean? Randomly, (*repeats a gesture that he did on the first 'randomly' – both hands splay on the word*) randomly. Okay, so, so was that, (*repeats the gesture a couple more times*) Library of Congress, was that okay? (*laughter*) (*gesture several more times*) 'randomly' is that OK?⁴⁹

He asks 'Can we laugh here, is that okay? Okay, good, good, good. Good good good good good. Is that black enough, by the way? Is laughing black enough?' Questions such as what it means to be 'black enough' are embedded in Sissay's discourse, with different resonances in different contexts. At TedX Salford he critiques the 'patronising' statements made by white people: 'you're not black you're a human being' and points out the racism of white people who don't 'see colour': 'they only say they never see colour when they see colour'.⁵⁰ Sissay makes reference to the wider systems of funding and how funding is used as a marker of 'acceptance': 'Maybe apply for some funding to accommodate you within this society'.⁵¹ Sissay often critiques societal structures with a performed palimpsest on the topic of funders and bureaucracy. In his talk for the Nantucket Project, after mentioning 'Mohammed, from the Koran' (in a list of examples of famous orphans), he takes a tangent:

It can be discussed, okay, it can be discussed. Maybe we should split up into small groups and discuss whether that was a relevant joke to say in this environment, but to split up into small groups we'd need a worker to administrate the process and to get a worker to administrate the process we'd have to apply for funding. To apply for funding we'd have to justify our existence through a constitution. Anyway, that's a whole other story.⁵²

Whilst questioning the contract between performer and audience as it is being played out, Sissay also asks wider questions of what he is expected to represent within society, why he is on that stage, who is paying him to be there, what the infrastructure is behind it all, and in so doing, he undermines audience expectations of what he,

'the poet' should be. The 2007 'Free Verse Report' discusses the 'tick box' nature of funding specific to poets of colour, contextualising Sissay's preoccupation with the 'subtlety of acceptance, you know, the rules of engagement'.⁵³ The report identified that poets are often 'asked to represent "the Black Voice" at events'.⁵⁴ Patricia Williams comments in her Reith Lecture: 'There's that clunky social box larger than your body taking up all that space. You need two chairs at the table: one for you, one for your blackness'.⁵⁵ In an interview with Molly Thompson the poet Patience Agbabi discusses similar territory: 'Obviously I'm a Black writer, of course I'm a Black writer – I'm not in denial about it, but I think there is a danger and I don't like it when promoters bill you or label you in a certain way'.⁵⁶ Sissay told me that he will not always fulfil a programmer's expectations of him: 'I've had to say no – this is the way I do it. Some days it'll be like this and some days it'll be like this'.⁵⁷ A poet can become invisible even when on a stage; Sissay's performed palimpsests maintain the audience's attention, their hyper attention, they keep him visible as a human being rather than a token ticking a programmer's box. Sissay's relationship with institutions is not a simple one: it was institutions, councils, and the state that failed Sissay so comprehensively throughout his childhood. Now, public funding and institutions often fund his performances and appearances. His joke at the Library of Congress: 'Maybe apply for some funding to accommodate you within this society' is uneasy.⁵⁸ The word 'accommodate' has uncomfortable undertones, suggesting the act of finding a place for someone who doesn't fit in. Even when Sissay is commissioned, programmed and paid to be on stage, his joke questions whether he is still just being *accommodated* by the institutions who request his presence.

After one of the introductions to 'Invisible Kisses', Sissay begins the first line of the poem, then stops and adjusts the microphone stand, possibly deciding in that moment not to continue the poem because adjusting the stand has interrupted it. Or perhaps he never intended to read the full poem at that point. Sissay uses multiple failures to begin the poem to generate writing, to structure this performed palimpsest, which moves from love to anger to racism, systems, society and to pain, all of which Sissay has had to navigate in order to write the poem. When Sissay pushes his narratives into a realm where they might (and sometimes do) fail, he keeps going,

pushing further and further; his 'failures' generate more material and become successful, and often funny. Sissay's performed palimpsest around 'Invisible Kisses' returns to the question of what love means for him, zooming out from the personal, to all the 'rules of engagement' that impact the individual and the individual's ability to love. 'Invisible Kisses' is an abstract poem, not referring to any specific person or event, however the performed palimpsest ensures that we can't listen to the poem, when it finally arrives, without the residual awareness of the speech that preceded it. Sissay's persona, his thoughts, experiences and his undermining and questioning of his role and contexts remain in the foreground. Couples may read 'Invisible Kisses' at weddings around the world without knowledge of Sissay's experiences and any context other than their own. When Sissay's persona is not the subject of the poem, there is space for others to insert themselves as subject. However, in performance he is always the subject, and everything that enabled him to write the poem becomes part of the experience of the poem, removing possibilities for audience members to relate the poem to themselves, and demonstrating that there is no such thing as a simple love poem.

3. Defamiliarising 'Gold from the Stone'

In his poem 'Gold from the Stone' Sissay writes about Ethiopia, a home, and a culture that he yearned for but did not experience until adulthood.⁵⁹ On first glance the poem evokes elemental feelings of creation, belonging, and the connection of the person to the land, but the imagery is of plundering the earth and a kind of alchemy, extracting gold from stone, an origin story in which humans interfere with the natural order of the world. The first performance I discuss takes place in London in 2015 as part of Ethiopia's celebrations for the World Travel Market in Porchester Hall, a grand location with wood panelled walls (**Figure 1**).⁶⁰ The second is embedded within an autobiographical lecture in Massachusetts for the 'Nantucket Project'.⁶¹ Considering both performances reveals how Sissay consciously 'writes live' with his voice and body, defamiliarising his poem with inflated and emphasised use of voice and gesture.

In *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese define the esoteric notions of 'presence' and 'energy' by attributes that can be identified

across performance traditions. They study the technique of performers from ballerinas and mime artists, to Balinese dancers and Noh theatre actors, observing principles of 'dynamic opposition' and 'extra-daily' balance in the way spines twist and weight is unequally distributed. Barba describes a 'dilated body' as when the 'flow of energies which characterise our daily behaviour' are 're-routed' and enable a performer to be 'present' and 'believable'.⁶² During Sissay's performed palimpsest at Porchester Hall [0:13–1:05] we can observe many elements of Barba's 'dilated body': extra-daily balance, use of eyes, and the principle of opposition. Before he begins the poem [Figure 1, 0:48] Sissay uses 'dynamic opposition', moving slightly forwards before pulling back his torso, achieving a position of 'extra-daily balance', shifting his gaze to different parts of the audience, folding his arms [0:46], twisting his torso, widening his eyes, amplifying his facial expressions [0:53].⁶³ Barba writes: 'seeing is not looking with the eyes; it is an action which engages the entire body'.⁶⁴ Sissay uses his eyes as part of the action of his body; he performs the action of seeing.



Figure 1: 'Lemn Sissay performs his poem Gold from the Stone' [0:48].⁶⁵

Sissay's energy shifts when he moves from the performed palimpsest to 'Gold from the Stone'. During the first half of the poem Sissay is frowning, then, perhaps when he locates the poem in his book, [1:45], his facial expressions suddenly transform, he starts smiling and widening his eyes again. He emphatically stabs his chest and breathes between words. The chest stabs, inhalations [I] and exhalations [E] function as a kind of stylised performed punctuation:

Gold from the stone, (*almost sings 'stone' and gestures with right hand*)
 Oil from the [I] earth,
 I [(E-I] and stabs chest, 'yearned' with arm out) yearned ([I] and stab chest)
 for ([I] and stab chest) my [I] home – (*home on exhalation, his fingers stay on chest, moving with exhalation. He repeats home twice more– it becomes a groaning sound*)

The second version of 'Gold from the Stone' is embedded within an autobiographical lecture entitled 'Poetry is the Voice at the Back of the Mind'. Sissay goes straight into the poem without pausing between the introduction, the title, and the first line [17:11].⁶⁶ He uses the same techniques, such as breath between words in the penultimate stanza, however his use of voice, breath and physicality is less exaggerated, and his energy is amplified consistently throughout the poem. He brings his book on stage but places it on the ground. Here are the final stanzas:

Gold (*sings 'gold' on rising pitch*) from the stone, Oil from the [I] earth,
 I [E-I] yearned [E-I] for[E-I] my [E-I] home [E-I] Ever [E-I] since [E-I] my [E-I]
 birth.
 (*no pause*)
 Food from the platter,
 Water from the rain, (*drops pitch and shifts balance back to the left, gesturing with left arm, pointing finger up*)
 The subject and the matter, (*between lines, he places both hands on his chest then lets them fall to his side*)

I'm going home again. (final line delivered simply, with smile, then he does a strong pointing gesture as if to underline or put a full stop at the end of the poem)

Sissay does not repeat the word 'home', nor does he stab his chest, doubling the impact of the breath, as he did in the London performance. In London he sings 'stone' – the final word of the first line of the penultimate stanza. In this performance he sings 'gold' on a rising pitch (the first word of the first line of the penultimate stanza). Sissay's breath is as 'present' as the words, rather than, in the conventional lyrical mode, serving as a vehicle to carry the line. He does not transfer this audible breath onto the page versions of the poem, translating breath into space on the page, and vice versa, as a poet influenced by Charles Olson's 'composition by field' might, but, as Olson writes, 'the beginning and the end is breath' and it is through breath that 'the material of verse shifts'.⁶⁷ Sissay's use of breath and voice creates another version of the poem in performance, one that is written with the breath and voice as much as with words. In both performances Sissay takes a breath before the word 'earth' (the final word of the second line of the penultimate stanza). Sissay's distinctive breath is a recurring element, part of his 'live writing' of this poem.

As Mukařovský describes, foregrounding can draw attention to 'the act of speech itself' and push communication to the background.⁶⁸ Sissay foregrounds 'the act of speech itself' with his vocal timbre, audible breath, and gestures. In the London performance, when he shifts his energy midway, his stabbing gestures and audible breaths become so 'loud' they are foregrounded over the words. By repeating 'home', and transforming it into an exhaled groan, Sissay prevents the word from being anyone's home, from being an individual audience member's idea of home, and instead foregrounds the groaning sound of his voice, which is perhaps his emotional response to the idea of home. The exaggeration of this groaning sound means this seems a representation of emotional response rather than a genuine groan triggered by emotion in the moment of performance. Paul Simpson questions what happens when the 'deviant pattern' (or unusual mode of delivery) is established throughout a text. He asks: 'Does it stay foregrounded for the entire duration of the text? Or does

it gradually and unobtrusively slip into the background?’ When the unusual feature becomes usual, any deviation from this new, unusual norm becomes known as internal foregrounding, ‘a kind of deviation within a deviation’.⁶⁹ This is what Sissay achieves in both performances when he deviates from the extra-daily ‘deviant pattern’ of the penultimate verse, to deliver the final line ‘I’m coming home’ so simply.

Rather than ‘emptying’ his presence in the ways conceptualised by Bernstein and Bergvall in their discussions of poetry readings and ‘live writing’, Sissay *amplifies* his presence, his (a)liveness. Sissay does this in an overtly ‘theatrical’ way, in contrast to the ‘monotonous incantation’ mode of delivery that is often preferred by avant-garde and ‘American academic’ poets.⁷⁰ Rather than avoiding the first person, ‘emptying’ presence, minimally inflecting and attempting to foreground the ‘writing’ rather than the writer, Sissay exaggerates his performance to such an extent that his presence, his voice and his gestures become a part of his live writing. Sissay does not just affirm his ‘I’, as detractors of performance poetry are so critical of with terms such as ‘naïve identity politicking’, but he overtly performs it, analyses, amplifies and defamiliarises it.⁷¹

4. Defamiliarising the body

The opening five seconds of ‘I Hate You’, a poem Sissay performed as guest poet at a Mouthy Poets showcase in Nottingham, shows him doing a gesture with pointed fingers and open mouth, turning his head, spiralling his arms and shifting his gaze from his audience to his fingers and back (**Figure 2**).⁷² Once he starts the poem he stops spiralling his arms but continues using the pointed forefinger. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka writes of Thelonious Monk: ‘The quick dips, half-whirls, and deep pivoting jerks that Monk gets into behind that piano are part of the music, too’.⁷³ The same principle applies; Sissay’s gestures are part of his poetry. Here Sissay’s gesture occurs independently of his speech and therefore does not emphasise or describe the imagery of the poem – it cannot, as the poem has not yet begun, except of course it has, it has begun with gesture. Sissay’s gesture leads seamlessly into a staccato comment: ‘this poem’s called “I Hate You”’, performed as if it is the conclusion of the gesture rather than the introduction to the poem. During the [spoken] poem Sissay



Figure 2: ‘Lemn Sissay – “I Hate You” [0:05].

continues the gesture, but now it is no longer abstract but has intention, pointing at the imagined subject of the poem. His forefinger seems to conduct his voice, at 0:25 his finger moves up with the unnatural pitch of his voice (then holds the silence for a moment). Sissay defamiliarises the gesture through repetition, rhythm, the intensity of his facial expressions, the staccato movements of his head, and by looking at himself; as Brecht describes: ‘To look at himself is for the performer an artful and artistic act of self-estrangement’.⁷⁴

When I asked Sissay about this extended opening gesture he remembered thinking ‘oh this is fun’ and continuing it, taking it ‘further and further’ until it moved ‘into the Tim Crouch realm’.⁷⁵ The fact Sissay remembers the gesture at all demonstrates

that this is as much a part of his conscious 'live writing' as his use of language. In our interview Sissay also talks more generally about breaking out of a poem to query his audience's interpretation of his physicality. He demonstrates taking a rhetorical gesture that his audience would habitually take for granted, or see as simply indicating generosity and openness and re-framing it, revealing that out of the context of the poetry performance the gesture could be read as a threat of strangling:

I used to have a whole thing on stage where I'd (*interrupting the poem and referring to his physicality*) go "do you believe me?" (*Sissay demonstrates a strangle gesture in the air*) 'cause this is weird... if a guy came up to you in the street with his hands like this you would say "go away now", but on stage people think, "Oh he's such an open guy", so I'm like "so this is alright is it?" I stop in the middle of a gig and have a whole joke about that.⁷⁶

The motif of decontextualising gesture to consider its meanings, like the recurring themes of blackness and the expectations of Sissay as a poet, recurs across multiple performances. During his performance at the Library of Congress he defamiliarises a gesture that accompanies the word 'randomly', repeating it multiple times and asking 'was that okay?'⁷⁷ During Sissay's TedX Salford talk (**Figure 3**) he gesticulates, then stops speaking, continues gesticulating, looks at his hands as if they are moving independently of him (Brecht's 'self-estrangement'), and uses this defamiliarisation device to reveal the strangeness of his physicality, alongside his awareness of his role and the expectations upon him in different contexts:

so (*holds fingers out, looks from one hand to another, wiggles fingers*) I'm not on drugs by the way just so...don't even don't don't this talk will now never get on TED because the black Americans will go 'really, did you have to? Did you have to make that joke?'⁷⁸

Sissay breaks the moment to defamiliarise the conventions of performance. He looks at his body, asking what it signifies, and how it might be interpreted. Brecht could be describing Sissay when he talks about the Chinese actor who looks at his own body



Figure 3: 'Morning Breaks: Lemn Sissay at TedX Salford' [11:46]⁷⁹

whilst performing and *'makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at'*⁸⁰ Brecht writes that the actor:

looks at the spectator as if to say: Isn't it just like that? But he also looks at his own arms and legs, guiding them, examining them, in the end, perhaps praising them.⁸¹

Sissay's self-estrangement of gesture prevents the audience from signing up to the 'suspension of disbelief' that is the default mode for the spectator. Using this technique, Sissay defamiliarises in two senses: he defamiliarises the audience's viewing of his body, enabling it to take on new meanings, and at the same time views his own hands as if they are moving independently from him, as if he is seeing them for the first time. By drawing our attention to his gestures and to the conventions of performance, Sissay makes these conventions strange, he 'reveals the conventions', questions their meanings, and removes the action 'from the realm of the self-evident'.⁸² Instead of enhancing the meaning of his speech with his gestures, Sissay gives his

body separate signification to his words and use of voice. He reveals the strangeness of performance and everything that the 'contract' between audience and performer permits us to take for granted. Audiences at poetry events are not in the habit of interpreting gesture independently of language; a gesture is not expected to carry meaning in itself but is the accompaniment and enhancement of spoken language. We often take the convention of direct audience address for granted, and perhaps forget the associations of power, politics and preaching that the direct address evokes. When Sissay breaks out of the 'poet' persona he reveals that these conventions of performance can prevent us from seeing and responding to the body on stage in a more nuanced way. Through techniques of defamiliarisation Sissay opens up the possibilities of using the body as part of live writing.

5. Defamiliarising Lemn Sissay

At the Royal Court Theatre downstairs on Sunday 30th April, 2017, at 18:00, Sissay presents *The Report*.

The Report lasts for two hours. The project came together quickly, over a few days, directed by John McGrath (who also directed *Something Dark*). The Royal Court theatre downstairs is sold out. Sissay and Julie Hesmondhalgh enter. Sissay stands centre stage and reads his blog post from the 20th March 2017 one month prior. His blog explains that he had to have a psychological report to provide evidence of wrongdoing by Wigan social services as part of his case against the state. He is suing the state and the report documents the lasting effects of his experiences in Wigan council's 'care' system. His blog recounts meeting the psychologist who said 'we're going to be five hours at least' before 'the psychological interrogation' of his life began. He says that he has not read the 25-page report yet. He says 'I want someone to read the report to me' and that he wants this to happen on stage 'in front of a live audience. One reader. One table. And me. It will be called The Report'.⁸³

The set looks like a psychologist's office, with a large desk and chair behind it (for the actor Julie Hesmondhalgh, tasked with reading the full report), and an armchair stage right with a side table and glass of water. After reading his blog, Sissay sits in the armchair and Hesmondhalgh reads the introduction to the report standing in

front of the desk, then continues, sitting at the desk. The report is repetitive and appears to be unedited. It begins with the story of Sissay's life as told to the psychologist by Sissay. Then it re-tells the events through the documentation provided by social services and Wigan council. In the final section Hesmondhalgh reads the psychologist's assessment of Sissay.

During the reading Sissay remains seated, he folds his arms, looks down, and sometimes turns slightly towards Hesmondhalgh. Hesmondhalgh reads the report facing the audience, at intervals she breaks out of her reading to ask Sissay if he wants to say anything and if he is fine to continue. He always says he is fine and that she should go on. Towards the end he says 'I couldn't have done this on my own' and several audience members shout out their support.

As Sissay told the psychologist, he has spent his whole life putting his story together. He told the psychologist that he had 'no identity' and that his 'identity [was] based on being not like everyone else' and that 'my writing was my identity'. Sissay recounted that he was 'always under threat'. He was surrounded by racism throughout his childhood. At one point he was put in a room with a confirmed Nazi. He told the psychologist that he is always aware that white people might see him as a threat. He said he even avoided breakfast at his hotel the morning of the assessment, as he didn't want to make the white people having breakfast feel uncomfortable. The report reveals that the actions he was often punished for were his responses to racism from the authorities, the police, other children and those who were responsible for his care. He said 'I don't trust institutions' and revealed 'I've raised my profile solely to be able to look them in the eye'.⁸⁴

Finally, Hesmondhalgh reads the psychologist's evaluation. The psychologist describes how for Sissay, performance is a safe space that enables him to interact with others at a distance. He diagnoses Sissay with chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (involving intrusive thoughts, nightmares and flashbacks), Avoidant Personality Disorder and difficulty forming relationships, a tendency to self-sabotage and Alcohol Use Disorder. He comments on how Sissay pushes away friends and partners when they get close. He concludes that Sissay will struggle with these conditions

and have difficulties forming relationships for the rest of his life. The psychologist comments that the trauma experienced by Sissay has shaped his personality, and become a part of him, a part of his identity.

Behind me in the stalls, a woman is sobbing.

By staging this event in a theatre, Sissay curates our hearing of various versions of 'him' as told by himself to the psychologist, as told by records held by social services, and as told by a psychologist repeating the narrations back and assessing the effect they have had. Simon Hattenstone reviewed the event for the *Guardian*, describing it as a 'blistering one off show' and 'the ultimate verbatim' and 'theatre at its most raw'.⁸⁵ He describes Hesmondhalgh as if she is portraying a character: 'Hesmondhalgh is wonderful – particularly when she breaks out of character to ask Sissay if he is all right and if it's OK for her to go on'.

Although the staging has a set and script and all the signs of theatre, Sissay is on stage as 'himself' and Hesmondhalgh reads the script and breaks out of the reading and 'character' to ask Sissay if he is okay. We could suggest that Hesmondhalgh maintains a Brechtian distance from her role, often reminding us that she is an actor not a psychologist, and not only an actor but Sissay's friend. Rather than preventing the audience from empathising with the content, as Brecht intended through defamiliarisation, our awareness of the theatrical devices make the content more rather than less real. In a sense it is an inversion of a Brechtian staging, the script is not drama but real life, and the use of theatrical devices enables us to distance ourselves from this reality enough for us, and Sissay himself, to bear it, and, through bearing it, digest the reality of it.

When he performs his poetry, Sissay's body, voice and presence often feels foregrounded over the content; here the content overwhelms his presence and all the constructs of theatre. Of course, in spite of his silence, Sissay is the subject to a greater extent than in any of his other performances. The formality of the staging contains the extremity of the material, makes it feel safer, housed within the rules and conventions of a theatre – the same conventions that Sissay usually tries to disrupt. It is the strange security of a stage setting that makes this the easiest way for Sissay to experience the report. Sissay told Hattenstone:

I feel good on stage. I feel, in a bizarre way, like I'm with family. This is the best way for me to look at those files. I couldn't be in a safer place. I feel more comfortable having this out in the open, because they fucked me up when I was on my own.⁸⁶

Paradoxically, the theatre context enables Sissay *not* to perform, but just to listen and experience, like a spectator at the theatre. This staging shares the responsibility of *hearing* with the audience. Although Sissay is almost silent throughout, he is still present as an 'author' playing with the conventions of theatre and questioning the ways in which his audience listens; we do not know whether to listen to this as 'theatre' or as 'life'; we do not know whether to see the two figures on stage as performers or not. Although the entire event is about 'Lemn Sissay' his identity is still never 'fixed'. His authority as 'author' is still being disrupted. He is, again, being written and re-written, heard and re-heard.

6. (A)live Writing

Sissay has found a method for making intrusive thoughts part of his performance, playing with multiple voices, staging the possible reactions and thoughts of his audience. Making method from one's madness (to borrow the cliché) can be an artistic strategy, a way of generating material from 'failure'. Sissay's stage self is a version of himself that he can operate in a controlled environment, where risk is safe, housed within the audience-performer relationship. His audience has chosen to be there and seek this interaction. It is a context in which he cannot feel that he has inflicted himself on others. He does not have to maintain a relationship with audience members off-stage. The performance space becomes a controlled laboratory in which to test and push interpersonal relationships, acceptance and the possibility of rejection. The stage is, as the psychologist reflects, a 'safe space that enables him to interact with others at a distance'.⁸⁷ Although an audience is a changing group of people, Sissay comments that when he is with an audience he feels 'like I'm with family'.⁸⁸ While one performance might be better received than another, he has never been rejected by this changing family, and has gathered accolades and symbols of acceptance. The psychologist concludes:

[Sissay] meets some of his needs for acceptance and love through the superficial and impersonal relationships he forms through being famous, whereby he interacts with people but at a safe distance.⁸⁹

Sissay's fame and his performances enable him to 'rehearse' relationships, to test out the stability of his position as a poet on stage. Hearing the aggressive actions taken by the authorities in the name of 'care' read out in front of Sissay and an audience is the ultimate act of defamiliarisation. His life is defamiliarised, it is made strange by being staged, by being framed as theatre, by being told and retold from multiple viewpoints. *The Report* generated a huge amount of empathy in the audience (as was clear in the calls of support, applause and tears) and at the same time the reading and context defamiliarised the content to enable us to reflect upon the systems, institutions, and cultural values that have resulted in this event ... and person.

During *The Report*, whilst the harmful actions of the institutions that were supposed to care for Sissay are voiced, Sissay, the subject, is silent. Writing and re-writing his life, testing his (a)liveness with an audience, revelling in the chance to change his script and re-write his own poems in the moment are all ways for Sissay to prove that he has 'authorship'. And although he sits quietly during *The Report*, by asserting himself as the author of the event, by choosing to stage it in this high-profile theatre, he exerts *some* authority over events from his childhood that effectively *wrote* him.

Spending two hours with the violence of the events from his childhood is not easy for either his audience or Sissay. The violence of being written by others is made public, made present, by Hesmondhalgh's voice, whilst Sissay's unusually silent presence 'is cut open, emptied out, absented by the writing's own presencing'.⁹⁰ The emptying out of presence imagined by Bergvall, in this realisation of the concept, is a violent act. Like the violence that was quite literally enacted on Sissay's *presence* as a child, the presence of the writing of the report acts on Sissay's silent, 'emptied out' presence on stage. *The Report* demonstrates that there is nothing naïve about 'identity politics'.⁹¹ Here, 'live writing' shifts towards a staged form of 'life writing'. Sissay proves that although the trauma he has experienced has

shaped his identity, he is not already written. He must do this 'live', with witnesses, 'because they fucked me up when I was on my own'.⁹² Sissay uses live writing to write and re-write his own (a)liveness. Sissay's performances demonstrate that, at least while alive, the writer's presence, their '(a)liveness' is always part of their writing.

Notes

- ¹ Lemn Sissay, 'Interview with Hannah Silva'. *Black British Poetry in Performance* (London: British Library, 8th September 2015), Audio recording.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ 'Crouch's theatre embodies Brecht's concept of a theatre that embraces its theatricality to make an audience think much more deeply about issues that seem commonplace or obvious'. David Chadderton, 'The Author, Tim Crouch, Royal Exchange Theatre Manchester. Review by David Chadderton' in *British Theatre Guide* (2010) [online]. <https://www.britishtheatreinfo.info/reviews/authorDC-rev> [last accessed 11th June 2020]
- ⁶ Claudette Sartiliot, *Citation and Modernity, Derrida, Joyce and Brecht* (Oklahoma Press, 1993), pp.120–121.
- ⁷ Adriana Cavarero, trans. Paul A. Kottman, *For More Than One Voice, Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford University Press, 2005).
- ⁸ Bertolt Brecht, 'Theatre for Learning'. In Carol Martin and Henry Bial (eds.), *Brecht Sourcebook*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.25.
- ⁹ 'On Chinese Acting'. In *Brecht Sourcebook*, pp.16–17.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p.22.
- ¹¹ *Citation and Modernity, Derrida, Joyce and Brecht*, p.140.
- ¹² 'Lemn Sissay interview with Hannah Silva'.
- ¹³ David Antin, *How Long Is the Present: Selected Talk Poems of David Antin*, Stephen Fredman (ed.), (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).
- ¹⁴ See: Victoria R. Arana, 'Situating a "Black" British Poetic Avant-Garde'. In *"Black" British Aesthetics Today*. Victoria R. Arana (ed.), (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) pp.79–100; Victoria R. Arana, 'Black American bodies in the neo-millennial avant-garde black British poetry'. In *Literature and Psychology* (48:4, 2002) pp.47–80; Romana Huk, 'In AnOther's Pocket: The Address of the "Pocket Epic" in Postmodern Black British Poetry'. In *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. 13:1 (Spring 2000), pp.23–47; Lauri Ramey, 'Diaspora and the Avant-Garde in Contemporary Black British Poetry'. In *Diasporic Avant-Gardes, Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement*, Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten, (eds.), (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), pp.189–206.
- ¹⁵ 'Is Performance Poetry Dead?' p.81.
- ¹⁶ Cornelia Gräbner, "Off The Page and Off The Stage: The Performance of Poetry and its Public Function". Diss. (University of Amsterdam, 2007), p.172.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p.155.
- ¹⁸ As heard at numerous performances including for the Oxford Poetry Society (Oxford: The Big Bang Sausage Restaurant, 2009) and *London Liming* (London: Richmix, 11th December 2013).

- ¹⁹ 'Lemn Sissay interview with Hannah Silva'.
- ²⁰ Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp.2–3.
- ²¹ Julia Novak, *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), p.55.
- ²² Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.13–14.
- ²³ Lemn Sissay, *Something Dark* (London: Battersea Arts Centre, 2006). The British Library Audio Visual Archives. VHS Cassette.
- ²⁴ Lemn Sissay, 'Something Dark'. In *Hidden Gems. Contemporary Black British Plays: Six Experimental New Plays by Black British Writers*, Deirdre Osborne (ed.), (London: Oberon Books, 2008), p.332.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.339.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.331; p.336.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.336.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.334; p.336.
- ²⁹ Lemn Sissay and Julie Hesmondhalgh, *The Report* (London: Royal Court Theatre, 30 April 2017). Performance.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Dierdre Osborne, 'Lemn Sissay's Life's Source', introduction to 'Something Dark'. In *Hidden Gems Contemporary Black British Plays: Six Experimental New Plays by Black British Writer*, Deirdre Osborne (ed.), (London: Oberon Books, 2008), p.321.
- ³² 'Lemn Sissay interview with Hannah Silva'.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p.318.
- ³⁴ Charles Bernstein, 'Introduction'. In *Close Listening. Poetry and the Performed Word*, Charles Bernstein (ed.), (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.13.
- ³⁵ Caroline Bergvall, 'What Do We Mean by Performance Writing?' (Keynote Speech) *Performance Writing Symposium* (Dartington College of Arts, 12th April 1996), p.3; p.1; p.6. [online] <<https://docplayer.net/38120436-Caroline-bergvall-keynote-what-do-we-mean-by-performance-writing-w.html>> [last accessed 11th June 2020]
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.6.
- ³⁷ Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard, 'The Death of the Author'. In *Image, Music, Text*. (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.142.
- ³⁸ Jane Fenton Keane, 'Poetry Beyond the Page, a stroll through noticing'. In *Philament 4: Untitled* (University of Sydney, August 2004), [Online] <<http://www.philamentjournal.com/articles/poetry-beyond-the-page-a-stroll-through-noticing/>> [last accessed 11th June 2020]
- ³⁹ Romana Huk, 'In AnOther's Pocket: The Address of the "Pocket Epic" in Postmodern Black British Poetry' in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. 13:1 (Spring 2000), pp.23–47. p.31; p.24.
- ⁴⁰ David Marriott, 'Response to Race and the Poetic Avant Garde'. In *Boston Review* (10 March 2015) [Online] <<http://bostonreview.net/poetry/david-marriott-response-race-and-poetic-avant-garde>> [last accessed 11th June 2020]
- ⁴¹ Peter Middleton, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), p.111.
- ⁴² Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.80.
- ⁴³ Lemn Sissay, 'Library of Congress'. ('Invisible Kisses') (Washington: The Library of Congress. 6th July 2015) 16 Nov 2015. [online] <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4rGod2TYho>>. Transcript

- available online: <<http://stream.media.loc.gov/webcasts/captions/2015/150706game1200.txt>> [last accessed 11th June 2020]
- ⁴⁴ Lemn Sissay, 'Invisible Kisses'. In *Gold From The Stone* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016), p.109.
- ⁴⁵ Phillip Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting, an Intercultural Approach after Stanislavski* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p.104.
- ⁴⁶ Nigel Fabb, 'The Verse-Line as a Whole Unit in Working Memory, Ease of Processing, and the Aesthetic Effects of form'. In *Philosophy Supplement* (75, 2014), pp. 29–50.
- ⁴⁷ Lemn Sissay, 'Library of Congress'.
- ⁴⁸ 'Lemn Sissay's Life's Source'. In *Hidden Gems*, p.319.
- ⁴⁹ 'Invisible Kisses' [23:42]. I have used the transcript made available by the Library of Congress (note 43) but have made corrections and added the bracketed descriptions of gestures (refer to the Youtube video (note 43) for clarification).
- ⁵⁰ Lemn Sissay, 'Morning Breaks, Lemn Sissay at TEDX Salford', *TEDX Talks* (25 May 2014) [Online] [13:00; 12:20–12:38]. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK6ggmkNhuk>> [last accessed 11th June 2020]
- ⁵¹ 'Invisible Kisses'.
- ⁵² Lemn Sissay, 'Poetry is the Voice at the Back of the Mind'. ('Gold from the Stone') (Massachusetts: The Nantucket Project, 26 March 2014), [online] [2:13] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wD5d_0ykUiE> [last accessed 11th June 2020]
- ⁵³ 'Invisible Kisses'.
- ⁵⁴ Danuta Kean (ed.), 'The Free Verse Report' (Spread the Word, The Arts Council England, Scottish Arts Council and Arts Council Wales, 2007), p.8. The Arts Council England, Scottish Arts Council and Arts Council Wales commissioned 'Spread The Word' in 2005 to research why so few black and Asian poets had been published in the UK over the previous ten years. The report was published in 2007.
- ⁵⁵ Patricia Williams, 'The Genealogy of Race. Lecture 2: The Pantomime of Race', *Reith Lectures*. (BBC Radio 4. Transmission: 4 March 1997).
- ⁵⁶ Molly Thompson, 'Patience Agbabi: An Interview', *Write Black, Write British, From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, Kadija Sesay (ed.), (Hertford: Hansib Publications, 2005), pp.145–164. p.153.
- ⁵⁷ 'Lemn Sissay interview with Hannah Silva'.
- ⁵⁸ 'Invisible Kisses'.
- ⁵⁹ Lemn Sissay, *Rebel Without Applause* (Edinburgh and London: Canongate Books), pp.9–10.
- ⁶⁰ Lemn Sissay, 'Lemn Sissay performs his poem Gold From the Stone.' (Porchester Hall, London, 5 Nov 2015)[online] <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dh979wkvjY>> [last accessed 17th June 2020]
- ⁶¹ 'Poetry is the Voice at the Back of the Mind'.
- ⁶² Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology, The Secret Art of the Performer* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.54.
- ⁶³ 'Lemn Sissay performs his poem Gold From the Stone'.
- ⁶⁴ *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology, The Secret Art of the Performer*, p.109.
- ⁶⁵ 'Lemn Sissay performs his poem Gold From the Stone'.
- ⁶⁶ 'Poetry is the Voice at the Back of the Mind'.
- ⁶⁷ Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' (1950). [online] http://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Projective_Verse.pdf [last accessed 11th June 2020]
- ⁶⁸ Jan Mukařovský, 'Standard Language and Poetic Language', *Chapters from the History of Czech Functional Linguistics*, Jan Chovanec (ed.), (Masarykova univerzita Brno, 2014), p.45.

- ⁶⁹ Paul Simpson, *Stylistics, A Resource Book for Students*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p.51.
- ⁷⁰ In his introduction to *Close Listening*, Bernstein writes: 'Without in any way wishing to undermine the more extravagantly theatrical style of reading, I would point to this more monovalent, minimally inflected, and in any case unaugmented, mode as touching on the essence of the medium (p.11). Marit J. MacArthur (also referencing Charles Bernstein's preference) describes this mode as 'monotonous incantation' and demonstrates (using pitch analysis software) that it is prevalent in an 'American academic' reading style. (p.38–39). Marit J. MacArthur, 'Monotony, the Churches of Poetry Reading, and Sound Studies,' *PMLA* (Modern Language Association of America. 131.1, 2016), pp. 38–63.
- ⁷¹ In 'In ANOther's Pocket: The Address of the "Pocket Epic" in Postmodern Black British Poetry' Romana Huk speculates that black poets' connections to 'the oral tradition' may be why they are not considered part of the British avant-garde, as it could be assumed that 'they therefore partake in a naïve identity-politicking incompatible with the British avant-garde's own style of language-centered critique' (p.38).
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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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