

# **The place where poetries meet: Exploring the contribution of the InZync poetry sessions to sociocultural transformation in Stellenbosch**

by  
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## Abstract

Calls for transformation have permeated South African society since the end of apartheid in 1994 in fields as diverse as the economy, sport, education and culture. However, transformation remains a contested term with multiple meanings. This study employs a context-specific systems-based understanding of transformation within the orientating framework of complexity theory to explore the contribution of the InZync poetry sessions, regular multilingual performance poetry events held in Kayamandi between 2011 and 2016, to sociocultural transformation in Stellenbosch. The poetry sessions have connected intercultural communities in Kayamandi and at the University of Stellenbosch through the medium of performance poetry, and the study explores how these connections have been made and how the participants have been transformed through their experiences at InZync. This exploration takes the form of an interdisciplinary literature review, discussions on transformation and complex systems, and findings through participant observation, interviews with InZync participants and performance texts to draw conclusions about the ways in which the poetry sessions have contributed to sociocultural transformation. It is shown that sociocultural transformation is a process which can emerge through the creation of novel sociocultural systems such as InZync. Specifically, the ways in which the poetry sessions have enabled the emergence of sociocultural transformation are investigated and the intimate connections between identity negotiation, inclusivity, agonism and transformation are explored. Furthermore, the nature of the intercultural interactions at InZync and the ways in which the sessions have functioned as an alternative learning space are investigated. The study concludes by drawing links between the literature review and findings in order to present a complex understanding of the dynamics and practices that characterise the InZync system and that have enabled it to become a vehicle of sociocultural transformation.

## Opsomming

Sedert die einde van apartheid in 1994 word die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing voortdurend deur oproepe om transformasie in diverse velde soos die ekonomie, sport, opvoeding en kultuur gekenmerk. Transformasie bly egter 'n betwiste term met veelduidige betekenis. Hierdie studie span 'n konteks-spesifieke, stelsel-gebaseerde verstaan van transformasie binne die oriënterende raamwerk van kompleksiteits teorie in om die bydrae van die InZync poetry sessions, gereelde veeltalige podiumpoësie aande in Kayamandi gehou tussen 2011 en 2016, tot sosiokulturele transformasie op Stellenbosch te verken. Die sessies het interkulturele gemeenskappe in Kayamandi en Stellenbosch Universiteit deur die medium van podiumpoësie verbind, en die studie verken hoe herdie verbintenis gesmee is en hoe die deelnemers aan die aande deur hul ervarings by InZync getransformeer is. Hierdie verkenning neem die vorm van 'n literatuurstudie, besprekings van transformasie en komplekse stelsels, en bevindings deur deelnemende observasie, onderhoude met InZync deelnemers en performatiewe tekste aan om gevolgtrekkings te maak oor die wyses waarop die InZync poetry sessions tot sosiokulturele transformasie bygedra het. Die studie wys dat sosiokulturele transformasie 'n proses is wat deur die skep van nuwe sosiokulturele stelsels soos InZync na vore kan tree. Die wyses waarop die sessies sosiokulturele transformasie bemiddel word spesifiek ondersoek en die noue verbande tussen die onderhandeling van identiteit, inklusiwiteit, agonisme en transformasie word verken. Verder word die aard van die interkulturele interaksies by InZync en die wyses waarop die sessies as 'n alternatiewe leerruimte funksioneer het ook ondersoek. Die studie sluit af deur die literatuurstudie en bevindings met mekaar te verbind om sodoende 'n komplekse verstaan te ontwikkel van die dinamika en praktyke wat die InZync stelsel in staat gestel het om as 'n tuig vir sosiokulturele transformasie te dien.

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## List of abbreviations

SLiP – Stellenbosch Literary Project

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

USA – United States of America



## CHAPTER 1

### 1 Introduction and background

This study aims to investigate the phenomenon of transformation within a South African context by focusing on how poetry sessions can contribute to transformation. It specifically focuses on the monthly InZync poetry sessions held in Kayamandi, Stellenbosch. The intended research has its roots in the creation and subsequent development of a performance poetry community in Stellenbosch via the Stellenbosch Literary Project (SLiP). SLiP was established by Professor Leon de Kock and myself as a literary-cultural collective in 2011 and is affiliated with the Department of English at Stellenbosch University. In the following sections, the history of the project and its constituent parts will briefly be discussed in order to provide a backdrop for the proposed research.

#### 1.1 History of SLiP

Over the last five years, SLiP has built up public literary-cultural platforms. The activities of the project can roughly be divided into three parts: a website that covers issues in South African culture and literature ([slipnet.co.za](http://slipnet.co.za)); the InZync Poetry Sessions, which are monthly free performance poetry sessions that are held at Amazink in Kayamandi, Stellenbosch's satellite township; and biweekly poetry writing and performance workshops for young students from under-resourced schools in the Stellenbosch area (the INKredibles). SLiP sees itself as "creating much-needed discursive platforms where creative literary practices can be shared and engaged with, where writers and performers can serve as mirrors for society" (SLiP 2014). The vision of SLiP is therefore explicitly linked to the social sphere and the project intends to assist in creating interfaces between writers/performers and their publics. Furthermore, the project also aims to enable "new conversations to take place across a diversity of cultures and languages, bridging gaps between academia and civil society, performance and publishing, and to help stitch together the various holes which span our social fabric" (SLiP 2014). This study will specifically focus on the InZync poetry sessions.

##### 1.1.1 The InZync poetry sessions

The InZync poetry sessions have been running on a monthly basis since the inception of SLiP in early 2011. Most often the sessions take place at Amazink, a theatre venue in Kayamandi, Stellenbosch. The project has hosted more than 40 sessions in total and the InZync community continues to grow – around 150 to 200 students and young creatives currently attend the sessions.

The basic tenet of the poetry sessions is the establishment of a performance space that is open to various kinds of poetic genres (including hip hop, imbongis<sup>1</sup> (traditional Xhosa praise poets), spoken word poets and page poets) and as many South African languages as possible (the main languages that poets perform in are Xhosa, English, Afrikaans, Afrikaaps<sup>2</sup> and Sotho). The poetry sessions have been free since the beginning in an attempt to create a space that does not exclude people on the basis of their social class. Furthermore, transport is also provided to students from the University of Stellenbosch to and from the venue in an attempt to stimulate the crossing of borders between areas that remain largely segregated on the basis of race (the historical legacy of cultural segregation that forms the contemporary backdrop for these evenings will be discussed in detail later on).

The size of the community that gets together every month varies, but in general between 100 and 250 people attend a session. In terms of the crowd demographic, an estimated 60% of the audience comprises black, coloured and white<sup>3</sup> students from the university, 20% of the audience consists of black locals from Kayamandi, Stellenbosch's satellite township, and 20% consists of black, coloured and white audience members from Cape Town. It should be noted, however, that these ratios differ from session to session. The important point to take from these estimates is the fact that the sessions provide a meeting space for people from different races/ethnicities, cultures and languages. It is this characteristic of the sessions that not only distinguishes them from other similar performance spaces in and around Cape Town, but also enables the creation of meaningful intergroup/intercultural contact that forms one of the core foci of the proposed research project.

## 1.2 Rationale of the research

Many view Stellenbosch as the intellectual birthplace of apartheid, and the continued segregation of cultures is still apparent in the post-apartheid era. The rationale of the research has its origins in my personal experiences in organising and attending the InZync poetry sessions. For me, the space has come to represent an alternative meeting point for people from different cultures where meaningful intercultural conversations can take place. The conception and recasting of my own personal and social identity following the poetry sessions has prompted me to explore the various impacts the sessions might have had on others and their conceptions of both their personal and social identities.

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<sup>1</sup> The isiXhosa words in the study have consistently been used without italics in an attempt to foreground the fact that these terms are not seen as foreign to the study at hand, but rather that they are embedded within the practices that the study addresses.

<sup>2</sup> Afrikaaps is used here to refer to the dialect of Afrikaans traditionally spoken by the "coloured" population. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the distinctive character of this dialect, which is why it is listed separately here.

<sup>3</sup> The use of these racial categories should not be read as a subscription to the ideology of distinct races, but rather as a reflection of the continued salience of these identity categories in post-apartheid South Africa.

I want to be able to understand what the significance of the sessions is to both the poets that perform and the audience members and how their experiences of the sessions highlight the continued need for sociocultural transformation in South Africa. Furthermore, I will use my research in order to attempt a theorizing of the kind of encountering space that InZync has become, to open up the possibility of the creation of more such spaces in South Africa's ongoing process of sociocultural transformation.

Following my preliminary literature review, I have found that little research has been done on performance poetry as a contemporary art form in South Africa, including the various forms the poetry takes on and the various traditions that inform the work of performance poets. My research will therefore also help to contribute to a body of work on contemporary cultural practices, which is currently lacking. Furthermore, my research will explore the possible contributions of the InZync poetry sessions to intergroup relations in Stellenbosch and to the renegotiation of personal and social identities.



**Figure 1. The InZync audience as seen from stage. © Retha Ferguson**

### **1.3 Research questions**

The research questions associated with the intended investigation are as follows:

- How can performance poetry be used as a vehicle for sociocultural transformation?
- Which characteristics of the InZync poetry sessions enable the (re)negotiation of personal and social identities?
- How have the poetry sessions helped to facilitate identity formation and self-expression?
- What is the nature of the intercultural interactions that the poetry sessions make possible?
- To what extent can the sessions be understood as an alternative learning space?

### **1.4 Research objectives**

By answering the above research questions, the objective of this study is to understand the InZync poetry sessions as a temporary complex system and the various ways in which this system has contributed to sociocultural transformation in Stellenbosch. An attempt will be made to uncover what the meaning of the poetry sessions have been for different participants in order to distil the shared meanings that the sessions have generated. Furthermore, the research will explore the influences of the InZync poetry sessions on the personal and social identity formations of poets and audience members. The research also aims to uncover the dynamics that characterise the intercultural encounters that take place at the sessions.

### **1.5 Importance of the research**

The research is important to practitioners in the field of performance poetry, to educators interested in alternative knowledge spaces and to academics interested in emerging forms of intercultural interaction and their effects on identity negotiation.

### **1.6 Limitations and assumptions of the study**

One of the major limitations of the proposed study is that my close involvement in the creation and maintenance of the InZync poetry sessions will most likely lead to a subjective bias in my investigation of these phenomena. My proximity to the project might therefore act as a barrier to a more objective and level-headed analysis of the sessions. My interviews with other organisers of the sessions, coupled with my interviews with poets and audience members will hopefully help to expand my viewpoint to include more intersubjective aspects. I have also made use of journaling in order to

record my reflections during the process of research. Another research limitation is the fact that findings will be context-specific and not necessarily generalizable to other cultural spaces.

One of the major assumptions of the study is that the sessions have indeed led to sociocultural transformation and to the renegotiation of identity. The study also assumes that the intercultural encounters which take place at the sessions have been significant in terms of the effects they have had on poets and audience members alike.

### **1.7 Ethical considerations of the research**

The research complies with the university's guidelines on the ethical aspects of scholarly research (Stellenbosch University 2013, Horn et al. 2015). Approval for the research was obtained through the university's research ethics committee under application number DESC/Odendaal/Aug2015/3. Since the main method of data collection will be semi-structured interviews, participants will all have to sign consent forms and will be providing information on the understanding that they will only be referred to by their first names in the study, unless they specifically ask for anonymity. The recorded interviews and their transcriptions will be kept online in a private google drive folder.

Furthermore, a careful consideration of the questions that will be asked to participants will ensure that the potentially sensitive topics of race and intercultural relations and interactions are approached in a responsible manner. This consideration will help to ensure that participants feel that they are in a safe and protected environment where they can talk freely about the above-mentioned topics.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2 Literature review

An important aspect of this study is its interdisciplinary approach in sourcing and integrating research done in diverse fields. The interdisciplinary nature of the research is warranted by the dearth of research that exists on the subject of performance poetry in an intercultural context in South Africa. Interdisciplinarity is a useful approach when researching topics that do not fit into traditional disciplines (Nissani 1997). Specifically, research on performance poetry in an intercultural context can draw on fields as diverse as literary studies, oral studies, cultural studies, psychology, philosophy, linguistics, sociology and anthropology. Boix Mansilla (2005) identifies interdisciplinary work as “the capacity to integrate knowledge and modes of thinking drawn from two or more disciplines to produce a cognitive development [...] in ways that would have been unlikely through single disciplinary means” (16). Here we see an understanding of interdisciplinarity which privileges the unique insights which can emerge from such an approach. Furthermore, according to Repko (2012), an interdisciplinary approach is ideal when dealing with complex phenomena (a class to which the InZync poetry sessions belong, as we shall see in chapter 4). Furthermore, insights from different fields of thinking will help to create a multi-faceted knowledge-base from which to approach the research questions.

Following this interdisciplinary approach, this preliminary literature review can roughly be divided into nine sections. First, some philosophical ideas relating to space will be investigated in order to try to theorise what the performative space of the InZync poetry sessions signifies/represents. This will be followed by a look at some research done in the fields of spoken word poetry and slams, as performance poetry has become known in the United States of America (USA), whereafter the few articles that exist on contemporary performance poetry in South Africa will be summarised. This will be followed by some remarks made on contemporary social identity in a South African context. Then the review will focus on a body of research in social psychology in the field of intergroup relations, both in general and in South Africa specifically. Furthermore, the literature review will delve into questions of multicultural education, the possibilities of intercultural communication and the indigenous worldview of ubuntu<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ubuntu is an indigenous African worldview which will be discussed in more detail in section 2.9

## 2.1 Theorizing the space

This discussion draws on the thinking of two political philosophers – Hannah Arendt and Chantal Mouffe – and their analysis of “spaces of appearance” and “agonistic space” respectively. While investigating these different concepts of space, a case will be made for their applicability in describing the InZync Poetry Sessions. For Arendt, a space of appearance is a physical meeting place “where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living/inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicit” (1958: 198). A space of appearance comes into being whenever people are gathered together “in the manner of speech and action” (1958: 199). However, Arendt reminds us that these spaces are fragile and that they only exist as long as they are “actualized through the performance of deeds or the utterance of words” (d’Entreves 2014). “Performance” is the crucial term here, as it reveals the centrality of performance in constituting a space of appearance as such. This performance, moreover, is also a performance of identity, according to Tavani (2013). The word “performance” also reminds us of the significance of identifying the InZync Poetry Sessions as spaces of appearance, since the sessions are a site of performance.

In developing Arendt’s idea further, Marquez affirms the connections between identity formation and spaces of appearance by defining a space of appearance as a “setting where individuality emerges from self-disclosure among equals” (2012: 7). Following this logic, we can also postulate that the performances at the InZync Poetry Sessions are closely linked to the affirmation of identity through the process of self-disclosure. Marquez also points our attention to the origin of the power that spaces of appearance hold: visibility generates power “by enabling actors to act in front of spectators” (2012: 10). The Arendtian space of appearance therefore also acknowledges the dialectic that emerges between performer and audience because of mutual visibility. The visibility that is created in the space of appearance provides the opportunity for participants to express their individuality, has the potential to lead to collective action and acts as a springboard to launch something that is new and emergent (Marquez 2012). ‘Emergent’ is understood here as socio-cultural phenomena that can not explicitly be found in the context from which they originated, but which come into being because of the possibilities enabled by their context.

Furthermore, an equality emerges out of the interactions in a space of appearance since the normal separations between people are temporarily suspended through the mutual visibility that the structure between performer and audience implies (Marquez 2012). This temporary equality is, to my mind, the characteristic *par excellence* that embodies the transformative potential of spaces of appearance, especially in places such as Stellenbosch with a history of systemic inequality.

Arendt thus identifies public space as one of appearance where alternative identity formations are possible (1958). Mouffe adds value to this study by specifically looking at spaces of artistic production as agonistic spaces (2005). One of the strengths of appropriating Mouffe's concept as a lens with which to view the sessions is that she specifically refers to spaces of artistic production when she talks about the creation of agonistic space. Mouffe points to contemporary claims being made that art has lost its critical power because "any form of critique is automatically recuperated and neutralized by capitalism" (2008: 7) This loss of power has happened because of the monetization of art and the subjugation of artistic considerations to economic ones. In order to combat these claims, Mouffe (2008) suggests a reconceptualisation of the political public sphere where antagonism will always be present. Her conceptualization of the political public sphere stands in opposition to both liberalist conceptions of the public sphere (which envisage that a rational consensus will ultimately emerge between differing parties) and pluralist conceptions of the public sphere (which envisage many perspectives which ultimately converge into a harmonious whole) (Mouffe 2005). According to Mouffe, however, both these conceptions ignore the basic fact that antagonistic difference will always be present in the public sphere, because the essence of the political is the construction of a "we versus them" dichotomy (2005: 2). Although Mouffe has her detractors, her conceptualisation of the public sphere as a site of constant and never-ending contestation comes closer to a realistic description of the public sphere, in South Africa at least to my mind, than liberalist and pluralistic conceptions.

If we accept Mouffe's basic definition of the public sphere as a site of perpetual strife, we can also adopt her notion of the "agonistic" relationship between differing parties. The use of the term "agonistic" points to the fact that there might not exist any lasting rational solution to differences of opinion in the public sphere. In such a case, recognising the legitimacy of opposing views becomes crucial to the "agonistic" stance that Mouffe (2005) advocates. The agonistic struggle that is present in the public sphere is therefore something which should be encouraged, because it accurately reflects the nature of politics. Furthermore, Mouffe also suggests that in order to understand her conceptualization of critical art, we also have to acknowledge the hegemonic nature of politics – this requires an acknowledgement of the fact that the status quo is the "result of sedimented hegemonic practices" (2008: 9). Armed with these two political perspectives on the public sphere, Mouffe proceeds to lay out her understanding of what critical art can achieve.

For Mouffe, critical art should be "art that foments dissensus, [... rendering] visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate" (2008: 12). Furthermore, critical art should aim to "[give] a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony" (2008: 12).



Now that we have defined critical art in Mouffe's terms, we can better see how her conception of the political in the public sphere is necessary in order to make sense of her conception of critical art. Mouffe goes further to identify various ways in which critical art creates "agonistic spaces" within the public sphere that can legitimately critique the status quo without being reabsorbed and neutralised by the logic of late capitalism. Three of these ways are of particular importance with respect to the InZync Poetry Sessions: "direct engagement with political reality"; the exploration of subject identities that are defined by otherness; and imagining alternative ways of living in opposition to the "ethos of late capitalism" (Mouffe 2008:13). These ways are particularly relevant because they are reflected in the content of the poetry sessions as well as the general subversive nature of the sessions.

The preceding discussions of space have hopefully helped us to better understand the nature of the InZync poetry sessions. With regards to agonistic space, this means that differences in opinion are not only tolerated at the sessions, but actively encouraged. These differences contribute to the agonistic nature of the sessions, thereby ensuring that the sessions remain an agonistic space that produces critical art that persists since it cannot be reabsorbed into the hegemonic structure of the *status quo*. Although the above arguments for InZync as "space of appearance" and "agonistic space" seem convincing, they will have to be corroborated by the data that will be collected via interviews during the research process.

## **2.2 Mainstream conceptions of slam poetry and spoken word in the USA**

Although surprisingly little research seems to have been done on contemporary performance poetry in South Africa, a substantial amount of scholarship has emerged from the USA on what is commonly called "slam poetry" or "spoken word poetry". Whereas "slam poetry" refers to performance poetry events that are competitive and where the audience acts as a judge to choose a winner, "spoken word poetry" more generally refers to poetry that is performed outside of a competitive context. The terms "slam poetry" and "spoken word poetry" will however be used interchangeably when discussing American performance poetry, as these are the commonly used terms that refer to performance poetry in general. Because different writers use different terms to refer to cultural practices that are formally quite similar, "performance poetry" will be the preferred umbrella-term to indicate any kind of poetry that is performed. Another reason for choosing "performance poetry" over "slam" or "spoken word" has to do with the fact that these terms have been historically used to refer to cultural practices that had their origin in the USA, whereas the next section will make the case that the distinctive character of poetry performed in a South African context warrants the introduction of another term which encompasses both "slam", "spoken word" and indigenous forms of poetry such as izibongo (praise poetry). This section showcases different conceptualisations that exist about performance poetry in the USA and what it means for the individuals who practise it.

## **2.3 Spoken word as performance**

Although it might sound obvious, the performative nature of spoken word poetry needs to be noted. Alvarez and Mearns (2014) have gone so far as to call “performance” the unique identifying feature of spoken word poetry and for Weinstein and West performance is “the mode through which [spoken word] texts circulate” (2012: 285). In this regard, Garoian’s definition of performance art becomes relevant: “Performance art [... is] the praxis of a postmodern theory that advocates the formation of agency, the critique of cultural codes, and the production of new cultural ideas, images, and mythical inventions based on the subjectivities of [...] students” (1999 in Biggs-El 2012: 161). Furthermore, the performance space of spoken word poetry “calls into being [...] a world in which young people are viewed as valuable [...], a world in which their individual and collective voices, bodies and stories are considered critical to a functional, democratic society” (Weinstein & West 2012: 290). The enabling nature of the performance as such is captured in this last quote and echoes what has been argued earlier about the performance poetry space as an Arendtian space of appearance and validity where power arises exactly because of the performative nature of the act of appearing.

### **2.3.1 Spoken word and the audience**

On the one hand, then, spoken word poetry requires a performer. On the other hand, spoken word poetry only functions as performance poetry in the presence of an audience. The performers and the audience provide the dialectical poles through which the performative act is constituted as “performance”. Audience participation is seen as central to the dynamics of slam poetry (Rivera 2014). With regards to the audience, Fisher points to the importance of “active listening” at spoken word sessions (2003). Poole (2007) also identifies slam as a new way of listening. This “active listening” includes audible responses from the audience to the performance as it unfolds. Call and response is widely used as a technique to elicit active listening on the audience’s part. Alvarez and Mearns call the response from the audience an “instantaneous affirmation of self-worth and value” (2014: 265). Because of the audience’s active role in constituting the performance, Fisher (2003) calls the relationship between the poet and the audience non-hierarchical, and once again we hear echoes of Arendt’s space of appearance and the equality that it creates. The performative act is therefore characterized by reciprocity (Alvarez & Mearns 2014) and interdependence (Weinstein 2010).

### **2.3.2 Spoken word and identity politics**

The centrality of identity politics in performance poetry is widely recognised (Fisher 2003; Jocson 2011; Weinstein & West 2012; Alvarez & Mearns 2014; Rivera 2014). Ultimately, spoken word is a proclamation of identity in the presence of others, a public affirmation of individuality.

One of the primary reasons cited for performing poetry is the close connection it has to the negotiation and formation of both individual and social identities (Fisher 2003). The use of spoken word as a means to combat stereotypes and meta-stereotypes about identities is also emphasised (Fisher 2003). Weinstein and West note that spoken word in the USA is “tied up in powerful social movements that reframe and validate the social identities of minorities” (2012: 287).

Ingalls sees the performance poetry venue as a space where “inhabitants work in creative ways toward the negotiation of personal identity” (2010: 106). This negotiation of identity is deftly analysed by Rivera via the use of the terms “parrhesia” (a term borrowed from Foucault) and “authentication” (borrowed from Buscholtz). Parrhesia refers to the particular type of “courageous truth telling”, a process that plays a crucial role in the formation of subjectivity (Rivera 2013: 115). This truth telling is risky because it implies a vulnerability in opening up to an audience. Foucault explains parrhesia as follows:

[Parrhesia] opens up a danger, a peril, in which the speaker’s very life [is] at stake, and it is this which constitutes parrhesia. Parrhesia [...] is to be situated in what binds the speaker to the fact that what he says is the truth, and to the consequences which follow from the fact that he has told the truth.

(Foucault 2010: 56)

Furthermore, the act of parrhesia is not only an act of truth-telling but also an act that attaches the utterances of the speaker to its subject, what Foucault calls the “parrhesiastic pact of the subject with himself” (2010: 65). Through this pact, the speaker not only speaks the truth, but also asserts that it is s/he who speaks the truth, thereby binding the speaker to her/his utterance. Parrhesia is therefore “self-implicating and self-interpellating” (Rivera 2013: 119) and assists in the process of subject formation through its declaration of truth-telling. Fox also alludes to the importance of performance and the presence of the poet’s body “to provide the proof of the truth of what is spoken” (2010: 421).

According to Buscholtz (2003), whereas the term “authenticity” implies that identity is primordial and static, the process of authentication views identity as “the outcome of constantly negotiated social practices [which involve] a set of relations [called] *tactics of subjectivity* that produce identity – both one’s own and others’ – through linguistic and social practices” (408, author’s italics). In the case of performance poetry, the linguistic and social practice is the poetry session or slam and the medium of authentication is parrhesia. We therefore see how parrhesia and authentication are connected in the process of subject formation that takes place at performance poetry events.

Biggs-El also acknowledges the importance of spoken word poetry to identity construction: “the public forum of spoken word serves as a means through which intensely disaffected young people have produced and maintained notions of community and self” (2012: 166). Somers-Willet (2005) picks up on this theme of identity by identifying first person narration, comprehensibility and the “confessional moment” as key characteristics of a slam (53). The audience’s evaluation of the slam poet (which forms a crucial component of the poetry slam) is also an evaluation of the “scripting and performance of identity” (Somers-Willet 2005: 53). In the United States, it is especially marginalised identities that are given opportunities of enactment at poetry slams. Somers-Willet is particularly perceptive to what she calls the “cultural politics of performing identity” in this regard (2005: 51). In her analysis of the dynamic between poets and audience she identifies the slam as a “rare opportunity for white middle-class audiences to legitimately support black poets critiquing white positions of privilege” (2005: 59). Her claim is that slam audiences (in the United States at least) are mostly white and slam poets are often black. At their best, then, poetry slams can lead to fruitful interracial dialogue – but Somers-Willet takes a more level-headed (and some might say cynical) approach and asserts that at its worst slams enable white audiences to reward “a construction of marginal identity without having to recognise their own complicity in that construction” (2005: 63). Seen in this way, the slam essentially becomes a space for the assuaging of white guilt (2005).

It is clear that Somers-Willet (2005) has a more ambivalent view of the identity politics at slams: on the one hand, slams enable positive political organisation; on the other hand, there is a “tokening” or “fetishising” effect on marginal voices. Somers-Willet summarizes her argument as follows:

My critique is of a cultural dynamic between white audiences and black performers that rewards the performance of black identities as more authentic than others based solely on its citation of blackness, as well as the fetishistic desires that this dynamic can embody.

(Somers-Willet 2005: 70)

Somers-Willet’s analysis, however fails to recognise the possibilities that also exist in using performance poetry as a means to critique the rhetorics of identity politics and the fetishisation of marginalised identities. The slam can therefore arguably serve as a cure for its own shortcomings.

### **2.3.3 Spoken word as common ground**

In addition to the negotiation of personal and social identities that spoken word poetry enables, the creation of a “common ground” where the universal similarities of the human struggle are highlighted implies that spoken word poetry is also closely concerned with the creation of a sense of community (Alvarez & Mearns 2014).

According to Peck, Flower and Higgins (1995), spoken word events lead to a kind of community literacy which creates the opportunity for intercultural communication, social action and activism. Rivera (2014) speaks of a ‘communitas’ that develops between audience and poets, Poole (2007) identifies slam as a “community-oriented pursuit and Fisher (2003) goes as far as to compare poetry sessions to churches in the way that they enable the creation of a community which collectively engages in questions of belonging. Weinstein and West (2012) also point to the “communitarian effects” of spoken word poetry, whereas Alvarez and Mearns identify spoken word poetry as an inherently “community-based art form” (2014: 266). Here they refer to the fact that the mutual exchange of information between poet and audience shifts perspectives “from a self-focus to a more socially integrated stance” (2014: 265). This shift in focus from the self to the self-with-others during performance constitutes a reaching out beyond the borders of the individual and the integration into a temporary community which exists as long as a spoken word event persists.

The socio-political potential of performance poetry is also touched on by various researchers: Poole sees slams in France as a “democratizing community-oriented social movement” (2007: 229); Ingalls calls spoken word poets “poet-citizens” where poetry is seen as a “rhetorical conduit to inspire the civic engagement of society” (2012: 101); Somers-Willet refers to the slam stage as a “political soapbox” (2005: 52); and Fox understands slam events as opportunities for poets and audience members to engage in a face-to-face dialogue about social and political issues (2010). Here, Ingalls’ use of the word “forum” to refer to the character of poetry events seems particularly apposite (2012). The forum that is created by performance poetry events is used to “assert and defend the legitimacy of [poets’] social and political views” (Ingalls 2012: 101). In fact, slam poetry is “a means by which one can enter the social world itself” (Rivera 2013: 122)

#### **2.3.4 Spoken word as pedagogy**

Spoken word poetry is also seen as a strong pedagogical tool for literacy teaching (Fisher 2005), a form of expression that fosters critical writing and thinking abilities and voice (Camangian 2008). According to Camangian, spoken word poetry serves as a “viable outlet” for describing obstacles in the social realities of youth in order to “interrogate the discursive structures by which they come to know the world” (2008: 37). Spoken word poetry as critical literacy thus posits an alternative discourse that opposes the “oppressive social conditions, ideologies and the institutions that marginalize the experiences and livelihoods of marginalized people” (Camangian 2008: 37). In this regard, Low (2006: 98) has referred to spoken word poetry as a “counter-literacy” similar to the counter-literacy of hip-hop. Here, counter-literacy is understood as a cultural practice that takes place “outside the formal practices of literacy, pedagogy and curriculum [...] evolving out of exclusion, necessity, and improvised pleasure” (Low 2006: 98).

Spoken word poetry events are indeed “alternative knowledge spaces” (Fisher 2003) which take place in out-of-school contexts (Biggs-El 2012) and enable students to reflect publicly on socio-political issues (Camangian 2008).

Furthermore, Weinstein and West (2012) identify the development of literate identities, the increasing of self-confidence and the creation of a sense of belonging and purpose as some of the main benefits of participating in spoken word poetry. Alvarez and Mearns’s (2014) research on the main reasons why performance poets create and perform their work also uncovers the role of performance poetry in the emotional development of poets. Performance poetry is seen as a form of personal emotional expression, self-exploration and reflection, and as a site for personal growth (Alvarez & Mearns 2014). Weinstein also insists on the following benefits that art in general and spoken word in particular provides by quoting Eisner: “[Spoken word] is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture” (2004 in Weinstein 2010: 22).

### **2.3.5 The limits of spoken word**

Lastly, the review of American literature on spoken word poetry also reveals some of the potential shortcomings of the art form. It is important to be level-headed about what spoken word can achieve and where its limits lie. Weinstein and West (2012) have identified the following limits. In the first place, although the stage provides an opportunity for the processing of trauma, other measures need to be put into place to continue this process off stage. Secondly, the spoken word poetry scene is closely associated with the poetry slam (a format where participants compete against each other for the favour of the audience), that can therefore easily succumb to the logic of competition. The competitiveness of the slam can be problematic and can overpower some of the other effects of spoken word poetry identified above, such as identity formation and critical pedagogy. Thirdly, spoken word poetry cannot be used in isolation for the development of youth because on its own it has limited benefits that must be complemented by other forms of development off-stage. Rather than seeing spoken word poetry thus as an endpoint in personal development, Weinstein and West propose that we see spoken word performances as “points of departure embedded within a larger process of noetic<sup>5</sup> exploration” (2012: 300).

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<sup>5</sup> Noetic here refers to the intellect.

In this section on mainstream conceptions of spoken word and slam poetry in the USA we have distilled six recurring themes that will help to serve as orientation points when proceeding with the research into the InZync poetry sessions: the performative nature of spoken word poetry (Alvarez & Mearns 2014); the role of the audience (Rivera 2014); the centrality of identity and subjectivity (Fisher 2003, Somers-Willet 2005); the importance of community and the socio-political potential of performance poetry events (Poole 2007); the fact that spoken word can serve as a pedagogical tool with identifiable benefits (Camangian 2008); and the limits of spoken word poetry (Weinstein & West 2012).

#### **2.4 Some remarks on performance poetry in Africa**

Barber (2007) provides a broad framework with which to approach oral poetry in an African context. The active role of the audience in contributing to the constitution of the performance as performance is emphasized and is most obviously made palpable “by the audience’s visible and audible participation” (Barber 2007: 137). Brown (1998: 10) investigates the dynamic between poet and audience and speaks of performance as an “event”, similar to mainstream conceptions of performance poetry. Furthermore, the audience’s experience of the performance can make them aware of the things they share as an audience, rouse them to collective action and express their collective sentiment. Another character of oral poetry is that it often depends on a “local, knowledgeable audience” (Barber 2007: 145) in order to decipher its meaning. The reliance on local codes for the generation of meaning will be explored later in the overview of the various kinds of poetries that meet at the InZync poetry sessions.

Barber (1997) also emphasizes the audience as historical product, meaning that we need to take the socio-cultural context into account when approaching performance poetry. Performance specifically and contextually constitutes the way in which the audience is set to receive and interact with the poet’s address. As an example of this, Barber mentions the interpellation of audience members at a Ghanaian concert party not only as Akan-speakers, but also as polyglot residents who are “able to operate mixed codes, while still remaining capable of decoding the condensed allusions of Akan proverbial discourse” (1997: 354).

Irele considers oral literature to be “the fundamental reference of discourse and of the imaginative mode in Africa” (1990 in Finnegan 2007:1). The centrality of oral literature to African literature is thus made explicit. Although the academy had for centuries dismissed oral poetry, there is now a general appreciation “of the existence, validity and richness of oral expression as part of the created cultural achievements of humankind” (Finnegan 2007: 7). Furthermore, Finnegan highlights the power of doing things with words and emphasizes language as process and exchange rather than as

the creation of stabilized, textual objects. This shift in focus helps to reframe the analysis of oral poetry. Furthermore, the co-operative nature of oral poetry models a higher aspiration for social harmony, even if it does not always practically entail this. The audience become members of a larger collective by virtue of their listening to the poetry. This act of participation leads to the emergence of collectivity (Barber 1997) and has echoes of the establishing of common ground in spoken word events as discussed in section 2.3.3.

The discourses that oral poetry feeds into are often moralising discourses, which “allow people to convene and consolidate new publics with flexible boundaries that can expand, contract or dissolve according to context” (Barber 2007: 168). The heterogeneous nature of mixed modes and audiences is also identified by Barber (2007) to be particularly applicable to the sub-Saharan Africa context. Within a contemporary globalised atmosphere, there is an emergence of new genres that are linked to global culture, and the mixing of genres and oral poetry traditions is therefore widespread. In this regard, Chapman argues that, in the global South, “the traditional, the modern and the postmodern exist audibly and visibly in simultaneous and antagonistic relationship to the life of the present day” (2016: 149).

Barber goes on to identify various ways in which oral texts are constituted, focusing on a momentary fusion of “fixing” and “emergence” (2007: 68). Ways in which meaning is fixed in oral poetry include the widespread use of oral formulas, whereas the new is allowed to emerge through the use of creative improvisation. The entextualisation of oral poetry is consequently discussed, which refers to the ways in which the poetry is made into a fixed unit of meaning. This includes the removal of deixis (the specifying function of words which change their denotation from one context to the next), nominalisation, quotability and obscurity (Barber 2007). A detailed analysis of this mechanism of entextualisation is not called for here, but entextualisation is mentioned to underscore the unique ways in which oral poetry comes to be constituted. An added benefit of obscurity is that it can be used to infuse the poem with a decidedly political flavour through a camouflaged criticism of power (Barber 2007).

## **2.5 Historical and contemporary performance poetry in South Africa**

Brown (1998) traces the origins of southern African orature all the way back to the first communities that thrived on the subcontinent: “from the songs and stories of the Bushmen and Khoi to the praise poems (Zulu/Xhosa: ‘izibongo’; Sotho: ‘lithoko’) of African chiefdoms” (3). Furthermore, there has been a long-standing connection between oral poetry and political activity (Opland 1983).



Despite this, a history of exclusion, occlusion and effacement has undervalued the significance of oral literature in South Africa. Brown traces this history in detail in his work on the history of oral literature in South Africa (1998; 2016), from the first studies which took place in the context of colonisation, to studies in African Languages departments in apartheid South Africa that became entangled with “essentialised notions of ‘ethnic identity’ and ‘racial otherness’” (Brown 2016: 2). In many cases, earlier work on orality was also informed by a nationalist agenda which understood orality as “something localised and of the past” (2016: 8). More recently, there has been a move towards acknowledging the extent to which oral poetry has broadened to become “transnational” in its reference and reach (Brown 2016: 9). However, there is a continued lack of engagement with oral literature in a postcolonial context, and this can be attributed to “a wariness of the relative lack of historicisation and theorisation in the institutional practices of oral studies in the past, as well as to larger resistances to the oral within literary studies itself” (2016: 6).

According to Hofmeyr (1999), there is a lack of equal exchange between local and global knowledges which is particularly evident in the infrequency with which oral literature is studied at academic institutions. In general, oral literature is often overlooked in favour of written literature. Deborah Seddon echoes Hofmeyr’s assertion of the marginality of orature in the South African literary canon (2008). There is a history of tension between oral and written poetry globally and in South Africa specifically which can be traced back to the history of colonisation and the devaluation of indigenous modes of cultural production within a Eurocentric, scriptocentric worldview (Brown 1998).

Despite the under-representation of oral poetry at tertiary education institutions in South Africa, orature is “one of the most socially dynamic and politically potent forms of verbal artistry” (Seddon 2008: 146) and has thereby played a very important role throughout South African history. Furthermore, oral poetry continues to flourish in contemporary South Africa by adapting to new technological and social contexts (Seddon 2008). Duncan Brown even goes as far as to say that the poetic oral tradition in South Africa represents “our truly original contribution to world literature” (1998: 1). Brown goes on to identify some central concerns of orature studies in South Africa in the last twenty years, specifically singling out the following themes: the relation between oral texts and political power; and how oral texts mediate identity and contribute to the expression of agency and opposition (2016: 7).

During the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s English served to transcend “the ethnic differences exploited by the apartheid state to divide and conquer”, especially within what came to be known as “Soweto Poetry” (Seddon 2008: 139). Oral poetry was also used extensively to circumvent the censorship of the apartheid state (Seddon 2008).

This performative turn also signalled an “affirmation of African cultural traditions [...] and the need for forms appropriate to a political context of intense repression and covert organisation” (Brown 1998: 182). What essentially happened during the 1960 and 1970s is that oral poetry, which has its origins in traditional cultures all around Southern Africa, became the voice of those suppressed by the apartheid state and the voice of black workers during the 1980s (Seddon 2008). In order to balance the relative inattention being paid to oral poetry with its ubiquity in South Africa, Seddon draws on Christopher Miller’s notion of “intercultural literacy” as the kind of competency that is necessary in order for different cultures to better understand each other’s cultural positions and conceptions of social identity (2008: 146). This notion of “intercultural literacy” will be explored in more detail once the intercultural context of the InZync Poetry Sessions has been established. More research is needed on the development and diversification of oral poetry since the late 1980s up until the present moment in order to better link contemporary oral practices with their historical predecessors.

One of the primary means by which oral literature continues into the present in a South African context, is through the practice of praise poetry (izibongo/lithoko). The role and history of praise poetry (izibongo/lithoko) have been investigated in various South African scholarly works. Chief among them are the books *The bones of the ancestors are shaking: Xhosa oral poetry in context* (Kaschula 2002), *Power and the praise poem: Southern African voices in history* (Vail & White 1991) and *Xhosa oral poetry: aspects of a black South African tradition* (Opland 1983). In colonial and pre-colonial South Africa, imbongis were seen as “praise poet[s] who frequented the chief’s great place and travelled with him in traditional Nguni society” (Mafeje 1963: 91). They would serve as a mediator between the chief and the populace and would have a poetic license bestowed on them not only to praise the chief, but also to criticize his rule (Kresse 1998; ). Imbongis were therefore seen as “special advisor[s] or counsellor[s]” to the chief (Kresse 1998: 179). Some of the famous historical imbongis from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries include Ntsikana kaGaba, Nontsizi Mgqwetho, S.E.K. Mqhayi, D.L.P. Yali-Manisi and Melikhaya Mbutuma (Kaschula 2012).

Imbongis also had the task of acting as historians and bearers of cultural memory by reciting the genealogy of chiefs (Vail & White 1991). As such, they publicly expressed and reaffirmed social identity (Kresse 1998). Kresse identifies the following two specific social functions of imbongis: speaking sense by “giving an illustration of the current state of society” (1998: 178); and acting as mediator – not only between the ruler and the populace but also between the living and the dead (Kresse 1998). The role of imbongi as mediator is central to understanding the historical and contemporary functions and significance of imbongis.

From the above description it becomes clear that izibongo constitute a rich cultural tradition that closely interlinks art, politics and social life.

Furthermore, art and power are closely intertwined in izibongo: “art reflects, transmits and so yields to prevailing power relations – while it can also subvert, influence and strive to control these relations” (Kresse 1998: 177). The transformation of the socio-political context in the past fifty years, however, necessitates a reconfiguration of our understanding of who imbongis are today and which functions they continue to fulfil. This reconfiguration is needed in order to avoid the trap of idealising or romanticising imbongis or seeing izibongo as a dead tradition (Kaschula 2012). In this regard, Kaschula provides the following useful definition of contemporary imbongis:

The contemporary imbongi can be classified as a person involved in the oral production of poetry using traditional styles and techniques in any given context where they are recognised as mediator, praiser, critic and educator.

(2002: 47)

The role of imbongis as mediators and “political and social commentator[s] of the power base within which they operate” is therefore still relevant today. The context, however, has shifted from performing izibongo for the chief to performing at political rallies, union meetings and at poetry sessions (as is the case at the InZync Poetry Sessions). Furthermore, the “awakening of political consciousness” (Kaschula 2012: 47) has also come to be seen as one of the contemporary functions of imbongis. This “awakening of consciousness” is in fact shared by many historical and contemporary South African poets, as we shall see in the following paragraphs on conscientisation.

Kresse stresses that imbongis formed and continue to form part of a “socio-regulative discourse” (1998: 171) and therefore fulfil a regulative function in the social sphere, that of mediating between “the ruler and ruled, the powerful and the powerless” (Opland 1996: n.p.) The imbongi does this by serving as a “reflective echo of society” – thereby constituting a “meta-discourse” of a “self-reflective society on itself” (Kresse 1998: 183). The izibongo should in this regard be seen as an institutionalised form of freedom of speech, because of the poetic licence that has been afforded to imbongis. Furthermore, Opland and McAllister liken imbongis to the universal figure of the trickster, a “liminal figure of sacred character” (2010: 157). The unifying feature of izibongo is also touched on, namely that the artist attempts to reconcile not only “individual and society into an ‘imagined’, poetically constructed community”, but also “ruler and ruled, under the principle of reasonable rulership” (Kresse 1998: 189).

The above description is an idealised description of the functions that imbongis and their izibongo can potentially fulfil. This does not mean, however, that they always speak truth to power and continue to critique the status quo. There are various examples from history where the critical function of praise poets was muted in favour of their uncritical appraisal of the ruler (Kaschula 2002).

A contemporary example is the imbongi Zolani Mkiva, who is widely known across the country and who has performed at the presidential inaugurations of both Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki (Kaschula 2012). He also utilizes poetry in the service of corporate and commercial interests (D'Abdon 2014a). This has led to criticism from different commentators, most acutely from Raphael d'Abdon and Kgafela Magogodi. D'Abdon describes Mkiva as “an astute entrepreneur who utilizes izibongo as a device to gain the favour of well-targeted, affluent audiences, thus contributing to a hazardous commodification and commercialization of post-apartheid poetry” (D'Abdon 2014a: 315). Magogodi (2006: n.p.) provocatively refers to Mkiva as the “official puppet” of the powers-that-be. It is also Mkiva’s attitude towards what D'Abdon calls “the questionable leaders of the political and economic-financial establishment” of South Africa that makes D'Abdon doubt Mkiva’s sincerity (2014a: 318). Here we see how the imbongi is still caught up in the web of power relations in society, and although his intentions might be suspect, his proximity to those in power continues to mirror the historical closeness to rulers that imbongis have employed. Mkiva’s case serves as a reminder not to idealise and romanticise the role of the imbongi but to see imbongis for what they are and the differential roles they fulfil in contemporary South Africa.

We now move to a discussion of contemporary South African performance poetry in general, which includes izibongo, but also a wide range of other performative genres, from improvised rap to “page poetry” simply being read, to spoken word and slam poetry. It seems that very little has been written about performance poetry in an attempt to reconcile and integrate the various genres which typically grace a poetry session in South Africa.

An exception to this is Raphael d'Abdon’s writing, which is especially interesting with regards to the link between he forges between Steve Biko’s conception of Black Consciousness and the ways in which his ideas are still relevant in the works of contemporary performance poets from South Africa (D'Abdon 2014b). Whereas David Tyfield (2013: n.p.) argues that contemporary South African poetry displays some “worrying symptoms”, including “the failing of poetic language and a reversion to ideological terms”, D'Abdon contends that “spoken word poetry<sup>6</sup> represents a crucial element of contemporary South African literature and popular culture” (2014c: 87). In his response to Tyfield, D'Abdon picks up on a continued fissure in South African poetry, between “page poets” that often see themselves as “Western” and “spoken word” poets who work with orality.

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<sup>6</sup> Although D'Abdon uses the term “spoken word” to refer to contemporary performance poetry (2014c), I would like to contend that “spoken word”, because of its historical links to poetry in the United States and elsewhere, is an insufficient term which does not automatically or obviously include the various performative genres of contemporary poetic practice in South Africa. Once again, I would like to reiterate the argument for the use of the umbrella-term “performance poetry”.

This fissure between page and stage is simply a reworking of the longer standing disconnection which exists between written and oral literature in this country referred to earlier, and the competing ideologies which are circulating as to the proper form and function of poetics in South Africa

D'Abdon asserts that performance poetry is a notable means of expression among South African youth post-apartheid, especially in the extent to which performance poetry functions as a form of "conscious-raising art" (Mda in D'Abdon 2014). This "conscious-raising art" has the following characteristics: "young people come together to create community dialogue on issues that concern them most [...]. It is a cultural and political reawakening of those who have been consigned to the ditches of a lost generation, who are now pulling themselves out, quite mercilessly, by the scruff of their necks" (Mda 2009: 23). This extract echoes some of the properties of both izibongo and spoken word poetry identified earlier – its creation of community and its critical pedagogy. The core mission of this kind of performance poetry is identified as the "elevation of the [...] listeners' self-awareness through 'conscious' art" (D-Abdon 2014: 79). The entanglement of performance poetry with identities (as is the case with spoken word poetry in the USA) also seems to be of relevance here.

Zakes Mda (2009) echoes D'Abdon's explicitly political formulation of performance poetry by referring to young performance poets as "Biko's Children" who are using their art "to understand the nature of oppression (which includes the sources of poverty) and to liberate themselves from it" (36). This particular conception of performance poetry also seems to mirror the critical pedagogy established as crucial to spoken word poetry in the United States. One of the shortcomings of the above formulation of performance poetry in South Africa is that it exclusively focuses on what poetry means for Black Consciousness, whereas the multicultural nature of the InZync poetry sessions necessitates a more nuanced reading of the political implications on the diverse audience. What is certain, however, is that the tradition of protest poetry in South Africa has left its mark on contemporary practices.

D'Abdon correctly identifies the urban poetry scene (specifically referencing Johannesburg) as one of the "very few platforms for open discussion" in South Africa (2014: 88). An insistence on the contemporary relevance and socio-political potential of performance poetry, however, does not exclude the possibility of critique:

Simplistic rhyming ideology often trumps more nuanced verse in the performance game...the urban scene throws up a great deal of generic, noisy thinking...A typical city spoken word session will involve heavy doses of misogyny, crazy feminism, outright racism, cultural blindness of all types, mlungu bashing<sup>7</sup>, illogical references to colonial mythology and so on.

(Miller 2013: n.p.)

But a critique which leaves little room for the appreciation of contemporary poetic forms on the urban poetry scene (such as that of Tyfield 2013) is also not conducive to debates about contemporary cultural practices such as performance poetry. In concluding this section, I would like to quote D'Abdon's conceptualisation of performance poetry as an explicit political tool in the new South Africa:

If the conscientization of the youth is the main objective of the artists engaged in the new liberation struggle, and culture the pre-eminent means at oppressed people's disposal to achieve it, then performance poetry [...is the language] through which such conscientization can be most effectively brought forward.

(2014b: 80)

In this section we have seen how performance poetry has manifested itself in historical and contemporary South Africa and the central role it has played and continues to play in conscientization efforts. We now move on to a discussion of contemporary social identities in South Africa.

## **2.6 Contemporary social identities in the South African context**

The late Neville Alexander identified identities as “mutable and dynamic historical constructs that retain meanings that are continually reworked by dominant and subaltern ideologies” (2005 in Hammett 2010: 251). Alexander (2007) also points to the fact that identities are multiple, contested and that they are still structured around the notion of race in contemporary South Africa. It is important to note that the use of racial categorizations to understand social identities in South Africa is essential, even if we believe in the ideal of a non-racial society which will still be brought into being. As Alexander states: “we ignore the social reality of ethnic and racial identities inherited from the past at our peril” (2007: 91). The racialized identities which we have inherited from our apartheid past cannot simply be ignored because they continue to persist in the discursive structures of the present. This does not mean that racial signifiers are not continuously being contested.

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<sup>7</sup> Mlungu bashing refers to a practice which criticizes white people, often humorously.

In fact, since identities are dynamic entities, they are always being made and remade through negotiations and constructions of notions of the self and other (Soudien in Hammett 2010: 250). Furthermore, the fullness of identity cannot be contained by racial categories (Hammett 2010). We are always more than just our race, but we are our race, amongst other social constructs.

In short, social identities post-apartheid include but are not limited to racial categorizations. This does not mean, however, that nothing has changed with regard to South African's social identities since the end of apartheid. In fact, Bornman (2010) postulates that there is an emerging pattern of social identities in the new South Africa and that the social and political changes that we have witnessed since 1994 have led to a re-evaluation of social identities. Her analysis of three studies related to social identity have revealed that whereas the main determinant of identity under apartheid was race, this has shifted to include both subnational identities (which are racial/ethnic and linguistic), national identity (being South African) and supranational identities (identifications with the African continent or the West) (Bornman 2010). Significantly, though, Bornman found that the most important determinant of subnational identities was language and that localized identities (be they racial/ethnic or linguistic) were more important than supranational identities to the participants in the studies that she reviews (2010).

Alexander also identifies the crucial importance of language in the construction of social identities, specifically in multilingual societies (2003). Alexander supports the notion, and Bornman's research also points in this direction, that more than one social identity is possible at any given moment and that this is especially the case in a multicultural society such as South Africa (Alexander 2003; Bornman 2010). Nevertheless, the persistence of race in contemporary South African society shows how difficult it is to move beyond the racialized social identities that South Africans have inherited from their past, despite the fact that "claims to (non)racial identities are varied, dynamic and often incomplete" (Hammett 2010: 248).

## **2.7 Intergroup relations**

Much work has been done on the social psychology of intergroup relations (Finchilescu & Tredoux 2010; Batson & Ahmad 2009; Durrheim & Dixon 2005; Pettigrew 1997). The so-called "contact hypothesis" is central to a lot of the literature. This "contact hypothesis" predicts that "regular interaction between members of different groups will promote intergroup harmony, provided that it occurs under certain favourable conditions" (Durrheim & Dixon 2005: 19). The situation in which the intergroup contact occurs is seen as central to the success of the contact hypothesis.

There are three models for contact theory which try to explain what the outcomes of sustained intergroup contact will be: mutual differentiation (which holds that groups retain their individual character within a pluralistic context); decategorization (which holds that a de-emphasis of differences will follow intergroup contact); and recategorization (which holds that a new “ingroup” will be created which contains all the previously distinguished groups) (Durrheim & Dixon 2005).

After decades of research, the general consensus among social psychologists seems to be that the contact hypothesis only holds under optimal conditions and that the relationship between contact and prejudice is robust, rather than linear (Finchilescu & Tredoux 2010), since contact may even paradoxically lead to an increase in antipathy (Durrheim & Dixon 2005). Furthermore, stereotypes and meta-stereotypes (stereotypes that people believe others have about them) are important determinants of the effectiveness of intergroup contact (Finchilescu & Tredoux 2010). The extent to which contact between different groups is personalised has been found to be specifically important in determining the effectiveness of intergroup contact (Batson & Ahmad 2009). An added effect of intergroup contact is that it might not only reduce prejudice towards other groups, but also change the attitudes of individuals towards their own group. This effect has been termed “deprovincialization” by Pettigrew (1997.)

A very interesting article by Batson and Ahmad (2009) focuses on the central role that empathy plays in the success of intergroup contact. The authors identify four states of empathy: the “imagine-self perspective” entails imagining how you would think and feel in someone else’s situation; the “imagine-other perspective” entails imagining how someone else thinks and feels given their situation; “emotion matching” means to feel *as* someone else feels; whereas “empathic concern” means feeling *for* another person (Batson & Ahmad 2009: 144). These four states of empathy are then related to their effects on intergroup contact, as can be seen in the following table.

**Table 3. Intergroup effects of the Four Empathy States**

Psychological State	Intergroup Effects
Cognitive/perceptual states	
1. Imagine-self perspective	Reduced stereotyping and more positive evaluation of (a) the out-group member in whose situation one imagines oneself and (b) the out-group as a whole.
2. Imagine-other perspective	Increased situational attribution for plight of the specific out-group member; increased empathic concern for him/her; more positive attitudes



	toward the out-group as a whole; increased readiness to help the out-group.
Affective/emotional states	
3. Emotion matching	More negative evaluation of those causing other's plight; more positive feelings toward the out-group.
4. Empathic concern	Increased valuing of welfare of the specific out-group member for whom empathic concern felt; more positive attitudes toward the out-group as a whole; increased readiness to help the out-group.

(Batson & Ahmad 2009: 150)

Consequently, Batson and Ahmad (2009) look at eight different programmes of improving intergroup attitudes and relations and the extent to which one or more of the empathy states are involved. What emerges from this study is that the imagine-self and imagine-other perspectives are especially important in improving intergroup relations and that the resultant empathic concern which is evoked might even lead to a reconsideration of personal and social identity (Batson & Ahmad 2009).

There are, however, some limits to the contact paradigm that Durrheim and Dixon (2005) identify. Firstly, it relies on an idealisation of contact that is removed from everyday reality, and the gap between optimal interaction conditions and actual interactions is often large. Secondly, the contact paradigm is abstract and general and thereby reifies contact without acknowledging its contextual nature. Thirdly, Durrheim and Dixon hold that the contact paradigm emphasises the individual level at which social change occurs and thereby ignores the systemic nature of racism which perpetuates continued segregation despite instances of intergroup contact (2005). This last point is related to the persistence of racial identities in present-day South Africa despite the official termination of racial segregation post-apartheid. Finchilescu and Tredoux also recognise the persistent systemic reality of limited interracial contact on a daily basis and the consequent reification of racial identities: "Despite their origins as a construction of the apartheid regime, [racial] groups have a historical reality that has shaped the subjectivities and worldviews of the South African population" (2010: 228).

Despite these reservations, the basic idea behind the contact hypothesis seems valid, as long as it is understood that the effects of intergroup contact are difficult to generalise since the context in which they occur plays such a vital role in determining their outcome.

My hypothesis for intergroup contact at the InZync poetry sessions is that it does not lead to the elimination of racism, but that some kind of shift/change in the perception of selves and others takes place at the sessions as a result of the deployment of the imagine-self and imagine-other perspectives as discussed above. This hypothesis will have to be confirmed in the course of my research.

## **2.8 Multicultural education and the limits of Rainbow Nation-ism**

Multiculturalism as a concept originally came into being in Western societies in an attempt to include marginalised migrant populations as members of these more or less homogenous societies (Koenig 2003). At its best, multiculturalism is conceived of as a cultural strategy “whose objective is to resist cultural supremacy and to focus on the equality of different representations among cultures” (Chien-Hui Kuo 2003: 223). In postcolonial societies such as South Africa, however, heterogeneity is the norm and cultural pluralism abounds (Gouws 2013; Koenig 2003). Questions therefore exist as to the applicability of the idea of multicultural education in postcolonies, given its origins in more or less homogenous societies. Furthermore, the concept of multiculturalism has fallen out of favour in recent years (Blum 2014) and the concept of “interculturalism” has taken its place with a renewed emphasis on the importance of integration (Blum 2014). Despite acknowledging the inadequacy of the framework of multiculturalism, certain values can nevertheless be identified which persist into the present in attempts to promote multicultural education. Blum (2014) has identified these as: the recognition of group difference; national cohesion (also known as trans-group civic attachment); and group-sensitive equality. The following section will address each of these values in turn.

The recognition of difference is seen by Fraser (2003) as an essential contributor to social justice. However, identity politics, which is closely tied to recognition as social justice, can devolve into the reification of group identities and stereotypes. The politics of recognition is therefore a necessary but insufficient condition for social justice if it is not accompanied by the redistribution of resources and parity of participation (Gouws 2013). Gouws (2013) reminds us that social justice cannot be reduced to identity politics if material economic inequalities are not addressed. Nevertheless, recognition remains a central prerequisite for social justice (Fraser 2003).

Secondly, national cohesion refers to social cohesion on a national level, where social cohesion is understood as the glue that keeps a society together. Because of the history of extreme multiculturalism in South Africa (where multiculturalism was seen as the separation and exclusion of cultures from each other), social cohesion remains a contentious topic where South Africans are continually negotiating their connectedness to each other (Abdi 2002). Social cohesion also refers to the sense of belonging and togetherness which people experience in a specific society (UNESCO 2013).

Thirdly, multicultural education also refers to the fostering of equality, where equality refers to the equalization of cultures without the erasure of their particularities (Abdi 2002). Abdi pushes the boundaries of what multicultural education can achieve by insisting on the importance of a critical dimension to multicultural education, including a constant questioning which has the potential to lead to the decolonization of representations and power relations between communities, i.e. an education which “de-otherizes” the Other (Abdi 2002: 154). Specifically, Abdi identifies “interrelational responsiveness” (2002: 156) as one of the social characteristics that critical multicultural education cultivates.

However, multiculturalism is not without its critics. Meier and Hartell (2009) identify one of the crucial assumptions of multiculturalism, namely that “cultural understanding leads to greater tolerance and racial harmony” (2009: 182). They rightly point to the difference between desegregation and integration (2009), while Chien-Hui Kuo (2003) links the creation of cultural diversity to the containment of cultural difference. Chien-Hui Kuo’s argument here is that multiculturalism “barricades the possibility of finding a diagonal, [...] of rearticulating cultural difference” (2003: 229). The dangers of cultural reification are once again acknowledged in this line of argument.

There is a particular history of multiculturalism in democratic South Africa and its implementation of the rainbow metaphor “to symbolize the new nation as the old apartheid regime was weakening” (Myambo 2010: 93). There are, however, serious problems with the rainbow metaphor:

“[T]he illusion of coherence and unity which [the rainbow metaphor] is intended to convey dissipates at the first touch of the bitter reality of racial, class and caste divisions.”

(Alexander 2003: 106)

But Alexander is not without hope – he contends that the divisions between groups which persist into the present can be bridged by encouraging social and cultural mixing and by “[speaking] fearlessly about the prejudices, the fears, and the anxieties that are like walls of misunderstanding that separate [...] South Africans from another” (2003: 108). As an antidote to the limitations of the rainbow metaphor, Alexander suggests the metaphor of the Gariep River. This entails a dynamical image/model of South African society conceived of as being “constituted by various tributaries” which ultimately “constitute the mainstream through their confluence” (2003: 99). This conceptualisation moves beyond the ideas of pluralism and multiculturalism to an acknowledgement of the entanglement of various South African identities, from an emphasis on the separate existence of ethnic identities (as exemplified by the rainbow) to an emphasis on a common, unified but diverse South African identity which contains and mixes all the diverse cultures of South Africa.

## 2.9 Intercultural interactions, communication and competence

In his exploration of multicultural education in South Africa, Abdi (2002) discusses four characteristics which should ideally constitute positive intercultural interactions. In the first place, cultural encounters should be “voluntarily accommodating” and include a “dialogue of cultures with each other” (152). Secondly, the interaction should “de-otherise” the Other, and in the process “augment the general democratic culture of [...] society” (2002: 154). How this “de-otherising” should come about is something that Abdi does not discuss. Thirdly, intercultural interactions should ideally be characterized by what Abdi terms an “interrelational responsiveness” where all the interacting cultures respond to each other in ways that are mutually affirming (2002: 156). Lastly, cultural interaction needs to be characterised by a recognition, acceptance and appreciation of difference (Abdi 2002).

Furthermore, according to Liu and Morris, specific kinds of “intercultural interfaces will be sites of cultural transformation” (2014: 101). These cultural transformations can be brought about by the same communication processes that are responsible for the maintenance of within-group interactions (Liu & Morris 2014). O’Reagan and MacDonald concur that intercultural work can lead to transformational responses in the right context, to a recognition of “differences in beliefs, attitudes and values of the Other” and a consequent hybridization of consciousness and identity which the authors term “transculturation” (2007: 273). The important point that O’Reagan and MacDonald make in this regard is that transformational discourse is problematized by the presence of multiple selves, and that difference should not be seen as something static which is overcome through intercultural work (Phipps 2013: 15). Their approach helps us to see intercultural work as dynamic, complex and open-ended.

Interculturalism has recently surfaced as a mode of enquiry in various fields, including sociolinguistics (Young & Sercombe; Baker 2011; Collier 2015), philosophy (O’Regan & MacDonald 2007; Block 2013; Ferri 2014) and education (Williams-Gualandi 2015; UNESCO 2010; UNESCO 2013). UNESCO’s conceptual and operational framework for intercultural competences begins by stating the centrality of intercultural communication to the development of cultures: “All living cultures are outcomes of intercultural communication” (UNESCO 2013: 4). The plenitude of intercultural interactions which constitute our daily lives has become one of the central features of the globalised present within which we live – “[our] ever-fast evolving cultural landscape is characterized by an intensified diversity of peoples, communities and individuals who live more and more closely” (UNESCO 2013: 4). In this discussion, we will follow UNESCO’s definition of the term intercultural:

Intercultural describes what occurs when members of two or more different cultural groups (of whatever size, at whatever level) interact or influence one another in some fashion.

(UNESCO 2013: 11)

It is important here to note here that the term can be applied on various levels, so that it both refers to face-to-face interactions between individuals (on a micro level), and to the processes of production, reproduction and perpetuation of domination and inequality (on a macro level) (Alexander et al 2014). Furthermore, intercultural not only refers to an encounter between individuals or cultures, but is also applicable to individuals themselves due to the “co-presence of multiple cultural positionalities in one person” (Alexander et al 2014: 18). Kim takes this argument to the extreme and develops a theory of “intercultural personhood” where he identifies complementary processes of individuation and universalization as forging intercultural identity<sup>8</sup> (2015:3).

The use of the term “intercultural space” is of particular relevance in the context of this study, which specifically focuses on the creation of a space of intercultural interaction, communication, dialogue and understanding through the medium of performance poetry. Arasaratnam’s definition is useful in this regard: Intercultural space is “a symbolic representation of an instance when communication between individuals is affected by cultural differences in a way that would not have been noteworthy in the absence of these differences” (Arasaratnam 2011: vii-viii). Here, the centrality of difference is emphasized, and Durham goes as far as to identify “communication across difference” as a core characteristic of interculturality (in Alexander et al. 2014). Interculturality is also identified as “a form of criticality”, (Alexander et al. 2014:25), a critical transformation of “mono-cultural reality” to “multicultural literacy” (Asante 1992: n.p).

The importance of the idea of intercultural communication to sustainable development in general is underscored by UNESCO’s in-depth analysis of education for intercultural understanding (2010). Here, they identify six underpinning principles of education for intercultural understanding: identity, language and cultural heritage; social justice, equity and human rights; valuing diversity and creativity; unity and solidarity in diversity; fostering tolerance, peace and social harmony; and, cultural inclusiveness (UNESCO 2010). The extent to which these principles find expression in a specific context such as the InZync poetry sessions will be explored later in more detail.

Building on the 2010 UNESCO report, UNESCO also released a framework on intercultural competences, which tries to identify the specific abilities required for meaningful and respectful

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<sup>8</sup> The use of the term “intercultural” implies a specific understanding of cultural identity as socially constructed and multiple, dynamic and fluid (UNESCO 2013) – and therefore also amenable to change through creative innovation

intercultural communication (2013). Here, intercultural competences refers to abilities that people can develop in order to “perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (Fantini & Tirmizi 2006: n.p.). Intercultural competence refers to “a new kind of literacy, on a par with the importance of reading and writing skills or numeracy” (UNESCO 2009, n.p.). The centrality of intercultural competences within UNESCO’s framework of understanding becomes clear when investigating UNESCO’s understanding of learning as comprising four distinct activities: learning to know; learning to be; learning to do; and learning to live together (UNESCO 1996). It is within the context of learning to live together where the development of intercultural competences plays a cardinal role (UNESCO 2013). Once again, we are reminded of the centrality of identity when dealing with interculturality, since intercultural competences can “lead to rediscovering one’s own identity under the deciphered forms of ‘the other’” (UNESCO 2013: 6).

UNESCO identifies the following as minimal requirements for intercultural competence: respect; self-awareness/identity; seeing from other perspectives; listening; adaptation; relationship building; and cultural humility (2013: 24). Cultural humility is understood here as “the desire to approach an (inter)cultural encounter with respect toward the other and their worldviews, and the chance to learn about her/him and yourself” (Alexander et al. 2014: 15). Intercultural competence also includes critical cultural awareness, which is defined as the “ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (Byram 1997: 53). Furthermore, mutually reinforcing feedback is identified between human rights and intercultural dialogue in order to create “inclusive societies” (UNESCO 2013: 8).

Despite these idealisations of intercultural interaction and the positive social functions that intercultural competence can fulfil, some commentators are more critical of the discourse of interculturality (O’Regan & MacDonald 2007; Young & Sercombe 2010; Block 2013; Ferri 2014). Young and Sercombe are particularly wary of intercultural discourse which is divorced from a specific socio-cultural context and which ignores the “inherent complexity of interdiscourse communication” (2010: 181). They point to the essentialisation of culture and identity, and particularly the uncontested use of the term “cultural identity” with its inherent complexities and inconsistencies in the intercultural literature (Young & Sercombe 2010: 182). In order to bypass this potential pothole, this study will pay particular attention to the socio-cultural context within which the intercultural encounters take place at the InZync poetry sessions.

Block also draws our attention to the complexity of identity, understood as “the multiple ways in which people position themselves and are positioned, that is, the different subjectivities and subject positions they inhabit or have ascribed to them, within particular social historical and cultural

contexts” (2013: 129-130). Here the ways in which identities can be projected onto individuals through existing socio-historical structural constructs is pitted against the agency that individuals also possess in forming their own sense of self. This tension between structure and agency is a tension which Block has identified as running through much of the literature on intercultural communication. Ferri (2014) takes a more philosophical stance and identifies some of the Cartesian presuppositions of intercultural communication theory. Her argument, essentially, is that intercultural communication theory presupposes an “autonomous rational [Kantian] agent” (2014:7), a view which is at odds with contemporary thinking around identity and selfhood. Furthermore, she deftly uncovers some of the colonial perspectives which informed the early evolution of intercultural research, thereby problematizing the continued uncritical use of the term “interculturality”.

O’Regan and MacDonald also assess what they call the “intercultural public sphere” and identify two aporias in current thinking about intercultural communication, namely the presupposition of a “universal consciousness” and the appeal to a “transcendental moral signified” (O’Regan & MacDonald 2007: 268). Through a deconstructive critique (as devised by Derrida 1976), they show how the “metaphysics of presence” permeates discussions about intercultural communication, thereby problematizing the discourse on interculturality from a post-structuralist perspective. These above critiques highlight the complexity and entanglement of intercultural communication theory and ethics.

## **2.10 Ubuntu as indigenous African worldview**

This section will focus on the philosophy of ubuntu, thereby using an indigenous lens to approach questions of identity and community. Ubuntu is an ancient African worldview (Broodryk 2002; Letseka 2012) which spans ontology, epistemology and ethics and has existed and continues to exist in various forms all across sub-Saharan Africa (Ramose 2002b). Despite the industrial revolution, urbanisation, modernisation (Dolamo 2013), colonialism and apartheid (MacDonald 2010), ubuntu has managed to survive as a worldview into the present and has gained a particular currency in South Africa post-1994 in attempts to provide a “shared moral discourse” (Letseka 2012: 48) and for the purposes of nation building (Gaylard 2004). It is also generally acknowledged that specific conceptions of ubuntu played an important role during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and ubuntu explicitly cropped up in the final clause of South Africa’s interim constitution (Gaylard 2004).

Ramose (2002b) calls ubuntu the root of African philosophy, whereas Kamwangamalu sees ubuntu as a “multidimensional concept which represents the core values of African ontologies”. Letseka insists that ubuntu forms the “philosophical basis for a unique African socio-political and economic democratic order” (2012: 47). Despite the ubiquitous use of “ubuntu” in post-apartheid South Africa,

the concept remains difficult to define, especially in a foreign language such as English (Gaylard 2004).

Ubuntu has variants in many sub-Saharan African languages, and linguistically ubuntu is an Nguni word which consists of the pre-prefix –u, the prefix –bu and the noun stem –ntu, which means “person” (Gaylard 2004). The central tenet of ubuntu is often summarised in the statements “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (Nguni languages) and “motho ke motho ka batho (in Sotho languages)” (Letseka 2012: 48). These phrases are difficult to translate into English, and both Mokgoro (1998) and Tutu (1999) have pointed to the difficulty of defining an indigenous concept such as ubuntu in a foreign language. Nevertheless, the above central tenet is often translated as “a human being is a human being because of other human beings” (Letseka 2012: 48). Hopefully, the discussion which follows will help to show that the distillation of a whole worldview into a single transcendental signified, as O’Regan and MacDonald would put it, diminishes the multidimensionality that is inherent in the concept of ubuntu.

On an ontological level, Ramose asserts that ubuntu subscribes to the idea that “motion is the principle of being” (2002a: 324), it emphasises becoming rather than being, holism rather than particularism (Dolamo 2013), the ontological unity of being (Chuwa 2014), and being as “process” (Bujo 2003). According to Bujo, on an ontological level ubuntu “describes a person as a process of coming into existence in the reciprocal relatedness of individual and community, where the latter includes not only the deceased but also God” (2003: 14).

Furthermore, ontology and ethics are co-original since “ubuntu”, or human-ness, is constituted through the relationships between self and other, identity and community (Dolamo 2013; Chuwa 2014). Being is therefore always being-with-others (Mcquarrie in Chuwa 2014). Ubuntu thinking transcends the binary of self and society by insisting that an individual “signifies a plurality of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships in which the individual in question stands” (Mcquarrie in Chuwa 2014). Personhood, or subjectivity, is therefore wholly constituted through our relations with others (Gyekye 1997) and Gyekye refers to this ethical position as “radical communitarianism” (1997: 37). In fact, African subjectivity is the process of becoming human “through a progressive process of integration into society” (Ng’weshemi 2002: 15). This subjectivity develops and thrives “in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others” (Treffo in Chuwa 2014). Ubuntu can therefore be seen as a “process of self-realization through others” that “enhances the self-realization of others” (Broodryk in Chuwa 2014).

We have seen how ubuntu as a worldview emphasises “social interdependence”, “rootedness in community” and an “interactive ethic” (Letseka 2012: 48). Ubuntu can also be understood as a set of



values which embody various ideals of living together. These values include “intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion” (Broodryk 2002: 230) as well as “humility, solidarity, hospitality and communalism” (Kamwangamalu 1999: 25-26). Ubuntu is therefore also an idealisation of society and how it ought to function, and lies at the heart of African ethics (Dolamo 2013).

If we look at the use of ubuntu in context, however, it is also clear that, like any worldview, ubuntu can be moulded to serve the interests of those that employ it. In this regard, McDonald (2010) makes the interesting observation that ubuntu has often been used in public policy in post-apartheid South Africa to escape governmental responsibility for socio-economic transformation. This has entailed a “downloading of fiscal and physical responsibility [...] onto the backs of low-income households in the name of ‘community’” (McDonald 2010: 146). More worryingly, ubuntu has proliferated in corporate culture in South Africa. Here, ubuntu is employed as a rhetorical device to push “ubuntu propaganda” which serves more “to justify post-apartheid capitalism and neoliberal policy making than to provide any serious or realistic alternative to economic management in the country” (McDonald 2010: 146). This, however, does not mean that possibilities do not remain where ubuntu can feature as an alternative worldview “to inspire collective action for development” (McDonald 2010: 149). Thomas (2008) also picks up on this thread by insisting on the potential of ubuntu to reinvigorate struggles for socioeconomic equality in South Africa. Nevertheless, Thomas also echoes McDonald’s sentiment when he sees ubuntu as clashing with “individualistic and private property rights and market relations characteristic of modern society” (2008: 20)

Gaylard has characterized ubuntu as an African humanism (2004) and Kamwangamalu calls ubuntu “the art of being human” (1999). Here, our humanness is seen to depend on a mutual recognition of our shared humanity, both by offering this recognition to others and receiving it from them (Gaylard). The recognition of personhood “necessitates the development of human relationships with other persons in the society” (Chuwa 2014: 34). Hereby ubuntu underlines the “vital importance of mutual recognition [...] in the construction of human relations” (Ramosé 2002a: 329).

This is partly why ubuntu continues to be seen as an antidote to the dehumanizing effects of apartheid, which constituted “a systematic and deliberate denial of the humanity of (black) South Africans” (Gaylard 2004: 267, *my brackets*<sup>9</sup>).

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<sup>9</sup> I have placed the word “black” in brackets because, if one is to carry the philosophy of ubuntu to its logical conclusion, one has to acknowledge that it is impossible to fully inhabit one’s humanity as long as that humanity doesn’t include a conception that acknowledges the fellow humanness of people from different races

Apartheid was particularly obsessed with the “politics of difference” and was an attempt to prevent the “development of social cohesion [by hindering] the development of a shared moral discourse” (Letseka 2012: 48). Sindane summarises the humanising effects of ubuntu thus: “[Ubuntu] inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to enrich our own” (1994: 8-9). In this sense, ubuntu is seen as an ethical disposition that enables us “to reach out beyond narrow racial and ethnic identities” in the process of the mutual constitution of subjectivities (Nkondo in Letseka 2012: 56).

## CHAPTER 3

### **3 Transformation in South Africa – towards a context-specific systems understanding of transformation**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In the following discussion on transformation, various literatures on transformation in diverse disciplines were consulted in order to provide a robust and integrated description of different understandings of transformations. In particular, writings on social-ecological systems transformations, conflict transformations, urban transformations, transformation in the South African social space and, particularly, in the tertiary education system were consulted. This last field was studied not only because it provides the richest and most extensive discussions on transformation in a South African context, but also because it is my contention that the InZync poetry sessions can be read as an educational intervention in the South African social environment. Understanding what transformation means in a South African educational context is therefore vital in the discussion of what the InZync poetry sessions might mean. This overview, therefore, does not attempt to provide an exhaustive discussion of the various understandings of transformation. Rather, insights from different disciplines were extracted in order to forge a complex understanding of transformation that is appropriate to the context of this study.

A general dictionary definition of transformation will help to anchor the discussion that follows. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, transformation refers to “[t]he action of changing in form, shape, or appearance; metamorphosis.” (sv. “Transformation”). The centrality of change as a characteristic of any transformational process is emphasised in this definition. However, the use of the singular “action” fails to recognise the systemic nature of transformations and the multiple actions at various scales needed to bring about sustained transformations in the context of systems. In this respect, Moore et al. (2014) more accurately capture what is meant by transformation in this chapter: “Transformation [...] describes a form of change that is more significant than adaptation, one that recombines existing elements of a system in fundamentally novel ways” (Moore et al. 2014: 55). Furthermore, some of the key elements of systems that change during a transformation are “norms, values and beliefs; rules and practices, such as laws, procedures and customs; and the distribution and flow of power, authority, and resources” (Westley & Antadze 2010 in Moore et al. 2014).

The processual nature of systemic transformation means that we should understand transformation as “a set of [...] changes at various internal states of transition along a continuum” (Universities South

Africa 2015: 22). Transformation is therefore a differentiated and ongoing dynamic process, rather than a static end point which will eventually be reached once a chosen number of requirements have been met. This is a crucial point as it points to the open-ended nature of transformation (a characteristic which echoes the open-ended nature of the systems in which it takes place) and to the possibility that the necessity for transformations might never cease.

The theory of conflict transformation helpfully identifies four dimensions to transformation: personal; structural; relational; and cultural (Omoyefa 2014). I would like to argue that these four dimensions also apply to the system-wide nature of transformation of social, political and economic systems in South Africa in general. These dimensions help to capture the system-wide process of transformation on different scales, from the individual and her agency, to the structure of the system in which she finds herself, to the relational nature of her connectedness in the particular system and the general cultural environment within which she acts. Another way, then, to understand transformation is to see it as a process which emerges from the interplay between agency and structure, relationality and culture (Westley et al. 2006).

The literature on conflict transformation further helpfully identifies four interrelated issues that need to be addressed in order for real conflict transformation to take place. These are social-psychological issues that pertain to “identity, self-esteem, emotion, trauma and grief”; socio-economic issues that pertain to financial redistribution; social-political issues that have to do with the demilitarisation of freedom fighters; and spiritual issues, which have to do with questions of “healing, forgiveness and mutual acknowledgement” (Lederach 2006: 242-243).

Although the argument was developed with reference to conflict transformation, the importance of generating creative platforms to both address surface issues and change underlying social structures and relationships (Lederach & Maiese 2003) applies to different kinds of transformation. The centrality of creativity as a mechanism for transformation is underscored by Kleiman (2008). Here the creative act is seen as both transformative in itself and as a tool for social transformation (Kleiman 2008).

### **3.2 Transformation in South Africa in relation to apartheid**

In South Africa, the term transformation has different and contested meanings, but a common denominator of is the way in which transformation is conceptualised in relation to the apartheid past. One must remember that apartheid constituted a supra-systemic attempt at practising social exclusion in the South African political, economic and social systems (Porteus 2003). Apartheid amounted to a systematic disempowerment of the black population in South Africa (Henrard 2003). This system

found its articulation in a “labyrinth of regulations” (Henrard 2003: 38), most notably the 1950 Population Registration Act, the 1950 Group Areas Act, the 1953 Reservation of Separate Amenities Act, the 1953 Bantu Education Act and the 1959 Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act, amongst dozens others (Henrard 2003). Within this historical context, transformation is therefore seen as “change that addresses the imbalances of the [...] apartheid era” (Govinder et al 2013:1), as the process needed to change the “inequalities embedded in the apartheid system” (Oldfield 2002 n.p.), and as a “social, economic and political change in the nature of society that clearly mark[s] a break with the [a]partheid past” (Lange 2014: 6).

But transformation in South Africa is not only about abolishing unjust differentiation (Banda & Mafofo 2016). The importance of asserting agency and empowerment is part and parcel of the process of social transformation. Here transformation is understood as a process which includes “the act of changing from a disabling to an empowering life condition” (Nkomo 2013: 14). In fact, empowerment is seen as a core concept of transformational politics (Shwerin 1995, Omoyefa 2014).

The use of transformation as a guiding term is complicated by the manifold understandings that exist in the public sphere. Lange (2014) asserts that transformation is one of most used words in South African public discourse. Keet (2015) echoes this sentiment when he identifies “transformation” as one of the most prolific signifiers in South Africa. This (over)use means that a plethora of understandings of transformation exist, some which are at odds with others. Transformation thereby becomes the battleground for competing agendas. As Lange states: “This is a sign of both contestation between different sectors and political groupings within government and civil society about the meaning and uses of transformation, and different paces in policy making in these sectors” (Lange 2014: 2). Lange also identifies a ‘common sense’ understanding of transformation which was adopted by the ANC post-1994 which served “as a shorthand ideological definition for a variety of political *aggiornamento* that was embraced by public and private institutions” (2014: 2). This was followed by what she calls the “institutionalisation of transformation” through its entrance into the “administrative logic of the state bureaucracy, becoming a key performance indicator for ministers, government officials, vice-chancellors and universities, CEOs of public enterprises, the professions, the church and business” (2014:3). Here we see how the notion of transformation has permeated and found particular articulation in almost all sectors of South African society.

Furthermore, Lange (2014) aptly identifies the commodification of transformation and the use of transformational discourse to serve market interests. The question thus becomes whether transformation as a guiding concept still has transformative power, or whether it has become so reified as “the leitmotif of the latest version of the master narrative of the South African struggle for liberation” (Lange 2014: 3) and so “streamlined” through the elimination of paradox and contradiction that it fails to adequately acknowledge the complexities of change (ibid).

The question of transformation in South Africa has also been approached in urban planning literature, and here the spatial dimensions of transformation are emphasized. The legacy of apartheid includes the creation of “dysfunctional and segregated spaces” in almost all urban areas of South Africa (Adebayo & Musvoto 2010: 1127). Or, to put it differently, “[a]partheid planning produced a disarticulation of spaces, races and classes that was the primary driver of uneven development in the city, and continues to sustain its most durable inequalities” (Schensul & Heller 2011: 80). The persistence of racialized areas in post-Apartheid South African cities is therefore “a testament to the profound, durable and compounded spatial inequalities bequeathed by apartheid” (Schensul & Heller 2011: 81). Any discussion of transformation in South Africa, then, also has to include a discussion on the ways in which segregated spaces become spaces of inclusion.

In trying to distil the essence of transformation in a South African context, Oloyede notes that “transformation is a move from one condition of existence – exclusion – to another condition of existence - inclusion” (2009: 430). Here, the essence of the apartheid regime is seen as “exclusion on the basis of a defined set of ascriptive characteristics” (Nkomo 2013: 14). In this respect, Porteus (2003) offers a helpful analysis of the concepts of exclusion and inclusion in social systems by providing two approaches to these terms. The first sees exclusion and inclusion as states of being - i.e. there are those that are included and those that are excluded (2003). Porteus (2003), however, argues for a more dynamic understanding of exclusion and inclusion as active processes which are in fact interconnected. Furthermore, this dynamic view also shifts the emphasis from the boundary between the excluded and the included to the agency of those contained in the system and their ability to remould and transform their environment (2003: 18). Here Porteus touches on a central tenet of the decolonising project, namely “the liberation of social agency” and the shift from the passive inclusion/exclusion of Others to the powers that these Others have “in choosing the form and function of inclusion and exclusion, and the terms of incorporation” (Porteus 2003: 17). In this light the recent student protests around South Africa can be seen as assertions of agency and the ability of marginalised students to be actively involved in the terms of incorporation which determine inclusion and exclusion.

### 3.3 Transformation in the tertiary education system

We have already seen how the discourse of transformation has permeated almost all sectors of post-apartheid South African society's attempts to address the exclusionary practices of the past and to create a society which is inclusive and socially just. It is within this understanding that the term "transformation" is employed to refer to systemic changes within the higher education system.

Similarly to the segregated urban systems of apartheid South Africa, the education system pre-1994 was "a system structured along highly stratified racial, gender, class, cultural and spatial lines; skewed in its structural development; unequally financed; disarticulated from the most pressing economic and social needs of the majority [...] with very few linkages with the developing world and the wider African continent" (Universities South Africa 2015: 1). Universities were therefore included in the material world of apartheid and formed part of the "spatial semiotics" of the country (Banda & Mafofo 2016: 175). It is within this context that the current education crisis is seen as "the result of centuries of deliberate colonial neglect, followed by a noxious apartheid prescription for the underdevelopment of education for blacks" (Nkomo 2013: 6).

As an indication of the state of the higher education system post-1994, the Education White Paper in 1997 stated that "the higher education system must be transformed to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities" (Department of Education 1997: n.p.). Furthermore, the Department of Education released a report on transformation in 2008, which investigated "discrimination in public higher education institutions, with a particular focus on racism and [sought] to make appropriate recommendations to combat discrimination and to promote social cohesion" (Soudien et al. 2008 n.p.). The findings of the report were damning: various forms of discrimination existed in many of the tertiary institutions and expressed themselves differently through "structural/institutional, governance, cultural, linguistic, gender, [...] epistemological, pedagogical and curricular practices" (Nkomo 2013: 10).

One way in which transformation has been measured, is in terms of demographic change over time. A recent attempt is that of Govinder et al (2013), who have employed a quantitative measure of transformation via the Equity Index (EI). Here,

$$EI = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (org_i - demdat_i)^2} \text{ (Govinder et al. 2013);}$$

where  $org_i$  is an organisation's demographic percentage for the  $i$ th category (e.g. black African females) and  $demdat_i$  refers to the national demographic percentage for the  $i$ th category. The details of this equation do not concern us here – it is sufficient to note that the authors essentially make use of a Euclidean distance formula to plot the distances that different tertiary education institutions have to cover in order to reach demographic percentages that reflect the nation's demographics. There are various limitations to this approach, as pointed out by several commentators (Cloete 2013; Morris, 2014; Borden 2014). These range from accusations of incorrectly applying the Euclidean distance formula (Borden 2014); to equating transformation with equity (Cloete 2013); to applying national rather than regional demographics as benchmarks of transformation (Morris 2014).

One of the interesting things to note here is the fervour and high level of passion with which all these commentators responded to Govinder et al.'s attempt at quantifying transformation. This shows that the topic of transformation in higher education remains a hotly debated issue and people's responses to transformation are (at least in part) determined by their subjective conceptions of what transformation should entail. Furthermore, the responses highlight the fact that transformation is not simply a descriptive matter relating to demographics – it is also normative in that it implies certain prescriptions for change.

Furthermore, Govinder et al.'s index captures none of the qualitative, subjective, lived experiences of students on campuses, essentially privileging what the authors state is an "objective" measure of transformation above narrative accounts and reducing the multidimensional complexities of transformation to a two-dimensional measure of distance. The key findings of the research indicate that which we already intuitively know, that "20 years post freedom, the EIs for students and staff in the higher education sector show that transformation is not only *painfully* slow, but also embarrassingly so" (Govinder et al. 2013: 9).

A more comprehensive and multidimensional approach to transformation has been undertaken by most universities in South Africa, who have recently come up with the following collective definition of transformation:

[Transformation is a] comprehensive, deep-rooted and ongoing social process seeking to achieve a fundamental reconstitution and development of universities to reflect and promote the vision of a democratic society. [It] refers to the active removal of any institutional, social, material and intellectual barriers [that stand] in the way of creating a more equal, inclusive and socially just higher education system.

(Universities South Africa 2015: 2)



Furthermore, three critical elements have been identified as constitutive of transformation: policy; epistemological change and institutional culture; and the need for social cohesion (Soudien in Keet 2015b). A recent countrywide university survey revealed six indicators and categories of transformation: institutional culture; curriculum and research; teaching and learning; equity and redress; diversity and social inclusion; and community engagement (in Keet 2015a). However, Keet warns against reducing transformation to the meeting of numerical targets within these categories (as Govinder et al's EI suggest) (2015a). Lange also identifies the ways in which the quantification of transformation has led to the occlusion of various other social categorisations, including class, disability and sexual orientation. Equating transformation with equity thus reduces the multipolar emancipatory potential of transformation by confining the field of its implementation to demographic access. The institutionalisation of transformation is one of the main ways in which this emancipatory potential has been rerouted and tamed.

There is also an acknowledgement that reducing transformation to a numbers game fails to recognise “the interconnectivity and simultaneity of race, class, gender, disability and other markers of social difference” (Universities South Africa 2015: 3). The acknowledgement of transformation as systemic intervention into an ongoing social process also signals a more complex understanding of what transformation entails. This systems understanding of transformation is echoed by South African universities when they assert that the system they are trying to transform is multidimensional, interconnected and relational (Universities South Africa 2015). Furthermore, the components of the system are living human beings “who are irreducibly complex, whose identities and responses to their worlds cannot be ‘fixed’ in a static set of representations of social orders, and [...who] always have the capacity for self-reflection and change” (Universities South Africa 2015: 22-23). This acknowledgement of the central role that agency can play in transforming any system has already been mentioned earlier in this chapter.

The commodification of transformation discourses has also taken place at universities as they have had to re-assert themselves as businesses in the global knowledge economy. In this way transformation is used more as a marketing strategy to outcompete other universities than as a process of deep-seated social change (Banda & Mafoko 2016). Following this assertion, Banda & Mafoko (2016) analyse the mission statements of three Cape Town universities (UCT, SU and UWC) and unearth the ways in which struggle credentials and commitments to transformation are used in the service of marketing and promoting these universities. In a way that is not too dissimilar from corporate South Africa's appropriation of ubuntu discourse to further narrow neo-liberal agendas (as discussed in the section on ubuntu earlier), transformation and struggle discourses are appropriated by higher education institutions. The ways in which transformation discourse is used to reframe the

universities as inclusive institutions help to mask the underlying lack of substantive transformation at these institutions (Banda & Mafolo 2016).

The institutional cultures of universities have also been in the spotlight since the recent student protests at higher education institutions around the country, with the following aspects being contested: “the dominance of Eurocentric epistemology, pedagogy and curricula, and [the silencing] of knowledge, culture, ideas and traditions from and about African realities, and more specifically, black experiences” (Universities South Africa 2015: 12-13). The argument here is that social power and its production have cultural origins, and in the case of universities, this cultural framework (including norms, values, codes, rituals, symbols and practices) is the institutional culture “via which social and intellectual behaviour is regulated within universities” (Universities South Africa 13). The important point here is the emergence of the realisation via the student protest movements of the centrality of culture in determining exclusionary/inclusionary practices. This means that culture is literally understood as a barrier/enabler of transformation.

The recent student protests at higher education institutions around the country have shown the urgency of fast-tracking deep-seated transformation and the large distances we still have to cover in order to arrive at an inclusive education system. As Keet (2015a) aptly observes, the demands from students suggest that “transformation must be performed to create an Afrocentric space; advance the decolonization of knowledge; agitate for better facilities and more productive practices; promote just pedagogies; broaden opportunities and increase success rates for black students” (1). In short, the education system still has a long way to go in order to systematically transform, and quantitative demographic transformation only constitutes one aspect of the multidimensional process of deep transformation.

The above discussion of different understandings of transformation started with a dictionary definition and an emphasis on the creative and system-wide changes that transformation entails. Furthermore, transformation in South Africa was shown to entail a move away from the exclusionary spatial practices of apartheid to the generation of inclusive communities in a democratic society. In this regard, we can start to see how the InZync poetry sessions might function as a creative, inclusionary spatial practice, although this will have to be corroborated by the research. In the above section we have also seen how the discourse on transformation has been appropriated and commodified and the particular ways in which it has been framed in relation to the tertiary education system.

These illuminations of what transformation might mean in a specifically South African educational context will be of vital importance as we move towards a more context-specific understanding of

transformation in Stellenbosch and the ways in which this social process is enacted at the InZync poetry sessions.

## CHAPTER 4

### 4 Complex systems – an orientating framework

This section will outline some of the basic tenets of complexity and systems theory which will serve as an ontological and methodological grounding for the study at hand. Although there is no agreed definition as to exactly what constitutes a complex system (Chu et al. 2003: 19) and since definition is a process which inevitably reduces complexity, this section will rather focus on characteristics that different authors have identified for complex systems. In particular, Paul Cilliers' work on marrying post-structural and complexity thinking (Cilliers 1998, 2000, 2008, 2010) provides an introduction into the world of complex systems and the kind of thinking they require by listing their characteristics (Cilliers 2008, 2010), the most important of which are discussed below.

#### 4.1 Characteristics of complex systems

According to Cilliers (1998), complex systems consist of a large number of elements that dynamically interact over time in a non-linear fashion – these interactions determine the behaviour of the system and lead to the phenomenon of emergence (i.e. the creation of systemic properties and behaviour that cannot be traced back linearly to the components themselves)<sup>10</sup>. Since the behaviour of the system is determined by the interaction between the components and not the components themselves, the structure of the system can be maintained even though the components might change. Feedback loops form an integral part of the structure of complex systems. Complex systems are open, meaning that there is an exchange of energy and/or information with the system's environment, and adaptive, meaning that they can responsively change to changes in their environment. Lastly, Cilliers also notes that there is no singularly valid way to describe a complex system, since various descriptive options exist (Cilliers 2000a: 23-24; 2008: 45).

In order to better understand the phenomenon of emergence, Cilliers (1998, 2010) uses post-structuralist insights into the creation of linguistic meaning through a play of differences between signifiers. Here, the central idea is that meaning is not pre-given or fixed, but something which emerges contextually through the relations between signifiers and between the signifiers and their context. The argument goes that there is a structural similarity between the emergence of meaning in language and the emergence of properties in complex systems. In the same way that the difference between words lead to the emergence of meaning à la Derrida (Cilliers 2010), the interaction between

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<sup>10</sup> It is this property of complex systems which, in my opinion, ultimately enables transformative behaviour.

components of a system lead to the emergent systemic properties. The logic of difference is therefore central to Cilliers' account of complex systems (2010).

Another approach to describe complex systems is taken by Chu et al. (2003), who identify what they call "generators of complexity", two of which are specifically relevant here, namely 'radical openness' and 'contextuality' (2003: 24, 26). On the one hand, the radical openness of a complex system means that there are many different connections between a system and its environment, making it hard to clearly distinguish between a system and its environment by drawing a boundary between the two (Chu et al. 2003: 24). On the other hand, the contextuality of a system means that there are components which also function as parts of other systems, meaning that changes in one system can create unexpected changes in another because their components are shared (Chu *et al* 2003). These two generators taken together "[are] a major source of unforeseen and potentially detrimental side effects of interventions into complex [...] systems" (2003: 26).

In addition to the above characteristics, Roberto Poli draws our attention to another relevant characteristic of complex systems: they are inherently creative (Poli 2013). In Poli's terms, creativity is understood as "the capacity to change, learn, and over time become different from what one was before" (2013: 145). The creativity of complex systems therefore implies that they are dynamic and subject to transformations, whilst also having the possibility to transform other systems of which they form part.

#### **4.2 Specific characteristics of complex social systems**

Due to the nature of this dissertation, the focus here will specifically be limited to complex *social* systems and the properties they exhibit, since the argument will be made in due course that the interactions which constitute an InZync poetry session establish a temporary complex social system with emergent properties. Following Cilliers' description, complex social systems consist of individuals – who are in themselves biopsychosocial systems (Pickel 2007: 3) – who interact over time to produce emergent behaviour. Gharajedaghi stresses the agency of the individuals who comprise a social system by stating that a social system is "a voluntary association of purposeful members who have a choice" (2011: 2).

Now we turn our attention to the social interactions which lie at the core of the dynamics of social systems. De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) define a social interaction as "the regulated coupling between at least two autonomous agents where the regulation [concerns] aspects of the coupling itself [and] constitutes an emergent autonomous organization in the domain of relational dynamics, without destroying in the process the autonomy of the agents involved" (2007: 493).

This interaction leads to the creation of a “temporary self-producing system” when the interaction self-organizes through the coordination of e.g. the gazes, gestures, movements and utterances of the individuals involved (McGann & De Jaegher 2009). The individuals involved retain their autonomy during this coordination, although the scope of their autonomy can be augmented or reduced, depending on the power relations between them (McGann & De Jaegher 2009).

Furthermore, social systems are indelibly symbolic since, “while people experience [...] social systems directly, they identify and understand social systems [...] through symbolic, in particular semiotic, systems such as shared social representations” (Pickel 2007: 4). These symbolic aspects of any social system include “cultures, knowledge systems, ideologies [and] values” (ibid: 5). It would therefore be more prudent to refer to a complex social system as a sociocultural system, since the cultural and symbolic aspects of any social system form part of the interactions which circumscribe the systemic behaviour. In this vein, Gharajedaghi (2011) makes the important observation that while mechanical systems are energy-bonded, sociocultural systems are information-bonded. This means that the elements of a sociocultural system are linked by the “interconnection of information” (Gharajedaghi 2011: 6). A succinct way of understanding sociocultural systems, then, is as “an organisation of meanings emerging from a network of interactions among individuals” (Gharajedaghi 2011: 6)

### **4.3 Defining sociocultural transformation**

Within this framework of sociocultural systems, it can be argued that the best way to investigate sociocultural transformation in South Africa is to look at different instances of systemic interventions into the South African system which mainly operate on the social and cultural levels. This thesis should therefore be read both as an exploration of what sociocultural transformation might mean and as a study of sociocultural transformation in action. See section 6.9 for the specific context in which the sociocultural transformation at InZync plays itself out. Nevertheless, we can still attempt a provisional definition of sociocultural transformation which can help guide future research into the field. Let us define sociocultural transformation then as a process of systemic change that happens concomitantly with socioeconomic transformation and transformation in general and which specifically addresses sociocultural issues like language use, belonging, inclusivity and identity through sociocultural praxis<sup>11</sup>. It should be noted, however, that it is not possible to strictly separate different kinds of transformation from each other because they intersect with and influence each other.

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<sup>11</sup> My contention here is that transformative sociocultural practices such as intercultural poetry sessions are key vehicles to bring about sociocultural transformation in places of historic segregation such as Stellenbosch.

However, the term sociocultural transformation helps to limit our focus to the sociocultural realm and the ways in which intersecting social and cultural systems are transformed through concerted effort.

#### **4.4 Research implications of a complex systems approach**

Whilst complicated systems can, at least in theory, be understood and modelled completely, complex systems are “never fully graspable by any model”, which means that descriptions as models of complex systems will always be incomplete (Poli 2013: 144). According to Cilliers, this means that “[t]here is no accurate (or rather perfect) representation of the system that is simpler than the system itself” (2000b: 9). This means that there is an irreducibility inherent to complex systems and that there will always be omissions when attempting to model complex systems. This ontological restriction has epistemological implications, because if we cannot model a complex system completely we can also not know it completely. There is therefore always an element of uncertainty involved when engaging with complex systems, which means that our engagement with complex systems (also and especially when researching them) always involves choices which cannot be substantiated on the grounds of an incomplete model (Cilliers 2000b: 12).

This means that when we research a complex system, we are inevitably engaged in ethics since we continually need to make choices about what to include and exclude as part of our investigation into the relevant complex system. However, the irreducibility which is inherent to complex systems should not overwhelm us to the point that we cannot act or carry out research. It simply means that we need to practise modesty when we engage with complex systems (Woermann & Cilliers 2012). We need to keep in mind that in understanding a complex system there are always other ways in which we could understand the system and that we therefore need to take responsibility for the research methods that we choose. Woermann and Cilliers help to elucidate this point: “when acting, always remain cognisant of other ways of acting” (2012: 407).

In the present study, this implies that any description of the InZync sociocultural system will inevitably entail a reduction in complexity. It also means that there are epistemological restrictions in terms of the extent to which we can fully know and understand the Inzync system, and that there are ethical implications in terms of the methodology we use to research and model the system – there are always other research methodologies and methods that could have been used.

#### 4.5 Relevant complex systems for this study

This study will focus on the recurring InZync poetry sessions at Amazink<sup>12</sup> over the past five years as a temporary complex sociocultural system of interacting individuals who themselves are part of intersecting sociocultural systems, three of which are relayed here: Stellenbosch University (as students), Kayamandi<sup>13</sup> (as inhabitants of the geographical space) and the greater Cape Town performance poetry scene (as poets). The participants involved are also complex systems in themselves with their own emergent behaviour. Furthermore, SLiP as an organisation is also a complex system which organises and orchestrates the creation of the InZync system. The INKredibles poetry workshops, which also form a core part of SLiP's work, will not be discussed separately in this thesis, but they will be referred to if they help to clarify some points regarding the poetry sessions. The main focus in this study will be on the InZync system, although the presence of multiple, intersecting systems in the same space needs to be acknowledged and taken into account when exploring the contributions the InZync system makes to sociocultural transformation. A more detailed discussion of the InZync system follows in section 6.1.

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<sup>12</sup> Amazink is an eatery and theatre in Kayamandi.

<sup>13</sup> Stellenbosch's black satellite township.



## CHAPTER 5

### 5 Research methodology

Wisker (2008) defines research methodology as “the rationale and the philosophical assumptions underlying a particular study” (67). In terms of the philosophical assumptions which underlie the study, see chapter 4 where complexity theory and systems thinking is used as an orientating framework for the study, as well as the section on insights from related research below. The rationale of a study includes the purpose, approach and research design.

In terms of the purpose of this study, the research should be seen as both descriptive and exploratory. A descriptive study attempts to provide a systematic description of a “situation, problem, phenomenon, service [or] community” (Kumar 2011: 10). The research undertaken is therefore descriptive because it aims to provide a systematic description of the InZync system. Secondly, an exploratory study attempts to better understand “an area where little is known” (Kumar 2011: 11); the research undertaken is therefore also exploratory because it explores the possibilities of and ways in which performance poetry can contribute to sociocultural transformation, an area of enquiry where very little research exists, as the literature review attests.

Furthermore, the research approach is qualitative in nature. In this regard, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) offer the following definition of qualitative researchers:

The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined [...] in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek to answer questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning.  
(2005: 10)

The sociocultural transformation that we want to investigate is not quantitatively measurable, and because we are interested in how the InZync sessions help participants to construct meaning, a qualitative methodology seems ideally suited to this type of inquiry. Furthermore, a qualitative approach supports a “commitment to perceiving the world from the point of view of the [...] participant” (Brynard, Hanekom & Brynard 2014: 38). A qualitative research approach also acknowledges the “impossibility of disentangling the positionality of the researcher from his/her

methods” (Clough & Nutbrown 2012: 63). This means that the methods chosen are subjective and a function of the intentions of the researcher.

## **5.1 Research design**

The research design takes the form of an exploratory case study that is place-based (Yin 1994). According to Biggs et al. (2010), the exploratory case-study is an appropriate research design when the following three criteria hold: “(1) the goal is to develop hypotheses and propositions for further enquiry; (2) it is not possible to control the situation being investigated, for example, through experimental manipulation; and (3) a holistic approach that considers the interplay of factors in the richness of contemporary real-world contexts is required to understand “how” and “why” certain events occurred” (2010). It is obvious why the InZync system calls for the above approach since our goal is to develop hypotheses for further enquiry, we cannot control the system being investigated, and we need a holistic approach to answer the question of how the InZync poetry sessions contribute to sociocultural transformation. The research design consists of a literature review, a discussion and application of complex systems thinking to the InZync system, semi-structured interviews with participants in the system and participatory observation notes, insights distilled from these interviews and notes, a simulated performance of an InZync session and a conclusion which aims to integrate the literature review and findings.

Furthermore, the research design includes specific strategies of inquiry which will be used in the research (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). In this respect, the following methodological insights from related research have helped to shape the approach of the current study:

## **5.2 Methodological insights from related research**

### **5.2.1 Performance studies**

In the first place, Conquergood (2002) has written an insightful article about performance studies research which has a specific bearing on the present study. Conquergood distinguishes a traditional academic epistemology, which is the result of empirical observation and critical analysis from an objective perspective, from an “experiential, participatory epistemology” (2002: 149), an alternative way of knowing which is “rooted in embodied experience, orality and local contingencies” (2002: 146). Furthermore, he asserts that analytic and artistic ways of knowing come together in performance studies (Conquergood 2002). Applied to the InZync system, this means that there are knowledges that are created and shared during a poetry session which are experiential and embodied. In order to unearth these knowledges, we need to take the experience of poets and audience members as our starting point since they will be able to reveal the experiential knowledges which they contain.

Furthermore, Conquergood makes a case for going beyond the text as object of analysis by asserting that there are “indirect, nonverbal, and extralinguistic modes of communication where subversive meanings and utopian yearnings can be sheltered” (2002: 148). This means that the object of study for performance studies should not simply be the text, but also all sorts of extralinguistic communicative modes expressed through the performance itself. This, however, does not imply that Conquergood upholds a simplistic dichotomy between speech (performance) and writing (text) – in fact, he points us to Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s concept of “orature” in this regard, which complicates the separation by proposing a term that captures the entanglements of the oral and the literary, and in this way “reminds us how these channels of communication constantly overlap, penetrate and mutually produce one another” (Conquergood 2002: 151).

Lastly, Conquergood reminds us of how the participant-observation methods of ethnographic research can be fruitfully applied in performance studies and that the research is complicated and enhanced by the “participatory understanding and community involvement of the researcher” (2002: 153). Applied to the research on InZync, it is obvious that my intimate involvement in the creation of the sessions both complicates and enhances my research and that I have gained specific experiential knowledge during my involvement with the InZync system which I can add to my understanding of the InZync system.

### **5.2.2 Intercultural communication research**

An insight from qualitative intercultural communication research complicates the epistemological contribution I can make as a participant of the InZync system by asserting that my sensitivity to and perception of the system are filtered by my own culture, which determines what I see and “serves as a filter of interpretation” (Aneas & Sandin 2009: n.p.). This means that my own bias and upbringing complicate and delimit the knowledge contribution I can make to the study of the InZync system, including the fact that I am white, Afrikaans, middle class and male. The research will therefore not be undertaken with an air of objectivity, but will be sensitive to the various ways in which my subjectivity influences what I can know and understand.

Interviews are a fundamental way of gathering information in qualitative intercultural communication research (Aneas & Sandin 2009) and an important decision to be made is whether the same questions will be posed to interviewees from different cultures or whether the questions will be tailor-made for the different cultures. In the present study the decision was made to use the same guiding questions to undertake semi-structured interviews. In this way, some of the commonalities in interviewees’

experiences of InZync could be tracked whilst also leaving room for meandering narratives which might emerge during the interview process.

Furthermore, Aneas and Sandin (2002) also make clear that the role of language is fundamental in this kind of research because language serves as a mediator during the interview process. Consequently, I attempted to maintain a sensitivity to language and the ways in which it might mediate the interviews during the research process. I also offered to do interviews in both English and Afrikaans, depending on what language the interviewee was most comfortable with. Unfortunately, due to my own linguistic limitations, I was not able to interview all respondents in their mother tongues, meaning that some had to respond in their second language, which could have affected their responses.

Another important insight from intercultural communication research methodologies is the fact that research methodologies need to be “decentred”, which means that they have to “allow critical spaces in which the unexpected can emerge, and the narratives of subjects can take on a life of their own” (Holliday in Phipps 2013: 17). This means that the agenda of the researcher needs to be tempered and influenced by those of the interviewees. Once again, this approach calls for an openness to the research at hand in order to ensure that the researcher can respond to and incorporate unexpected developments during the research process.

Phipps (2013) maintains that “standardized, extractive methods” were specifically used under modernist paradigms of objective knowledge and centralised control. They are therefore insufficient when dealing with “complex, postmodern, postcolonial [or] intercultural situations” (Phipps 2013: 19). In this vein, intercultural research is identified as necessarily including “sustained, careful, collaborative listening and co-construction of research” (Phipps 2013: 20). Furthermore, creative methods are also identified as a possible avenue that can help to ensure that the “textures of intercultural life” (Phipps 2013: 19) are captured and not overlooked during the research process.

### **5.2.3 Performance poetry as research practice**

A radical and affirming stance towards spoken word (performance poetry) as research practice is taken by Lisa William-White (2011). The author contends that spoken word as an art form “elevates and privileges local and cultural epistemologies through radical and revolutionary performance texts” (William-White 2011: 534). These performance texts can be read as an “embodiment of critical theory, where discourses centered on the intersections of race, class, identity, lived experiences are named, analysed, and interpreted in critical performance narratives” (William-White 2011). The crucial point here is that performance poetry is itself a kind of radical research which investigates

various intersections and socio-cultural-economic inequalities through the medium of the performance.

Ideally, this would mean that the performance of poetry at InZync should itself be included as a radical research method which aims to uncover and explore the various sociocultural complexities of the particular context in which the participants of the sessions find themselves. More realistically, the point that can be taken from this affirmation of performance poetry as research is that the poems that people share at InZync need to form part of integrated research on the topic. By following the logic of her own calls to an essentially creative research methodology, William-White sets out to write a spoken word-piece which ties together her thoughts on using research and spoken word together in order to uncover aspects of critical reality which other forms of research tend to occlude. The “hook” that rings throughout her text helps to show what kind of mixing of research and performance she has in mind:

“I’M CALLIN’ FOR A SCHOLARSHIP REVOLUTION!

Merge critical theory, discourse,  
activism and teaching’  
consciousness raisin’  
signifyin’, rappin’  
and  
preachin’  
with substance  
for IMPACT”

(William-White 2011: 535)

Practically, this means that the research undertaken about the InZync poetry sessions inevitably needs to include a section which discusses and analyses performance texts in context in order to understand the critical potential that performance poetry has in contributing to transformation through the act of performance.

### **5.3 Methods**

Firstly, and most importantly, I have undertaken 20 semi-structured interviews with participants in the InZync sociocultural system, ranging from poets to organisers to audience members. I have tried to use similar questions to anchor the interviews, whilst also leaving space for the emergence of unexpected narratives. The following questions guided the conversations I had:

- Who are you, and where are you from?
- Can you remember the first time you came to InZync? Why do you continue to come?
- Are there any InZyncs that particularly stand out in your memory? Why?
- Why do you think poetry is important? What social roles can it fulfil?
- How have the sessions affected/influenced you?
- What have you learnt from the sessions? About yourself, about others, about Stellenbosch?
- What themes that have been addressed at InZync jump to mind?
- How does the space at InZync compare to university spaces?
- What does transformation mean to you? How does InZync contribute to transformation in your opinion?

Twenty people were approached to share their experiences of InZync through semi-structured interviews. The respondents can roughly be divided into those that were solely audience members at InZync (8) and those that also performed their poetry (12). In terms of race, 6 of the interviewees were white, 4 were coloured and 10 were black. The interviewees included 16 South Africans, 1 American, 1 Ecuadorian and 2 Zimbabweans. Interviewees largely fell within the 18-30 age bracket, which also reflects the age demographic of the poetry sessions. Fourteen women and six men were interviewed. The interviewees were not chosen at random, but specific people were approached because they have been to many of the sessions over the years and would therefore be better suited to give an overview of the extent of the sessions. The table below summarizes the respondents and their demographics:

**Table 4. Details of interviewees**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Poet/audience member</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Vuyisa	Both	Black	South African	Female
Chrystal	Both	Coloured	South African	Female
Lisa	Audience member	White	South African	Female
David	Audience member	White	American	Male
Aphelele	Both	Black	South African	Female
Vusi	Both	Black	South African	Male
Wamuwi	Audience member	Black	South African	Male
Sam	Both	Black	Zimbabwean	Male
Nthateng	Both	Black	South African	Female
Ulrike	Audience member	White	South African	Female
Ashanti	Both	Black	South African	Female
Maria G	Both	White	South African	Female
Maria F	Audience member	White	Ecuadorian	Female
Lwamba	Audience member	Black	South African	Female

Tembi	Both	Black	Zimbabwean	Female
Stephanie	Audience member	Coloured	South African	Female
Béata	Both	Coloured	South African	Female
Du Toit	Both	White	South African	Male
Allison	Both	Black	South African	Female
Adrian	Both	Coloured	South African	Male

Six of the participants that were interviewed form part of the INKredibles poetry collective which was established by InZync in 2013 as a platform for the skills development of young poets in the Stellenbosch area and consists of regular writing and performance workshops. This thesis does not focus separately and explicitly on the INKredibles workshops, although many of the effects of these workshops have filtered into interviewees' descriptions of their experiences at InZync and have been relayed here. Although the INKredibles poetry collective forms an important part of the InZync system, the workshops will not be discussed separately in this thesis due to limitations in scope. Nevertheless, the insights from the older INKredibles are shared here because they have all participated in multiple InZync poetry sessions and have been both performers and audience members. This makes them important voices in the discussion of the InZync system that follows, and they have unique perspectives that enrich the description of the InZync system and the ways in which it has contributed to sociocultural transformation.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because a flexible approach to interviews not only enables commonalities to be tracked, but also leaves room for the emergence of novel or unexpected information (Kumar 2011). Although semi-structured interviews permit "more sensitivity for the interviewee", they also "reduce the comparability" of the data (Flick 2011: 183). The advantages of interviews are that they are well-suited to complex situations, useful to collect in-depth information and questions can be directly explained to the participants (Kumar 2011). On the other hand, interviews also have disadvantages, the first and foremost being that the "quality of data depends on the quality of the interaction" (Kumar 2011: 150). Furthermore, researcher bias can easily be introduced and used to guide the conversation (Kumar 2011). I need to remain heedful of these advantages and disadvantages when doing the interviews. The sampling of participants was not random, but purposive, where purposive sampling is understood as the seeking out of individuals in which the processes under investigation are most likely to occur (Silverman 2010).

Furthermore, participant observation is a method of data gathering which has also been employed in the current study. This is a consequence of my intimate involvement in the InZync system which I attempt to describe and explore. Although the direct involvement in events is seen as a strength of participant observation because the researcher will have "insights into the internal perspective of the setting" (Flick 2011: 183), there is a concomitant limitation which comes with a proximity to the

object of study and which may “overwhelm the researcher” and thereby endanger “their distance from the situation [that is] observed” (Flick 2011: 183). The only way to counter this limitation of participant observation is to remain cognizant of the ways in which my position in relation to the InZync system can serve both as a strength and a weakness.

Then, I have also included some secondary sources (articles about the InZync poetry sessions) which might illuminate aspects of the InZync system that the interviews did not. These articles are taken from reports generated by SLiPnet and from more recent articles in other media, and are integrated into the discussion of the interviews. My contention here is that the analytic lens that others have applied to InZync can help to enrich my own understanding of InZync as sociocultural system and how it contributes to transformation.

Lastly, in the spirit of William-White’s (2011) call to employ performance texts as examples of radical research, I have also selected certain poetry texts which have been performed at InZync which I will analyse and contextualise in order to try to relay some of the cognitive-emotional experiences associated with hearing and seeing these poems performed live. These poems have been chosen subjectively in a way which I feel represents the different poetic genres which are performed at InZync as well as some the different languages and dialects in which they are performed. This selection excludes many of the poems which have been performed over the years at InZync, but an attempt has been made on my part (subjectively limited though it may be) to give a generalised impression of some of the material that has been performed on the InZync stage.



## CHAPTER 6

### 6 Findings

#### 6.1 Establishing InZync as a complex sociocultural system<sup>14</sup>

In this section, I will argue that InZync can be understood as a temporary complex sociocultural system using the characteristics of complex systems as developed by Cilliers (2000a, 2008) and others as discussed in section 4.1. This theorization will be supported by personal observations and excerpts from interviews and secondary texts which will contribute to a systems-understanding of the InZync poetry sessions and will serve as a prelude to the investigation of the 20 interviews and what they reveal about the distinctiveness and transformational capabilities of the InZync system. Establishing an InZync session as a temporary complex sociocultural system will help us to see more clearly how the sessions have contributed to sociocultural transformation which can, within a complex systems-framework, be understood as something that emerges from the activity of the system.

In the first place, we see that InZync consists of various elements (i.e. participants) which interact in a specifically structured way over the course of a poetry session. The participants can be divided into poets, audience members and organisers (the host, DJs, and producers). Notice here that the InZync system is seen to persist as an entity over time from each poetry session to the next even though the elements of the system might change, whereas their relations to and interactions with each other stay relatively constant. The interactions between elements in the system can arguably best be understood by turning to the individuals which have formed a part of the system and investigating the interviews. These interactions will be shared in the following section which investigates the different narratives which have emerged from the interviews.

Despite the structural characteristics which persist from one session to the next, there is also an undeniable singularity, an unrepeatability, to each show, because each session happens only once and the specific collection of people at the event will never be the same again. As Adrian aptly observes, “each show has its own personality and its own character – [...] the energy we put into the show, we’re all in different places in our lives, and the result is shown in the show” (Adrian). Here Adrian touches on an important realisation, namely that the organisers’ lives also influence the trajectory of each session.

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<sup>14</sup> Although this section naturally flows from using complex systems thinking as an orientating framework (chapter 4), it is included here under findings because it includes data gathered using the methods as described in section 5.3: it not only incorporates participant observations, but also quotes from the interviews that help to develop an understanding of InZync as a complex sociocultural system.

On a related note, it is prudent to re-state that any system-description entails simplification, which means that we need to stay conscious of the ways in which the sessions and the full scope of their impact will always entail more than any single model of the sessions can represent. In this regard, we would do well to take heed of my own description that “there are as many experiences of InZync as there are people on the night” (in Adrian). This realisation not only helps us to remain conscious of the diversity of experiences at InZync during any one session, but also to acknowledge that any description of the complex system that is the InZync sessions (including this thesis) will therefore inevitably exclude certain information and experiences. The following findings do not imply that everything that can be said about the sessions has been said.

Returning to a description of the system, each InZync session contains feedback loops of various kinds. Firstly, the audience’s response to poems being performed constitutes a feedback loop which can change the way in which the particular poet performs their poem at hand. There is an undeniably dialogical interaction between the audience and the poets that consists of information which is both verbal and non-verbal (Allison, Adrian). An example of verbal feedback are responses like “Thetha!” and “Bua!” - Xhosa and Sotho words which mean “Speak!”. These words, along with many others such as “Yes!” and mmm’s and ahhh’s, are often used to show support for a particular train of thought in a poem and to anticipate what might come next. They notify the poet that the audience is present and following their poem as it is performed. An obvious example of non-verbal feedback is the audience’s applause (or lack thereof) which responds collectively and directly to the poem as a whole. This applause not only includes hand-claps, but also cheers, ululations and other expressions of support.

Another feedback loop which is of relevance is the interaction between the host and the audience throughout the session. To start the session, the host uses verbal and non-verbal communication to act as a positive feedback loop for the establishment of the communicative parameters of the InZync system. This means that the host welcomes everyone, and gets them “psyched-up” by employing call-and-respond techniques. By requiring the audience to respond directly to his/her words, the host prepares the audience for their role as listeners and active respondents to the poetry that is to follow. The dialectic between poets and audience and the concomitant two-way flow of information (poems from the poets, responses from the audience) is hereby established. Furthermore, important rules regarding the behaviour of participants is established at the start of a session. These rules include respecting the space by being sufficiently silent to allow the poets to speak, switching off cell-phones which can interrupt the flow of information between poets and audience, and enjoining them to respond vigorously to lines or sentiments they agree or disagree with (Adrian). The host thereby helps to establish the mutual respect between poets and audience which is a pre-requisite for the system to emerge (Du Toit).

The host also plays an important role between poets' performances by not only preparing the audience for what is to come, but also ensuring that the audience returns to a suitably quiet and focused state before the next poet comes on-stage. Furthermore, in the case of a disruption in the system, the host's role is to create a negative feedback-loop in order to contain the audience in such a way and to bring them back to a focused state so they can be attentive and receptive to the poetry that comes next. Here, the host's sensitivity to the state of the audience is crucial in ensuring the continued appreciated exchange of poetry which characterises the InZync system. In this regard, Van Wyk affirms that the hosts "have to help create the space so someone can feel comfortable enough to speak on stage" (2016). In order for that comfortable space to be created, the host often makes themselves vulnerable by sharing one of their own poems.

Furthermore, the InZync system can also be said to be an open system, since there is an exchange of information between the system and its environment. The environment here is taken to mean the outside world and the larger sociocultural and social-ecological systems of which the participants form a part. In this way, the participants bring with them their connectedness with and embeddedness in larger complex systems and act as representatives of these systems. Furthermore, the InZync system (as informational exchange between poets and audience) also acts as a temporary environment for these larger complex systems, an "outside" from where these larger complex systems can be described, critiqued and challenged.

Following Cilliers' thoughts on meaning-making through the use of signifiers via Derrida (2000a), we can also say that the meaning that emerges from the InZync system is contextually bound and receives its substance from the interplay between different poems, different signifiers and different languages. In this regard, it is important to point to another characteristic of the InZync system which emerges from the fact that the sessions are consciously structured to be multilingual events – the differential and changing understanding of the audience as different languages are employed by different poets.

A concrete example will make this point clearer. Imagine that a poet comes on stage and performs a poem in isiXhosa. This will only be understood by all Xhosa-speakers in the audience, even though the non-Xhosa-speakers can still follow and appreciate the poem, not only by listening to the musical qualities of the poem, but also by taking their lead from the response of Xhosa-speakers in the audience. Their mmm's and ahhhh's help to contextualise the poem and provides the non-Xhosa speakers with audio clues as to the emotional substance of the poem. Now imagine that this poet is followed by an Afrikaans poet. Once again, only a certain (but different) section of the audience will understand Afrikaans, but the rest (via the same process as described above) can still follow and meaningfully interact with the poem despite their inability to understand the language.

What we see here are the ways in which different participants become semantic outsiders or insiders during the performance of poems in different languages and the ways in which their embeddedness in the system allows them to continue to participate in meaning-making even though they might not speak the language in which a poem is being performed in. There is an interlingual (and therefore also intercultural) awareness which emerges here in the interplay between different languages which I contend is crucial to our understanding of how the sessions can contribute to intercultural understanding, which, in turn, can contribute to sociocultural transformation. This point will be revisited when comparing responses from different interviewees.



**Figure 2. Nondyebo-Vooi Mtimde, a regular imbongi at InZync. ©Retha Ferguson**

## **6.2 A thick description of InZync through the mouths of participants**

The InZync poetry sessions have been running for six years at the moment of writing. Valley writes the following about what InZync has come to mean to her:

[InZync] has become a space where participants can become entangled in one another's narratives and perspectives, through addressing the big questions relevant to our time and place like identity, transformation, economic freedom and also the shared human experiences that connect us regardless of race or socio-economic background.

(Valley 2014)

Lisa brings a historical perspective to her discussion of InZync, since she attended the very first InZync session in March 2011 and has attended almost all InZync sessions up until the present. In the early days of InZync, Lisa remembers it as a “tentative, careful space” where the participants from Kayamandi and the university were still unknown to each other. As she puts it “everyone was still trying to figure out their relationship to each other and to poetry” (Lisa). Nevertheless, one characteristic stood out from the start – the sheer diversity of people that were gathered in the same space for the same reason.

Over the years, InZync has evolved into a “sociocultural event” which “draws in a wide variety of people from very diverse parts of the town into [...] one space” (Mbao 2016). Wamuwi discusses how this is particularly significant given the fact that these kinds of intercultural meeting spaces are quite rare in Stellenbosch. Relatedly, for David, InZync shrinks the “small literal separation” and “figurative cultural separation” between people from Kayamandi and students from Stellenbosch University. This figurative cultural separation is a result of centuries of deliberately separated cultural development and has led to the perception that different South Africans sometimes seem to “live in different universes” (David).

### **6.2.1 The place**

The distinctiveness of the sessions definitely involves their geographic location at Amazink in Kayamandi. The sessions are held in the Stellenbosch’s satellite township, which is often seen as a “forbidden space for privileged students” (Stephanie). By inviting students to enter the township, the sessions therefore help to break the presuppositions that students have about Kayamandi in general by creating a safe and inclusive space in the township. As Béata asserts: “For a town so stuck in its ways, stuck in a box, [InZync] forces us students to get out of that box”.

In terms of the transformative potential that InZync has, its ability to integrate people from Stellenbosch and Kayamandi to participate in the same temporary system should not be underestimated (Maria F). In fact, InZync temporarily integrates many people from different cultures and different contexts through poetry. This kind of integration, however, is not “clinical, forced [or] categorical” (Maria G). Rather, it is something that emerges from the InZync system as a result of the relational dynamics that the system establishes.



**Figure 3. The InZync audience filling up before a show. ©Retha Ferguson**

### **6.2.2 InZync in relation to other Stellenbosch spaces**

A recurring theme which emerged from the interviews was the ways in which participants had experienced InZync in contrast to other spaces in Stellenbosch. The following descriptions do not attempt to give an objective description of Stellenbosch, but rather try to relay how different InZync participants have experienced Stellenbosch as a lived reality and how their experiences of Stellenbosch have been different from their experiences of InZync. In this regard, Maria F points out that InZync has a “different ambience” from the rest of Stellenbosch. For Wamuwi, most other spaces in Stellenbosch tend to be monolingual with a predominance of Afrikaans, closed off and only accessible “to a specific crowd of people”.

In this regard, Valley describes Stellenbosch as being in line with “typical apartheid urban planning practices” (2014). Similar to other South African towns and cities,

Stellenbosch consists of a town center, reserved for “white” people during Apartheid by the Group Areas Act (1950) surrounded by spatially disconnected and racially segregated suburbs and townships. [...] Legacies of colonialism and apartheid are etched into [the] social dynamics of the town in the way its inhabitants occupy public space – real and imagined boundaries are still constructed according to race and class.

(Valley 2014)

Furthermore, InZync does not conform to the dominant culture of Stellenbosch, as Ashanti argues. For her, the dominant culture in Stellenbosch is white, privileged and Afrikaans and includes student activities like “skakels<sup>15</sup>” and “sokkies<sup>16</sup>” (Ashanti). In this respect, Béata discusses her experience of “huisdansen<sup>17</sup>” on campus and the ways in which she has not felt welcome in these kinds of spaces:

Let’s take huisdansen [at residences] as an example: You often only get one kind of person there, you don’t normally find queer people in that space and you won’t find many people of colour because it’s a very Afrikaans space.

Relatedly, Stephanie argues that she has experienced the university as an oppressive space which does not allow for the unencumbered expression of her personal identity:

The university often dampens any creative flow from happening because you relate the space to so many negative things, like the oppressive nature within which we exist in this space, all the harsh dichotomies that exist here, whether they be racial or gender binaries.

A similar sentiment is echoed by Allison, who has experienced Stellenbosch as a space of exclusion:

In a space [...] like Stellenbosch, there’s no breathing space for people. At your lectures, at private space, at work, there’s little opportunity to express yourself, to be creative, to say whatever you want to say. But InZync is that space. And Stellenbosch needs that space. Because there’s a whole history of silencing people here.

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<sup>15</sup> “Skakels” are social events where male and female residences literally “link up” or “skakel”.

<sup>16</sup> “Sokkies” are dance events featuring specific kinds of close dancing and Afrikaans music.

<sup>17</sup> “Huisdansen” are, literally, house dances, an annual formal dinner and dance organised by each residence.

Attempts at facilitating traffic between historically segregated Stellenbosch-spaces through InZync have not been without difficulties. Whereas the sessions have been particularly successful in bringing university students from the center of Stellenbosch to Kayamandi, “they have been less successful in attracting people from neighbouring Cloetesville [a coloured neighbourhood]” (Valley 2014).

In contrast to the above descriptions of Stellenbosch, InZync is significant because it “allows for the presence of other cultures in [the same] space” (Ashanti). As Mbao points out, InZync shows how poetry can “[forge] connections that cut across the spatial and class differences of our country” (Mbao 2014). InZync’s explicit foregrounding of multilingualism and intercultural encounters therefore distinguishes it from many other spaces in Stellenbosch.

### **6.2.3 The participants**

Apart from the location of the InZync sessions, Maria G identifies several other factors which contribute to the distinctiveness of the sessions: the kinds of people that come, the languages that they speak, their economic backgrounds and their cultural identities. Because of these various differences between participants at an InZync session, Maria G holds that there is no single marker of difference which characterises the participants. Rather, one could say that it is the multiple ways in which people are different – their differentness - which defines the participants. Lwamba echoes this when she states that “[one] cannot make any assumption about anyone that’s [at InZync]”. The one characteristic however, according to Lwamba, which typifies InZync-participants is their open-mindedness, their willingness to hear people out. Despite the differentness of participants, some respondents also pointed to the similarities between people that come to InZync. In this regard, Nthateng says “I get to meet people that are like me”, and Ashanti and Allison both affirm that there are like-minded people at the sessions.





**Figure 4. Adrian "Diff" van Wyk – co-director of InZync and regular emcee. ©Retha Ferguson**

#### **6.2.4 Descriptions of an emerging system**

The InZync sessions have variously been described as “alternative” (Maria F), “comfortable” (Nthateng, Sam, Chrystal), “alive” (Sam), “dynamic” (Wamuwi), “energized” (David, Ulrike) and “super electric” (Béata). These monikers can be read as self-descriptions of the system. Even though the system is primarily concerned with information-exchange in the form of poetry, from these descriptions it is clear that there is also an energy-component to the sessions, a palpable experience that Wamuwi describes as “[a] wave of poetic energy” which literally carries the audience away. The poets are also “carried” by the audience as they perform (Du Toit) – here Du Toit refers to this feeling of being carried away as “crowd-surfing”. These feelings of being carried away can arguably be understood as first-hand descriptions of the experience of becoming part of the emergent InZync system during a session. Chrystal also describes her experience of the system:

The energy I experienced was like no energy that I had I felt before – it was like everyone was friends and everyone respected me – there was an energy there like ‘people have your back’.

Tembi also highlights the distinctiveness of the energy at the sessions: “the energy that comes out from the performances [...] is magic”. The bodily responses of the audience to the performances form a feedback loop (as discussed earlier) which leads to what David calls “social alchemy” (2016).

Here, words like “magic” and “alchemy” should be read as markers of inexplicability, as signifiers of the emergence of a system. Emergence is used here to refer to those characteristics of a system that emerge due to the interactions between its components, characteristics which cannot be traced back directly to any of the elements of the system.

In terms of understanding InZync as a sociocultural system, it is interesting to note the other social systems to which participants compare InZync. For many of the INKredibles interviewed, InZync has become a second family (Vuyisa, Aphelele, Vusi). InZync also has church-like qualities (David, Lisa) in so far as there is a celebration, not of God, but of “youth, a celebration of life, sadness, of joy” (David). Stephanie also picks up on the similarities between the InZync system and a church:

[Poets are] preaching the gospel and it [doesn't] matter if you agree with them or not, your body reacts in such a way that you [can't] help but be involved in what they [are] saying.

#### **6.2.5 Interactions between poets and audience**

The sessions are “intimate”, because of the short distance between audience and poets (Maria G). Lisa calls this an “ease of intimacy”, and the performance of poetry at InZync carries with it a distinctive immediacy which is the result of the co-presence of poets and audience (Lisa). The immersive character of the InZync system is highlighted by Maria G when she says that “everything that happens fills all the nooks and crannies of the space – it's almost like you are sitting in the poetry during the performance”. Stephanie describes her experience of being immersed in the poetry in the following way which captures something of the unique strength of performance poetry in my opinion:

All of a sudden there's this gap, this opening, where someone is able to enter this different realm where they can speak about things. It's like when the clouds open up a little bit and you can see the light.

Continuing, Stephanie asserts that participants are able to transcend the here and now during these moments because of the “cathartic release” which takes place when you follow a poet into the opening which their poem has created. This metaphoric description of the links between poet, poem and audience underscores the interactional nature of the system.

Relatedly, Wamuwi points out the dialogue which emerges between performance and audience. Elsewhere, Mbao describes the relationship between performers and audience as “telepathic” (2014).

Whereas poetry events are often characterised by a passive, quiet audience, the InZync audience “directly participates, not only through their applause but also in how they react to the things that are said” (Wamuwi). This dialogue is also described as a conversation, a back and forth and a call and response (Wamuwi), a dynamic that has already been identified as central to the discussion of InZync’s functioning as a complex system.

Lisa sheds more light on this relationship between the understanding of the poem and the audience’s reaction to it: “the way the crowd is responding affects how you are hearing the poem”. In this regard, Lisa refers to specific moments of what she calls “acute resonance” where there seems to be a unification of what the poet is saying and what the audience is experiencing. According to Lisa, this happens when the rhythm of the words matches their shape and their meaning. More generally, this feeling of intimate connection between poet and audience is described as “the rush of distance closing” (Lisa). It is apparent, then, that the boundaries between selves and others are blurred in these moments of heightened sensory and emotional awareness which are brought about by poems that resonate strongly with the audience.

The shared quality which emerges from becoming aware of different people’s stories and subjectivities is what leads to the “tight-knit feeling” of togetherness (Du Toit) and communality at InZync (David). In this respect, Du Toit highlights fact that he didn’t feel alone anymore after performing at InZync – the audience members were vocally responding to his poem and this made him realise that those people also know something about the issues he was talking about (Du Toit).



**Figure 5. The audience intently listening. ©Retha Ferguson**

### 6.2.6 Agonism at InZync

An important characteristic of the system which kept on emerging throughout the interviews was the fact that differences of opinion are tolerated, that agonism is allowed, in the space. The following examples from the interviews help to make this point clearer. Referring to one of the performers she experienced, Maria F says the following: “I didn’t agree with what he was saying, but also you can feel free to say what you want to say, as long as you don’t hurt anybody”. At InZync, you are welcome to audibly disagree with something that is being said (Du Toit); sometimes the different viewpoints from different poets can be “quite clashing” (Stephanie); and there’s “no censor” at InZync (Ashanti).

Another example of agonism is a poem which Sam performed entitled “Ask a black dude” at a session in May 2016. The exchange between his poem and an audience member and the lack of response from the rest of the audience reveals the kind of agonism which is allowed by the system. One of the questions in Sam’s poem is whether all black people hate white people. Whereas there was a light chuckle from the rest of the audience following the question, one audience member loudly exclaimed “yes!” The lack of support for this statement from the rest of the audience was communicated by their silent response to the exclamation.

The point made here is that everyone does not always agree with each other and that this disagreement should be seen as a strength in a diverse community such as InZync. As David puts it:

To be offended or [...] challenged by a poem in the InZync context is not something where you need to assert your point of view, you have to think about it, contemplate it.

Adrian also points out how some people do not agree with all the socio-political commentaries that he provides through his poetry. But he insists on the ultimately positive effects of having people disagree with what you are saying and then being able to engage with them after the performance on the issues at hand.

Relatedly, Lisa points to the politicisation of content at InZync over the years and how she has experienced this politicisation as a positive antidote to a town where “it’s not always safe to be angry” (Lisa). Here we see again how allowing agonism in the space enables a robust and inclusive system to emerge. Allowing “dissidence and dissonance” (Lisa) at InZync is therefore crucial to understanding InZync as an intercultural space. Lwamba makes a similar point when she says that “no one group owns the space. But at the same time it’s not like anyone is compromising – we can just call things as we see them”. This tolerance of dissidence means that people “accommodate each other” at InZync

(Chrystal), which allows for the emergence of the temporary equality that characterizes the InZync sessions, an equality that Arendt (1958) identifies as one of the characteristics of a space of appearance. In this regard, Lwamba points to how agonism is cultivated at the sessions when participants do not necessarily agree with what is being said: “Sometimes it’s awkward, I can sense [from] the energy in the crowd that it’s awkward for them to hear the poet’s truth, but you just take it because you respect it [because] it’s your platform to say what you feel”.

### **6.3 Experiences of poetry at school**

The interviewees were asked about their experience of poetry in a formal educational setting and how it compares to their experiences at InZync. Their responses will be shared here. This should not be read as a comprehensive discussion of the generalised experiences of poetry at high school, but rather as a subjective sharing of participants’ conceptions of formalised poetry education and how this differed from their exposure to performance poetry at InZync.

The general response from participants was that studying poetry at school was associated with restrictions and limitations (Du Toit). The understanding of a poem is generally limited to what the teacher tells you about the meaning of a poem (Nthateng). Here, the teacher is seen as someone who is privy to the hidden ways in which the poem creates meaning, and as such has a privileged position with regards to the poem. The teacher is the source of objective knowledge about the poem and the learners are passive recipients of the poem’s meaning-making strategies. The understanding of poems is therefore regulated and limited by their analysis in a classroom-context and often the direct sensory enjoyment of the poem and its sounds, the pleasure which the reader/audience member draws from the poem, is suppressed in favour of an analytic, distanced perspective (Maria G).

Furthermore, the kind of poetry studied at school very rarely includes performance poetry (Ashanti) and poetry in general is seldom seen as something to be performed (Vuyisa). This is largely due to the fact that performance poets are underrepresented in the formal education curriculum. Some participants also had strong feelings about the lack of relevant, local poets at school – “it was always ‘the greats’: British, English greats from Europe”, says Maria G. Chrystal supports this view when she states that 90% of the poets she studied at school weren’t South Africans, and that 90% of the poets were “old, white men” who couldn’t say anything that she felt she could relate to. Furthermore, Chrystal asserts that the language of the poetry was “hoog en suiwer” [high and pure] and that almost none of the poets that they discussed in the Afrikaans class were writing in Afrikaaps, which is the dialect she identifies with most strongly. Stephanie also highlights the unrelatability of much of the poetry she was exposed to at school because poets always seemed to be writing in “high-English” (Stephanie).

For Sam, the poetry at InZync is different from the poetry he was used to at school: “[At InZync] you have to know the context you have to know the message and who it is directed to, the impact of the poem, how strong the poem is”. This description reveals a particular understanding of poems as communication devices which explicitly take the audience into consideration in their conceptualisation.

#### **6.4 Poetic communication and the social importance of poetry**

The following section summarizes the interviewees’ understandings of the various functions that poetry can play in a societal context, with particular reference to the InZync sessions. Their responses reveal certain shared understandings of what performance poetry can do in the social sphere, understandings which have been shaped by the interviewees’ participation in the InZync system. The following themes emerged in this regard: Poetry as shared message, poetry as form of expression, poetry as social commentary, poetry as self-reflection, poetry as silence, poetry as parrhesia and poetry as cultivator of togetherness.

##### **6.4.1 Poetry as shared message**

Poetry is a “powerful medium for communication” (Ashanti). This sentiment is echoed by Lisa when she states that poetry is a “compact, potent form of expression”. This communication is conceptualised as an activity of sharing. As Vuyisa states: “At InZync we just share”. The sense of InZync as a space to gather in order to share ideas and to talk is highlighted by Wamuwi. The importance of this sharing is explained by Maria G: “sharing this energy and these ideas and stories about one [another] helps us to tell stories of people that don’t know [each other], that don’t meet often”. Here we see how InZync contributes to the knowledge that people have about each other, especially if they belong to social groups which, due to historical or contemporary reasons, do not often engage in each other’s personal narratives.

Poetry is therefore a way of bringing people together in order to “pass a message” (Nthateng). Aphelele also underscores this understanding of poems as messages being passed from the poets to the audience: “We [the poets] come here to send a message and all the people [come] here to listen to the message”. Aphelele emphasises that not all poetry sessions work in this way and that the intimate and respectful communication which happens at InZync does not always happen at other poetry sessions that she has attended.

#### 6.4.2 Poetry as unique form of expression

Another recurring theme which emerged from the interviews is the fact that poetry is a way of expressing yourself (Vusi, Vuyisa, Ulrike). For Chrystal, poetry helped her to start talking and writing about personal issues at home that she hadn't been sharing with anyone else. Relatedly, Maria G highlights how poetry is a platform to express things that are usually hidden. The beauty of poetry is that it gives everyone a voice to tell their story (Chrystal, Aphelele). By giving people a voice, poetry also helps in the formation of agency and identity, a topic to which we will later return.

Poetry as a form of expression is unique because poetry can be used to say things that people don't often talk about (Sam). In this regard the ability of poetry to express that which is not being expressed elsewhere is emphasized by Vuyisa. For her, the purpose of poetry is "to tell what is not being told [...] for people to be aware of your stories – [...] it's all about awareness". Here Vuyisa explicitly links the performance of poetry to an increase in intersubjective awareness.

In terms of poetry as form of expression, Chrystal asserts that "poetry is [her] modern-day superpower": "[...] no-one can tell my story better than me and no-one can tell it the way I do and make the impact I want to make". This singularity of perspective which a poet with a particular subjectivity brings to the sessions is also highlighted by other interviewees (Vuyisa, Nthateng) and is closely tied to the poet's voice. Aphelele complicates our understanding of "voice" by insisting that poets do not simply express their own voices, but can also act as conduits in order to be "a voice of all the dead and living victims". Poetry is therefore not only seen as a way to speak for the self, but also a way of speaking on behalf of others, especially those that are silenced.

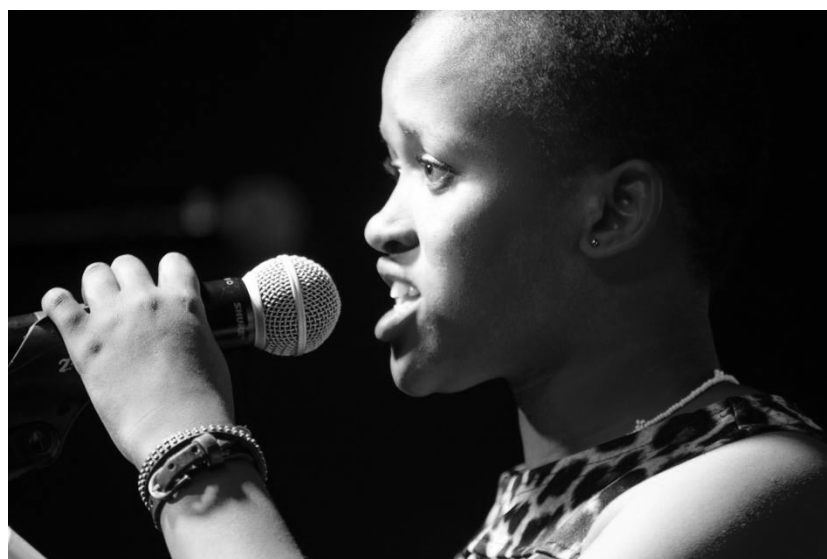


Figure 6. Aphelele Mvamva, an INKredible poet. ©Retha Ferguson

### 6.4.3 Poetry as social commentary

Vusi asserts that poetry is not only about poets and their expressions, but also about the society in which the poets find themselves: “Some people think that if you are a poet you do it because you love it, [but] it’s because you have to. We don’t do it for ourselves, but for society”. In fact, according to Allison, poets are seen as “social commentators of the world”:

We observe and because we observe intensely and honestly and deeply, we speak truth. And we need to be reminded as people all the time – it’s not just about race, it’s about all of us trying to understand all of it, [understanding] how to be human.

Poets are social commentators because they are able to use poetry to provide a different perspective on social issues “through the perspective of someone’s struggles” (Chrystal). According to Chrystal, poets are able to talk about these social issues in a way that draws the audience in and forces them to pay attention to the issues at hand in a way that is unique to poetry.

In this regard, the intentions of the organisers in curating the InZync sessions should also be taken into consideration when we try and understand the social commentary at InZync. Here Adrian points to the effect of consciously choosing poets who use their poetry to provide social commentary:

The people we put on stage, there’s a lot of social commentary, a lot of artists who are socially aware [and who] speak about social circumstances and realities. It’s not just about meadows and deep forest mists and falling waterfalls – the artists we bring in provide commentary on social circumstances. And that’s where the power comes in, where the audience can holler back, like respond in agreement with “Yaaaaa!” That definitely gives the audience a sense of empowerment.

### 6.4.4 Poetry as self-reflection

Furthermore, poetry functions as a tool “that can allow people to self-reflect, especially if it’s activist poetry around sensitive issues” (Ashanti). In this regard, Lwamba describes InZync as a place of “thoughtful reflexivity”. Ashanti refers to a poem she performed about the differences between rough sex and rape as part of the ongoing “End Rape culture” protests that were happening around the country to explain poetry’s potential to act as self-reflective tool. For her, bringing these issues to light helps some people in the audience “to take a different viewpoint” and to see an issue such as rape in a new context (Ashanti).



Performance poetry not only allows for self-reflection, but performance poetry events can also be read as reflections of society as a whole (Wamuwi). The poetry that is shared on a platform reflects what is happening in the society within which the poetry event is held (Wamuwi). Performance poetry is also reflective in the sense that the audience's reactions "are reflective of the value of [a] poet and the poet then becomes reflective of the collective" (David).

#### **6.4.5 Poetry as silence**

One of the reasons why performance poetry is particularly important to Lisa is captured in her following description of the place of poetry in our contemporary society:

The world is becoming louder and louder and louder – it's noisy and there's noise interference. Everything is overlapping at a pace where there is less coincidence and more passing by. It's just this blur. I find the world incredibly bewildering and overwhelming. So to have something that you can be quiet with while having this raging outside is, to me, very special.

This insistence on the silence that poetry also creates is interesting, given the usual associations of voice and volume when it comes to performance poetry as a medium of self-expression. In this regard, Lisa also refers to the beauty of "a moment of shared silence" at InZync – here, the sharing of silence emerges as a complement to the sharing of stories.

#### **6.4.6 Poetry as parrhesia**

In section 2.2 of the literature review we saw how Rivera, in following Foucault, identifies parrhesia as a particular form of "courageous truth telling" (2013: 115) which characterises performance poetry and which is intimately tied up with the identity formation of the performers and audience. From the interviews it also transpired that parrhesia is also the mode through which poetry is shared at InZync. In this regard, Ulrike argues that the performance of poetry at InZync has a "rawness [...] authenticity [...] and honesty". In a passage which reveals the possibility of parrhesia operating across and between different languages, Maria G remarks that "[t]he authenticity, the honesty and vulnerability is the language which the audience and performer understand" (2016). Here parrhesia is shown to be central to the mutual understanding that performance poetry at InZync enables. The centrality of the body in parrhesiastic activity is also acknowledged by Ulrike when she says that something happens when a person performs their own poem – it becomes alive in their mouth in a way that would not have been possible without the co-presence of poet and audience.

#### 6.4.7 Poetry as cultivator of togetherness

For Adrian, performing poetry is about “letting people in” (2016). This letting-in implies an “immense vulnerability” and is often accompanied by fear “because you are going to say the things you have written down to a room full of strangers, and then you’ll see what happens” (Adrian). Relatedly, Béata holds that listening to other people’s poetry provides “a glimpse into their life”. Throughout the interviews it repeatedly emerged that poetry has the potential of bringing people together (Maria G, Wamuwi), even if (and perhaps especially because) “there are so many problems and ideas about other cultures in South Africa with its painful history” (Maria F).

Maria G argues that it is not necessarily the political and critical nature of a lot of the poetry at InZync which has the biggest social impact (2016) – rather, it is the sheer fact that InZync brings people together because they want to listen to poetry. Du Toit takes this train of thought further by insisting that people come because they want to listen to each other. Vuyisa echoes this statement: “One thing that gathers people here is poetry. Everyone will be talking about poetry and nothing else”. Ashanti also agrees that “the poetry [at InZync] is what makes us all the same”.

It is in this respect that Maria G refers to the sessions as a “social lubricant” which “entices”, “invites” and “allows” people to come together for a singular, shared purpose . This leads Maria G to sum up what she sees as the real power of InZync:

You don’t need to come from a specific class because the sessions are free, it happens across multilingual platforms, it speaks to all kinds of sexual orientations and gender experiences. That’s the real power behind the sessions: Because of its multifarious nature it actually brings all these people together. And that’s the real impact that the sessions have, the intermingling of audience members [who are all] there for poetry.

The affirmation of communality at InZync is captured by Du Toit in his use of the Afrikaans word “vereenselwig” which he employs to explain how InZync cultivates togetherness. Roughly translated, to “vereenselwig” people with each other means for people to associate themselves with each other. But this translation fails to capture the interrelated nature of personal identity formation and communality. Literally translated, “vereenselwig” refers to the process of becoming one “self”, of unifying each other. This description illuminates how the acknowledgement of other people’s subjectivities relates to the affirmation of your own.



**Figure 7. Some dancing in between different poets. ©Retha Ferguson**

### **6.5 The InZync system as a facilitator of learning**

This section collects the various skills, understandings and knowledge-creations that InZync made possible for the people interviewed. They can be read both as descriptions of the contextual knowledges that InZync has enabled and as generalised distillations of what performance poetry can teach to those that participate in its creation, either as audience members or poets.

Firstly, Sam makes us conscious of the fact that there is no uniform essence which everyone that has come to InZync has learnt - rather, different audience members learn different things from different poems. This differentiated understanding of the learning that InZync enables is in keeping with a complex systems understanding of the varied ways in which different participants can learn different things from the same system. Furthermore, Lisa asserts that the normal power hierarchy between teachers and pupils does not apply at InZync. This does not mean that teaching does not happen at InZync, but simply speaks to the temporary equality that is established at the sessions. This equality is further entrenched by the fact that the organisers of InZync also go on stage, making themselves vulnerable and sharing their poems (Lisa).

Learning about the importance of believing in one's own writing was a recurring motif in my interviews with the INKredibles (Vuyisa, Vusi). For these young poets, this insight is closely linked to understanding the importance of self-belief when undertaking self-expressive activities like poetry (Vusi). Furthermore, Vusi states that engaging in poetry has taught him about "the flexibility of playing with words and languages". Nthateng, another INKredible poet, shares her insights from InZync:

InZync has taught me that no-one is better than anyone else, you get to tell your own story. No-one is going to stand in your way saying, "No, it's like this, it's like this!" – you get to make up your own stories.

In these examples we see the agentic power of performance poetry and how it enables the telling of narratives of the self, thereby contributing to the creation and affirmation of personal identity, a theme to which we will return later in this chapter.

The focus on multilingualism at the sessions has also taught various participants about the different traditions of poetry which exist in our country. In this regard, Adrian learnt about these different traditions and how they contribute to the different regional cultures by being exposed to a variety of poetic genres and forms. The various languages to which the participants listen each have their own poetic traditions: from Xhosa praise poetry as performed by imbongis like Nonbyebo-Vuyo Boo and Bulelani Zantsi, to the rap-verses of Afrikaaps hip-hop (as performed by Jitsvinger, for example) to the possibilities of sign language poetry, as performed by Xoliswa Flekisi (Maria F). Ashanti calls the tradition of Xhosa poetry which the imbongis represent a "culturally-based poetry performance". On a personal note, being exposed to indigenous praise poetry has also opened my eyes to the ways in which performance poetry has always been part of the South African cultural landscape.

For Maria F, InZync has taught her to accept difference and to understand difference better. Similarly, Ashanti has learnt the importance of accepting difference and acknowledging our common humanity. In a striking metaphor, Ulrike argues that the sessions help to make the walls that separate people from each other "more transparent". Although these walls do not necessarily disappear, it is impossible not to acknowledge someone else's humanity once you have seen it shared through performance poetry (Ulrike). The use of the wall metaphor reminds us of Alexander's earlier quote about the "prejudices, fears and anxieties" of South Africans which are like "walls of misunderstanding" which still exist between us and which need to be broken down (2003: 108).

For Ulrike, these transparent walls do not simply amount to a superficial acknowledgement of the recognition of sameness, but rather a reminder of the ways in which the poetry performances can affirm our ubuntu, our shared humanity, despite the fact that people have different backgrounds and realities.

The recognition of sameness despite difference also stands out as something that Sam has learnt from the InZync sessions: “In poetry we are all the same [...] we understand the same language, the language of poetry”. Relatedly, Aphelele holds that InZync has explicitly taught her about ubuntu, especially through the relations she has built with fellow young poets, “the Shonas (like Sam), the Xhosas (like me), the Sothos (like Nthateng)”. For Nthateng, InZync reminds us of our shared humanity despite the racial dichotomies with which we still live on a daily basis:

Here at Inzync there is no colour, there is no black or white or pink, there’s just people. And it’s a space that reminds us that before you were white, before I was black, before I had this hair, before you had your hair, we were all just humans.

Although Nthateng’s idealised description perhaps glosses over the stubborn persistence of race in our daily lives in South Africa and the complex ways in which race is addressed at the sessions, her insistence on the unifying possibilities of certain forms of intercultural expression reminds us that a space of togetherness beyond race is still viable. In this regard, Allison similarly asserts:

InZync represents ubuntu in its fullest form, I feel. Because I am learning so much about myself through other people. We are reflections of each other. All our stories somehow, we can relate. And that is the beauty of it – I can’t grow on my own, I can’t be isolated, I need people, I need togetherness. [...] And poetry reminds us of that humanness, that energy that connects us.

Nthateng emphasises the knowledge-creation side of the poetry sessions when she affirms that InZync has helped her “to understand the social life of others, others’ livelihoods”. This understanding is cultivated through a focus on listening to other’s narratives. David picks up on this when he states that he has learnt “to listen in different ways” (2016) at InZync: “To literally shut up and listen to people, that [...] is a tool, that isn’t a South African lesson, or gendered or racial: it’s a human lesson” (David). For David, to listen intently at InZync is “to be filled-up with someone else’s story, for a moment to [become] aware of [that person’s] subjectivity”.

Relatedly, Béata shares some of the things that she has learnt at InZync:

I learnt a lot about the racial divide, because I [...] don't really like politics and I was very ignorant when it came to any of that. And now I'm in a lot of activist groups because I realised how bad things are here. [...] Hearing a lot of Kayamandi locals and hearing poetry about the racial divide and politics – I learnt that things are a lot bigger than you, it's not just about what's happening on Stellenbosch campus. [...] I became more aware.

Here we see how InZync has helped to transform Béata's understanding of her place in Stellenbosch-society in relation to others. In this regard, David points to the fact that InZync has the ability to “enhance the [mental map] of what the cultural and social landscape is like” in Stellenbosch.

Lastly, there is also the skill of perspective-shifting, of imagining the other as self, which many participants identified as a crucial component of what they had learnt at InZync. For Sam, creating and sharing poetry has taught him how “to be a person who has two perspectives: not only [his] own, but also what other people think”. Poetry thus has the ability to cultivate an understanding of the other in relation to one's self, but also of the other as Other. In this regard, Vuyisa highlights how poetry functions as a medium to “explain how [she feels to] somebody else [in order] to share the feeling of how [she is] feeling”. Here we see how performance poetry can act as a vehicle to enable the imagine-self and imagine-other perspectives identified earlier in the literature on intercultural communication.

In this regard, Wamuwi holds that the audience becomes immersed “into a whole set of viewpoints that are completely different to your own”. Adrian uses a similar metaphor when he says that at InZync the participants are continuously “getting angles of other's people's lives”. According to Wamuwi, InZync is a space “where no one particular cultural viewpoint dominates [and] where people are exposed to the experience of other viewpoints having as much legitimacy as their own”. It is this characteristic of InZync that is directly responsible for making it a transformative space, in Wamuwi's opinion. These varied viewpoints help participants to provide perspectives on their own identities and the ways in which they make sense of the social fabric in which they are embedded (Adrian).

## **6.6 Themes addressed at InZync**

Participants were asked what some of the themes are that they feel are often addressed at InZync in order to gain a broad understanding of the content which is shared at the sessions. Of course, there is a diversity in content which can only be conveyed in its entirety by discussing every poem that has ever been performed at the sessions – which is obviously not feasible given the scope of the thesis.

Rather, the interviewees' thematic summaries are used to frame the diverse poetics which have graced the InZync stage. This will be followed by a more detailed textual analysis of some of the poems which have been performed at the sessions.

Some interviewees emphasized the expansiveness of topics addressed at InZync. As Aphelele says, "we are writing about all the things that are happening in this life". Wamuwi also holds that at InZync the poems communicate "what it is like to be a young person in South Africa". More specifically, poems always speak to current debates in the community and society in general (Maria G). In this sense, many performances can be read as instances of activism because they address "relevant [themes] that are affecting society at the moment" (Tembi).

Looking at the responses from participants, the most prevalent themes identified at InZync are those relating to race, gender, sexuality and politics (Maria G, Vusi, Wamuwi). Intersectionality is a term which helps to capture all the iterations of the above-mentioned topics, especially as it relates to identity politics (Nthateng). Related topics that are addressed are nationality (Stephanie), history, apartheid, multilingualism and linguistic inclusion and exclusion (Wamuwi). Lisa also highlights the disillusion that many participants have with democracy, and poets do not shy away from sensitive social issues like racism, rape, patriarchy and white supremacy (Chrystal). Certain interviewees felt compelled to also mention the prevalence of love and sex in the poetry performed at InZync, especially as an antidote to some of the above issues which can be quite depressing and critical (Vusi, Lisa, Ashanti).

In general, Wamuwi differentiates two kinds of themes which have emerged from the sessions: "public accessible themes, like current social and political trends" and "acutely personal topics" which might not have an obvious wider relevance, but become so because through the performance these topics "becomes meaningful to the audience". Although this distinction between public and personal themes exists, it is also important to remember that they can both occur in the same poem and, as Maria G suggests, this comingling of the personal and the public arguably makes for the strongest kinds of poem in terms of their ability to communicate a change in mindset to the audience.

David and Lisa both point to a Women's Day session in August 2014 which was essentially devoted to women and women-ish issues (2016). This session has gained significance in retrospect for David, because it preceded the various conversations around patriarchy which later emerged as a central narrative during the national FeesMustFall protests in 2015. Lisa reiterates her gratitude for the "emboldened presence of women" at the sessions and how this presence allowed for a robust engagement with gender dynamics. This presence has been made possible, according to Lisa, by the fact that InZync is such a safe space. An example of Lisa's reaction to a poem about rape by Nthateng

helps to elucidate this “emboldened presence” she refers to and the empowering effect the sessions have had on women:

[A] real woman standing in front of real people on a physical stage and speaking with her body, being there, is incredibly important when we talk about prejudice and gender violence. It is perpetuated on bodies in spaces that are secret, hidden from [the public], because these are where the most everyday atrocious acts happen, in places hidden from view. So to have a woman’s body speaking with vocal chords, and to see a real woman saying these things [...], the act of uttering something, is immensely powerful. And then to have people respond to that. Because everybody will know someone that it has happened to, or it’s happened to them personally. [A]t the end of the day when women as well as men respond with horror, anger and sadness – it’s comforting. [...] You can see it on people’s faces and you can’t escape that intensity – it’s heightened by the presence of others.

(Lisa)

In a more critical vein, Tembi asserts that there can sometimes be a tendency to deal with the “same South African issues”, specifically issues around race, which can have the unintended effect of “reproducing themselves” when they are addressed. Here, Tembi refers to the need to balance socially conscious poems with celebratory poems, because “there’s a lot that is happening [around us] – so that we don’t just see darkness”. Furthermore, Tembi points to the need to broaden the themes addressed at InZync so there can be more inclusivity for poets from other countries.



**Figure 8. Poet laureate Keorapetse Kgositsile performs at InZync. ©Retha Ferguson**



## 6.7 Identity formation and development at InZync

This section focuses on the various threads that emerged from the interviews that specifically reference identity formation as an emergent property of the InZync system. In this regard, Nthateng describes the effect of performing in front of an InZync crowd for the first time: “I was someone, you know, I was starting a journey of making something of myself, and the inner child in me, who I really am, just came out” (Nthateng). Here we see the personal transformative potential the sessions have, specifically when it comes to identity development through performance. Relatedly, Aphelele affirms that attending the InZync sessions gave her the courage to take to the stage, to speak out about her sexuality and to be proud of her identity as a lesbian. Here we see how InZync has functioned as a platform for the performance of identity. The power that comes from performing identity and the concomitant responsibility that this entails for performers is summed up as follows by Aphelele:

InZync is giving me the power to be me, it’s giving me the power to speak out, it’s giving me the power to be the voice of the voiceless – the voice of all the victims. Because rape, I’ve been there, being lesbian, I’ve been there, tortured by my sisters and family issues, I’ve been there, depression, I’ve been there.

In this quote, we see how the voicing of the self entails the voicing of others, thereby affirming the mutually constitutive nature of identity formation that takes place in the InZync system between poets and audience. This understanding of identity echoes an ubuntu-centred worldview where you are who you are through others. InZync can therefore be read as an enactment of this interconnected constitution of identity.

Béata relates a similar tale about coming out at an InZync performance:

I wrote a coming out poem, which I wouldn’t have written if I didn’t feel comfortable with it. And I read that poem in a way that [my parents] would understand, like I didn’t think they would understand if I just talked to them. I performed it at InZync and [afterwards] two girls came to me and said that poem helped them to realise what their sexuality was. So knowing that writing something as personal as a poem to my parents touched even two people to be okay with their sexuality – you feel a lot of responsibility, but also feel like it means something, you know?

Two things are worth noting from this extract: firstly, that Béata felt she could voice her sexual identity singularly through poetry in a way that she couldn't do by just talking about it; secondly, how the development of personal identity through performing poems is linked to the development of others' identity. The performances act as showcases of various identities that, by virtue of being performed, allow other participants to gain a better understanding of their own identities. This understanding takes place not only through identifying the similarities with those identities that you can personally associate with, but also by noting the differences between yourself and others.

In a similar way, the exposure to different cultures at InZync complemented Sam's conception of his own distinctive cultural identity as a Shona man. This contribution that the sessions have made to cultural identity is echoed by Adrian when he asserts that when he came Stellenbosch, he was still grappling with the idea of being "coloured". Consequently, InZync helped Adrian to determine who he is through the constant process of renegotiating his identity.

## **6.8 Transformation as defined by InZync participants**

This section builds on the discussion in Chapter 3 of a context-specific systems-based understanding of transformation by including InZync participants' subjective understandings of transformation. This will be followed by a discussion of the ways in which InZync participants see the InZync system as contributing to sociocultural transformation in Stellenbosch.

On a surface level, interviewees understood transformation to refer to a normative process of change from a less desirable state to one that is more desirable. In this regard, transformation is seen as a process of "becoming better" (Nthateng), of "changing something to be better" (Aphelele, Béata), of "moving to another level in a positive way" (Vusi). During my interview with Vuyisa, I shared my own understanding of what transformation might mean:

I think transformation has something to do with a change in the way people think and a change in the way people see and understand themselves and others. It's important especially in South Africa with the history of people being separated from each other.

Within a transformational framework, there is a definite acknowledgement of a connectedness to the apartheid-past in South Africa and the ways in which the present is determined by that past. Here David holds that transformation entails the realisation that your current circumstances and context are a function of the past.

Simultaneously, transformation also implies “[completely] leaving behind that which was” (Stephanie). Transformation is therefore both an engagement with the past and an unambiguous movement away from that past.

Furthermore, transformation implies a process of productively engaging with difference – transformation is about “making sense of difference and trying to make it beautiful, eloquent; not trying to make difference threatening or exclusive,” (David). Transformation is also closely linked to access and inclusivity. In this regard, Maria G holds that transformation implies “equal access for everyone” (2016): “regardless of your economic background you [...] feel an equal sense of belonging as someone who is different from you”. For Wamuwi, transformation can mean many things, but on a felt and tangible level it refers to “changing a space such that more people feel welcome and more people feel accepted in that space”. Here we see how transformation is understood as a process which promotes equal access and inclusivity.

Relatedly, for Lisa, transformation is about

stronger interpersonal bonds, greater openness, greater safety, [...] freedom of movement, [...] being free to care, feeling safe enough to care and to show care. It’s about not needing to justify your presence somewhere, about not making excuses for your beliefs or experience, about owning a collective history and a willingness to do all the above.

Ashanti points us to the possible pitfall of using a term like transformation, especially because it has been co-opted by the powerful to promote changes which masquerade as transformation, but which actually serve to uphold the status quo. In this regard, she proposes the use of the term “decolonization” to refer to transformative practices (Ashanti). Either way, here Ashanti helps to anchor the discussion about transformation around specific practices. Stephanie also highlights the fact that transformation only becomes meaningful if it is intimately tied to social justice and praxis. Despite Ashanti’s reservation and taking Stephanie’s point into account, I still believe that the term “transformation” carries enough pre-established significance to serve as a lens through which we can look at the transformational practices which are a result of the InZync system.

Lastly, two seemingly contradicting observations about the relations between identity development and transformation help us to remain cognisant of the complex ways in which these processes are interlinked. Chrystal makes the important point that transformation can also be a process which happens on the individual level in the form of identity development: “growing up and getting to know yourself is also a kind of transformation”.

Here, Allison counters by asserting that transformation is in fact about selflessness. Selflessness implies a forgetting of the self, whereas identity development entails knowledge of self. These two, however, do not have to work in opposition to each other – it is possible to get to know yourself better whilst learning about being selfless. In fact, it might be argued that transformation works with this tension between recognizing the self and recognizing the other. In this way, identity development can be read as a crucial component of transformation, but only if identity development is understood as a dynamic social process which constantly renegotiates the boundaries between self and other.

## **6.9 Transformations at InZync as described by participants**

For Mbao, the InZync sessions are “transformation made visible” (2014). This section attempts to understand how the InZync sessions help to visualise and perform sociocultural transformation. According to Maria G, everyone has an equal sense of belonging at InZync: because the sessions are free, there are no financial restrictions placed on who can attend the sessions (2016). Furthermore, InZync “doesn’t discriminate whatsoever towards any possible political signifier” (Maria G). Perhaps this description of InZync is slightly idealistic, as other interviewees pointed out the fact that foreign students often feel slightly excluded or alienated and that more can be done to make InZync a space of belonging for everyone (Maria F, Tembi). Nevertheless, throughout the interviews it repeatedly emerged that people experience InZync as an inclusive space (Vuyisa, Stephanie).

Furthermore, people from different cultures feel acknowledged at the sessions since there is a conscious effort to invite poets who perform in different languages. The importance of this multilingualism should not be underestimated, especially within a Stellenbosch-context where debates about the language policy at the university have dominated university politics for years. According to Adrian, acknowledging people’s mother tongues and allowing them a space for expression has the following effect: “acknowledging someone’s language [is] an acknowledgement of existence”. Relatedly, Ashanti argues that “InZync is an example of how a rainbow nation (however problematic that term might be) looks like in practice”.

Then, the transformative nature of the sessions is, at least partly, enabled by their location. As Maria G aptly observes: “The space [Amazink] is on the periphery of town and if you want to think of [Stellenbosch] as [a] centre of white privilege, [the sessions] take place on the margin, [meaning that] people are immediately forced to discomfort themselves”. The fact that InZync takes place on the margins means that the dominant cultural narrative does not carry the same weight at Amazink as on the university campus in the centre of town. One might even speculate that the peripheral location

enables transformative practices precisely because the hegemonic hold that Stellenbosch has on cultural production is loosened in this space.

Furthermore, Vuyisa provides a clear perspective on how poetry can function to bring about transformation:

When poetry brings people together there is [...] change because [people] will be talking about one thing and that thing will be to express what they feel to other people. And when they express what they feel that brings other people to come and listen.

For Ashanti, InZync has contributed to the process of transformation through decolonization simply because many of the “revolutionary minds on campus” often come to InZync, the critical thinkers and thought leaders who are currently, together with students all over the country, coordinating the call for decolonized and free education. In this regard InZync has served as a rallying point for these critical thinkers and a “welcoming space” where the social issues of the day are deliberated (Wamuwi). The importance of the kinds of conversations which take place between participants at InZync “about what they have witnessed and what they have experienced” during the break and after the session and the contribution of these conversations to transformation is also acknowledged by Wamuwi. Relatedly, Nthateng holds that InZync gives its participants many things to think about, and “thinking transforms” people. The logic here is that InZync opens up conversations about various topics through performance poetry (see section 6.6 on themes at InZync) and that these conversations can ultimately lead to different, transformed behaviour.

For Vusi, InZync is transformative because it has shown participants that it is important to know and acknowledge who you are. In his words, InZync has “instilled a sustainability of [knowing] and [remaining] who you are” (Vusi). Aphelele also echoes this when she describes the transformational impact that InZync has had on her life: “It’s [...] like changing, changing that Aphelele then to be this powerful Aphelele now”. Once again we see the proximity between questions of identity and questions of transformation.

According to Wamuwi, there are crucial transformative moments at InZync where people are “made to experience what it is like to be on the outside of a cultural paradigm for a moment, or [...] made to experience someone else’s cultural paradigm as being not simply a marginal thing but something that has as much claim to the space that we live in as their own”. It is during these moments that InZync can most clearly be seen as having transformative effects. Relatedly, Stephanie holds that “you experience difference when you come to InZync”. According to Stephaine, this difference is not only something that you see, but also something that you are confronted with intellectually.

Many of the participants also pointed to the ways in which InZync plays with different languages and genres and how this contributes to transformation. As David asserts, InZync is seen as a vanguard intercultural event that shows us what Stellenbosch could be “in terms of accommodating language, mixing language, not being afraid of that” (David). We will now turn to this question of language use at InZync because the mixing of languages, in my opinion, is one of the most important characteristics of the InZync system which enables transformation.

### **6.10 Encountering linguistic and cultural differences at InZync**

David talks about the simultaneous understanding and non-understanding which is a defining characteristic of the InZync audience and a function of the multilingual nature of the sessions: “that [certain] people can understand what’s going on very clearly, and that [other] people can’t, at the same time – it’s weird. It’s kind of unsettling at first, but then you realise there are other ways to understand it”. Lwamba specifically enjoys poems in languages she cannot understand “because then [she has] to deal with the fact that there is a barrier, and [acknowledging] that is natural and okay and honest”. By not understanding, you are confronted “with your lack of knowledge about language and about the ways that language connects people” (Stephanie). Encountering performances in a language that you cannot understand therefore highlights the central role that language plays in creating exclusive and inclusive spaces.

This code-switching between different languages forces the audience to realise that “they are not the center of attention, [that] they are not the center of the place where they live” (David). This de-centering effect therefore helps audience members to broaden their perspectives on the kinds of people that live in Stellenbosch and the validity of the stories that they carry with them. It is this effect which leads David to state that InZync “doesn’t really have a center”. Although the sessions are representative of Kayamandi, Stellenbosch and South Africa, they are centerless because there is no single cultural or linguistic viewpoint which dominates or excludes others (David). David also insists that non-understanding is an essential component of the transformative impact that the sessions have had on him: “it’s good to realise your own inabilities, to hear them, to feel that feeling you get when you are not privy to the conversation taking place. It is a powerful feeling”. This feeling is also described by Lisa as realising that “you are not the center of the universe – your experience is not the only one in the space.”



**Figure 9. Malika Ndlovu performs. ©Retha Ferguson**

When a poet performs in a language she doesn't understand, Maria G asserts that she is forced to switch to a different kind of register where she "listen[s] to sound effects, rhythm, or even just [looks at] body language". These then become the ways in which she "reads" the performed poem. In this regard, she emphasises her continued ability (despite her linguistic handicap) to respond to the poem because she still "feels" it, because "there's a bodily response to it". Furthermore, Maria G also highlights the role of the audience's reaction in guiding her own response to poems when they are performed in a language that she doesn't understand. Vusi also talks about his experience of encountering non-understanding: "Even though I can't understand Shona, I get the context; even though I can't understand Sotho, I get the context; even though I don't understand Afrikaans, it still touches me in a way". David affirms that his non-understanding is supported by listening to the audience, thereby learning to anticipate what might come next.

Maria G describes how these differentiated responses from the audience also happen when people talk about social contexts that she might not be familiar with: "[S]omeone will do something which you don't get because you don't live what they are talking about, [b]ut other audience members around you do and then you're like: 'there are different people here and they relate and I don't' and [then you ask yourself] why". Here we see how the audience's response is crucial in connecting the responses of the audience members who feel they understand the social context that the poet is talking about with the audience members who might feel alienated by the described context.

In this way, the latter's understanding of the poem is enhanced through the observation of other audience members' responses.

The audience's understanding of the poems and lived realities to which the poets refer is something that, according to Maria G, continually "comes back and falls away" during the course of a session, depending on the extent to which one understands a poet's language and social context. This means that an audience member "is distanced from certain audience members who collectively respond to what the [poet] says and vice versa" (Maria G). Here Maria G touches on a central emergent characteristic of the InZync system which she describes as the "strange and constant links" among audience members and between audience members and poets.

These shifting dynamics also reflect the tensions between racial, linguistic and cultural differences, between an "us" and a "them" that are alternatively accentuated and erased from one moment to the next. Maria G succinctly describes this dynamic as one that pendulums between the understanding that "we are all human" and the understanding that "we are all different": "there is a constant fluctuation between these [two]: [the differences] need to be addressed, and they need to be forgotten, and they need to be addressed, and they need to be forgotten". This continual reminder and erasure of difference is therefore an emergent property of the InZync system and one which, in my opinion, contributes to the sociocultural transformation that the InZync system enables.

### **6.11 The limits of performance poetry**

In the preceding discussion of the findings of this study we have continuously focused on the transformational possibilities that the InZync system enables. We have emphasized the contribution of the InZync system to identity formation, intercultural communication and transformation in general. It is important, however, to also note some of the limits of performance poetry at InZync. Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged that InZync is merely a temporary sociocultural system which lasts for two or three hours a month. As Lwamba aptly observes, once the session is over "we listen, clap very loudly and then we all go home". Maria G also highlights the boundedness of the system when she says that "it sometimes feels as though [InZync is] this little universe in itself that's momentarily cut off from everything that's happening outside of the doors". Furthermore, although Lwamba acknowledges the fact that poetry can galvanise people into action, she asks a pertinent question which reminds us of the humility that should accompany our understanding of the possibilities of performance poetry: "How many poems do you need to listen to before some kind of social change comes about outside of just the poetry itself and [...] listening and becoming a transformed individual?" (Lwamba).



Acknowledging these limitations does not mean that we are calling into question the ways in which InZync has contributed to transformation in Stellenbosch. Rather, it forces us to be honest about the extent to which multilingual performance poetry events in and of themselves can bring about enduring, system-wide transformations and the ways in which performance poetry needs to be complemented by various other transformational attempts in and outside the University of Stellenbosch if we are to talk about the total transformation of the higher education system.

## CHAPTER 7

## 7 A mini-InZync session – an imagined transcript

## 7.1 The transcript

What follows is an attempt to textually represent what happens at an InZync poetry session. The featured poets were chosen because of their continued relationship with InZync over the years and not because they claim to be representative of all the many poets that have performed at InZync. The session features poems by Allison-Claire Hoskins, Adrian Diff van Wyk, Aphelele Mvamva, Chrystal Williams and myself, your host, Pieter Odendaal.<sup>18</sup>

*Chilled South African hip-hop (perhaps the early Tumi Molekane) plays in the background, the audience has filled the amphitheatre at Amazink in Kayamandi, Stellenbosch. You, reader, audience member, also sit down. Dusk is settling in. You can see the lights from Cloetesville on the other side of the train tracks, the profile of Simonsberg in the distance. The night is quiet.*

*Cupfuss start playing a sick beat. The host appears. He is a boertjie from Bloem. Slightly awkward-looking, but deep into the groove of the music. The audience quietens down as he starts rapping.*

Host:

This is the place where the poetries meet: Get up, get up and stand on your feet!  
 Fuck the fuckademics, like Papa Ramps said / poisonous thoughts pollute the head /  
 PJJL Pikes spitting on these decks / I come with the InZync, that's what I said /  
 I come with the InZync that's what I said

*All you beautiful people, how you all doing? Music fades, audience start clapping.*

Yoh, there's so many beautiful mense here tonight!

*Now everyone is quiet.*

Tonight we have a special session because our audience is scattered through time and place – we are live-streaming to you wherever you are reading this.

---

<sup>18</sup> I have consciously decided not to provide full translations of the Xhosa and Afrikaans poems that follow. This was done in order to try and mimic the non-understanding which is an important feature of the InZync system, as identified in section 5.10.

You, yes you! I can see you and we are going to have a beautiful night. This is an African poetry session; this is a South African poetry session! So if you feel someone and what they're saying, you don't click like you're in New York, you show your love with Ooohs! and Yohs! and hands and ululations! Ok, so when I say "InZync" you say "poetry"; InZync...

Nah, man, I wanna really hear you, you must be present! When I say InZync you say poetry; InZync...

Audience:

Poetry!

Host:

Yes! InZync...

Audience:

Poetry!

Host:

InZync...

Audience:

Poetry!

Host:

Much better! So you know that you come here to respect this platform, so please give people your ears. You don't pay to come to the session, so pay with your ears by listening. I'd like to start tonight with a poem I wrote after working on my thesis about, you guessed it – InZync! To me, the poem tries to show why I think this thing called poetry is important given the history of systematic cultural segregation in this country, and why being here at this session together tonight is important. Okay, here we go:

### **this apartheid thing**

the ultimate attempt, then, to block the  
passages between people  
rocks that stop the flow of lovewords  
separations of selves that are always already porous

we are the bridges that bind us  
routes overgrown with weeds, like lies  
of difference, we contain each other  
living mirrors of mutual observation  
we are the sky between birds  
the blood between bodies  
always overflowing  
resculpting the banks  
that keep our streams from merging  
we erode the facades holding up the past  
divisive borders denials of the multiple threads  
that weave us into this delta that is us  
this thing that lives between

we are conglomerations of each other relentlessly  
shuttling matter to and fro:  
the ocean beating as hearts do  
the beach born from recycled shells  
whenever we try to find our endings  
new pathways emerge that bring us face to face  
with what we have known from the start:

we are the connections  
the ones that flow between  
the synapses that tie bodies together through words

*kom laat ons sing!*

come let us  
cultivate the spaces between:  
those uncharted landscapes of shared breath  
that unfold like origami  
when we open ourselves up  
to the vagaries of wind:  
like this line here  
like this poem  
and this night

*The audience shows love.*

Okay, next up is one of our INKredibles! She has been with us for 3 years and it has been amazing to witness her growth as a poet and a human. Make some noise for Aphelele Mvamva! Whoop-whoop!

Aphelele:<sup>19</sup>

Ndibuvile ubunzima

Ndisenzonzobileni

Ebumnyameni

Iingcango zivaliwe Yehova.

Lonto ivavanyiwe intliziyo yam

Ewe ke bandivonyavonyile

Bendivuselela iintlungu mntaka Mbeleko

Belibala ukuba bandivulela indlela.

Ukundithuka kwabo kundenze ndathungululela esibeni.

Ukundibetha kwabo kundenze ndacinga de ndancazela nephepha.

Ewe kakade ibiliphupha lam elo.

Ndiba ndililizwi elixilonga iintliziyo

Zamakhoba axhatshazwe zizinxadanxada ezinxuse unxweme elivuzwa iinyembezi zikaVitoliya

Ewe besele kukade ukuba ingaveli.

Kwaze kwandenza ukusokola ndithobele namasiko.

Bendihleli ndingenothandwa ngumntu wonke kakade andiyomali.

Bandombelela bengandombuleli,

Suke bandithiya bendithuka.

Andazi kutheni lingade lifike elam ithuba.

Kanti ke lifike ngoku!

Ndidiniwe kukuba nguchof'ayichaze into ezulayo.

Heyi! Suke ndanomsindo.

Ngumzimba wam lo,

Usuka ndawoni xa ndithetha inyani?

---

<sup>19</sup> An English translation of this poem appears in the Appendix.

Kanene iyalumeza Kanti ke uyakuyilumela ngamathe.  
Ndiyiyi nangoku!  
Ewe ndithanda abantu abasini sinye.  
Ndidiniwe kukonelisa abantu de ndibeke mna mva.  
Ndinguye endinguye,  
Ndingasoze ndibenguye

*Lots of ululation from the audience.*

Host:

Thank you Aphelele! Next up is Chrystal Williams, another INKredible poet. Take it away, Chrystal!

Chrystal<sup>20</sup>:

hou op kak praat met mekaar  
dat ek natural hare dra  
dat ek my afro verleng  
deur dit met braids te vermeng  
dat ek my liggaam spoel in riviere  
en bly in senties  
permie rondloop met fokkol bra en pentie

hou op kak praat met mekaar  
dat ek dreadlocks jak  
dat ek rondsliiep in plastiek sakke  
vol weed of twak  
dat ek kaalvoet loep  
meneer ek respekteer haar koek

my vorm is abstrak  
ek rek jou mond oep tien onreg  
jy kan myni fool met jou godly-complex  
en wordly hashtags  
#prayforparis #feesmustfall #endrapeculture

---

<sup>20</sup> An English translation of this poem appears in the Appendix.

ek is consciousness  
as racism my sien  
hou hy vir hom onbewus  
ek is die wind wat dans as 'n hele generasie hul vyste lig

I am consciousness  
and I am a verb  
you cannot demand my presence  
by throwing adjectives in the air like  
misogynistic, patriarchal, chauvinistic

tell the competing activist that  
I cannot be obtained by picking for oppression points  
tell the white girl  
that I cannot be imprinted in her mind  
cause she twisted braids in her roots

moet my nie limit tot  
'n hairstyle, 'n wardrobe, 'n status, 'n profile pic  
'n voorarm-sized dick en 'n melanin shade

ek isi sexually transmitted  
ek sali net bust as hy my ingesit'it  
ek vat my tyd

jy vind my in ha playlist  
ek hang saam katte soes Lauryn Hill & Jitsvinger  
Kom by plekke soes InZync & protest

ek is consciousness  
en solank ons twee brasse is  
sal jy nooit weer 'n natte kies wat nie  
op my journey is  
vind my in jou family tree  
in jou Nee beteken Nee  
en Nee bly mos Nee  
want die ouens v hie

vestaan mosi diti

soe hou op kak praat met mekaar  
ek maak my hanne warm by haar honger asem  
sit aan tafel met rich politicians  
ek jak elke pattern  
nie net African print  
eksi net 'n African kind  
ek is alles behalwe blind

*The audience responds enthusiastically.*

Host:

Yoh, you guys were feeling that weren't you? Amazing! Are you still with me?

Audience:

Yes.

Host:

I can't hear you?

Audience:

Yes!

Host:

That's better! Our next sister has been with InZync for three years, and she has lit up all of our lives.  
Please show some love for... Allison-Claire Hoskins!

Allison:

Nina Simone will not remind us that we are young, gifted and Black  
Louis Moholo will not beat us into the next phase of the revolution  
Julius Nyerere's Ujama will not be the next solution

There will be no Messiah waiting for us  
There will be no Rosa Parks sit-ins on the bus  
Just us, pushing i-skorokoro at the next station of liberation



just us reaping reparations for this looted generation

For the land that is-and-is-not is knotted in fists  
whose arms stand erect against the winds of oppression  
here memory is the weapon

Solomon Mahlangu will not hang for our salvation  
Miriam Makeba will no longer sing for the Black Nation  
Oh Woe, the woke who still sleep walk in these Takalani Sesame streets –  
the revolution has been hijacked by puppets

Yet, impressed by silver and gold their souls black-managed and white-owned

Oh, Cry The Beloved Country of Sobukwe's Dream!  
Remembering is a political act  
I have seen this before  
Black bodies performing for freedom  
Free The Dom!  
They have polluted Biko's seeds  
here the soil is red stained by the blood of 34 men  
Lilies cannot grow on such corrupt soil –  
instead, they are buried

Yes, Black lives Matter! You can buy that on a t-shirt  
Black lives underground  
Who, who! Will bail you out?

So no, James Brown will no longer sing and shout it out out  
For it is only a few that are really Black and proud  
cause, when the lights go out being dark ain't so lovely  
when the lights go out  
you know who killed Lumumba and Garvey

THE WRITING'S ON THE WALL!  
but, only blind men can read it  
Motho Fela said it, but the people did not want to see it.

There will be no Messiah waiting for us  
There will be no Rosa Parks sit-ins on the bus  
Just us, pushing i-skorokoro at the next station of liberation  
just us reaping reparations for this looted generation

Oh, Cry The Beloved Country Of Sobukwe's Dream!

When will they see that they are the Beautiful Ones we've been waiting for?

Host:

Yoh, mense are freaking out hey. And the hele standing ovation! Ok, peeps, get yourself ready for the last poet for tonight – he's usually behind the mic introducing everyone else. He has been there from the start and InZync would not have been possible without him...Please, go crazy and make some noise for Adrian Diff van Wyk!

Adrian:

### **D.F. Malan vs. Diff**

My feet stand steady on this unstable ground  
shifting and skutting the soil  
engraving my name into the earth's surface  
with my big toe

for too long  
Malan's legacies  
have tried to disturb  
how we flow  
& listen  
to the  
earth's bio-  
rhythms

Verwoerd's ideas were not wys  
that the moon conveys messages  
of yesterday's unequal existence  
& that our presence

in these strongholds of nostalgic advantage  
personify the phrase "never again"

our artworks occupy corneas  
our poems disrupt eardrums  
our voices protest demonstrate  
& activate change in an instant

because we are  
causes the white supremacist  
capitalist patriarch to paaap

we are genetically connected to the soil,  
The lame appliance of pseudo-science  
tried to divorce us from the ground

even R.W Wilcock's report of 1938  
could not separate our names  
from being written in the sunrays  
by floating dust particles

Apartheid commissioned an uninformed report  
trying to build  
buffers  
between  
boejong and baaaas,  
You lekker jaaaas  
if your well-imagined violence  
will continue to perpetuate my silence

My melanin bounces off yesterday's injustices  
they vibrate resurrecting heritages  
murdered by coloured classification

my blood shouts Batavia  
my skin screams Namaqualand  
my feet found home in the Kuila

my soul is a clenched fist  
that owns blackness

My feet stand steady  
on this unstable ground  
shifting and skutting the soil  
engraving my name into the earth's  
surface with my big toe

Host:

People have just been coming with the fire tonight, hey? I feel like I've seen the future – and it doesn't look as kak as one would think. InZync, you've been an amazing audience. Thanks to our DJs, thanks to Diff and the INKredibles and everyone that helped make tonight a reality! I'm Pikes, and I'm out!

*The audience applauds enthusiastically. Music fades back in.*

## **7.2 Discussion**

This section will briefly discuss the poems from the previous section and the ways in which they help illuminate the findings from the interviews and the themes that interviewees identified.

### **7.2.1 Pieter Odendaal's poem**

The speaker in Odendaal's poem shows the ways in which South Africans are mutually constituted beings and how apartheid managed to convince us differently, namely that there is some kind of a priori separation between people of different races and cultures (stanza 1). Rather, from an ubuntu-viewpoint, we determine each other and become human through our relations with each other (stanza 2). Furthermore, the poem calls for poets and artists in general to acknowledge their role as sociocultural workers in connecting people to each other and celebrating our shared humanity through poetry – “kom laat ons sing” [come, let us sing], the speaker enjoins us, “come let us cultivate the spaces between” (ll. 28-30). In this poem, the transformational potential of poetry is celebrated, particularly the potential of metaphors to reimagine the interconnected constitution of our identities as South Africans and the role that poets can play in sociocultural transformation.

Here, the words “we are” are repeated throughout the poem followed by metaphors – we variously are “the bridges that bind us” (l. 5), “the sky between birds / the blood between bodies” (ll. 9-10), “conglomerations of each other” (l. 18), “the ones that flow between” (l. 26) and “the synapses that tie bodies together through words” (l. 27).

The poem ends with an affirmation of the connective power of poetry and how it enables us to connect to each other (ll. 31-37). Here lines and poems and evenings like poetry sessions (ll. 35-37) can all contribute to an enlarged understanding of each other and an affirmation of our shared humanity, despite all the historical segregation which haunts South Africa’s past.

### 7.2.2 Aphelele Mvamva’s poem

The speaker in Mvamva’s poem starts the poem by sharing how she has suffered in darkness and in shame (ll. 2-3) and how this darkness eventually lead her to her pen and to realise her dream – “Ndiba ndililizwi elixilonga iintliziyo / “Zamaxhoba axhatshazwe zizinxadanxada ezinxuse unxweme elivuza iinyembezi zikaVitoliya” [To be a voice that mends all hearts / of victims abused by bastards who reside on the coast that oozes alcohol] (ll. 12-13). The speaker reveals that she has suffered abuse from an alcoholic (l. 13), that she has been kept quiet by traditions (l. 15), that she has been insulted and hated (l. 18).

The poem builds in intensity as the speaker ultimately reveals what it is that has caused her all this suffering: “Ewe ndithanda abantu abasini sinye” [Yes, I love people of the same sex] (l. 27). The poem therefore defiantly celebrates the speaker’s identity as a lesbian and ends with her acceptance of who she is despite all the hardships that it has caused her: “Ndinguye endinguye, / Ndingasoze ndibenguye” [I am who I am / And I will never be who you want me to be] (ll. 29-30). This affirmation of identity through poetry is one of the emergent characteristics of the InZync system we have already identified – in this poem we see an example of how the content of a poem can reflect the affirmation of a person’s identity. We must also understand that a lot of the impact of the poem resides in its being performed, since the performance itself coupled with the presence of the body of the speaker – “Ngumzimba wam lo” [This is my body] (l.23), she says –becomes a general call to the audience present to affirm the speaker’s identity. The last line of the poem, however, builds on the defiant tone established earlier by declaring that the speaker will not succumb to what the audience and the general public want her to be – “Ndingasoze ndibenguye” [I will never be who you want me to be] (l. 30). Rather, she has decided that she will be who she wants to be irrespective of the audience’s approval.

### 7.2.3 Chrystal Williams' poem

In Williams' poem we encounter a similar defiance in the tone of the speaker to Mvamva's poem. Here, the refrain is "hou op kak praat met mekaar" [stop talking shit to each other] (l. 1), and the speaker enjoins the audience to stop making assumptions on her identity based on her hair and socioeconomic status (stanzas 1 and 2). Rather, the speaker affirms her identity as "abstrak" [abstract] (l. 14) and that she opens the audience's mouths against injustice ("ek rek jou mond oep tien onreg" (l. 15). Her fight for social justice is not the same as other young activists who play around with twitter hashtags (l. 17), have a "godly-complex" (l. 16) and use words like "misogynistic, patriarchal, chauvinistic" (l. 27). Rather, the speaker identifies herself as "consciousness" (l. 23), as "die wind wat dans as 'n hele generasie hul vyste lig" [the wind that dances when a whole generation lifts their fists] (l. 22). Here, the speaker affirms that what she represents is not the narrow interests of a single individual, but rather that she encompasses consciousness, the she is a verb (ll. 23-24). Once again, we see how the speaker distances herself from other activists who try to score "oppression points" (l. 29). She refuses to be limited to a hairstyle, wardrobe, status, profile pic or shade of melanin (ll. 33-35).

This is followed by an identification with the people and groups who do in fact help determine the speaker's identity – Lauryn Hill, Jitsvinger, InZync and protests (ll. 40-41). Furthermore, the speaker also addresses her lover in stanza 10 and insists that he needs to respect her voice and the fact that her No means No ["Nee beteken Nee / en Nee bly mos Nee"] (ll. 47-48). She also uses this as an opportunity to comment on the sexual rights of women in our society and the fact that men don't always understand that when a woman says no, that means no (ll. 49-50).

The poem ends with the refrain "hou op kak praat met mekaar" [Stop talking shit to each other] (l. 51) and affirms the speaker's identity as something that cannot be limited to any one thing (including a narrow conception of African identity (l. 56)) – rather, she is "alles behalwe blind" [everything except blind] (l. 57). Here we see how the speaker repeats her claim of being a totality which includes everything that is conscious, and especially everything that is able to see, everything that is able to witness the current social realities in South Africa.

### 7.2.4 Allison-Claire Hoskins' poem

In this poem, the speaker starts out by insisting that none of the traditional heroes of the black liberation movement will save us, there will be no Nina Simone (l. 1), no Louis Moholo (l. 2), no Julius Nyerere (l. 3), no Messiah (l. 4), no Rosa Parks (l. 5).

Rather, it will be “just us, pushing i-skoroskoro at the next station of liberation / just us reaping reparations for this looted generation” (ll. 6-7). Here, the speaker affirms that the audience she is speaking to, “we”, are the only ones that can actually stand up and do something about the current oppressive socio-economic realities. In this regard, the speaker uses a line which is reminiscent of an image in Williams’ poem: “arms stand erect against the winds of oppression” (l. 9). Here we see how Hoskins’ and Williams’ poems can be read alongside each other as different responses to the same political transition in which South Africans currently find themselves.

Continuing, the speaker states that Solomon Mahlangu and Miriam Makeba have long been dead (ll. 11-12) and she decries all those who call themselves “woke” (a recently popular term to refer to individuals which have been conscientized about the oppressive system under which they are expected to live), but who still “sleep-walk in these Takalani Sesame streets” (l. 13). Here, the speaker points our attention to the fact that the revolution has been “hijacked by puppets” (l. 14) who are “black-managed and white-owned” (l. 15). The point that the speaker makes here is that the people that are currently pretending to be at the forefront of the current protest movements in South Africa are in fact controlled by other politicians with their own interests, managed by other black people and owned by white people. This idea of being “white-owned” arguably points to the fact that the South African economy has not been transformed, but still mainly belongs to a few white capitalists who are in control.

This section is followed by a lament that remembers the ideals for which liberation fighters like Sobukwe and Biko stood for (ll. 16, 21) and the ways in which their legacies have been twisted and undone by acts like the killing of 34 mineworkers at Marikana (22-24). Furthermore, the current protest movement in South Africa is linked to the “Black lives matter” protests in the United States , but the commodification of these movements is highlighted by the acknowledgement that it is possible to buy a “Black Lives Matter” t-shirt, and yet no-one will be bailed out once arrested by the police (ll. 25-27). The speaker returns to a listing of liberation fighters like Lumumba and Garvey (l. 32) and holds that even though James Brown celebrated being “Black and proud” (l. 28), at the end of the day black bodies are still unprotected in the dark and subject to violence (ll. 30-32). The poem returns to the opening stanza, thereby affirming the fact that no-one else will be fighting for our liberation – rather, we must see and acknowledge that we are the “Beautiful Ones” we have been waiting for (l. 41) and that it is up to us to transform the socio-economic reality within which we find ourselves.

### 7.2.5 Adrian Diff Van Wyk's poem

The last poem which we will discuss here is a poem written in defiance of the legacies of political figures like D.F. Malan (the first leader of the National Party when it came to power in 1948 and started the process of establishing the legislative architecture of what would later come to be called apartheid), H.F. Verwoerd (the later of the National Party in the 1960s) and R.W. Wilcocks (an academic at Stellenbosch university whose research helped vindicate the policies of separate development which the government instituted). The speaker insists that Malan's legacies have disturbed "how we flow / & listen / to the / earth's bio- / rhythms" (ll. 8-12). Similarly, Verwoerd did not know (his ideas were "not wys") that it is still possible to see the legacies of the past ("yesterday's unequal existence" (l. 15) and that the presence of black bodies in "strongholds of nostalgic advantage" (l. 17) are in themselves acts of resistance which embody the ideal that apartheid will never happen again. Furthermore, the speaker affirms the power of art to disrupt and protest: "our artworks occupy corneas / our poems disrupt eardrums / our voices protest demonstrate / & activate change in an instant" (ll. 19-22). In fact, the mere presence of dissident voices already make those in control ("the white supremacist / capitalist patriarch" (ll. 24-25)) uneasy and stresses them out (they "paap" (l. 25)).

This is followed by an affirmation of the ways in which black identity is rooted in the soil and how apartheid tried to deny that fact (ll. 26-28). Once again, the speaker refuses to be determined and silenced by the legacies of the past which tried to separate "boejong" from "baas" (black workers from white bosses (l. 37)): the "well-imagined violence" of apartheid will not perpetuate the speaker's silence. The speaker goes on to break this silence by affirming his black identity against the "coloured" classification under apartheid. Consequently, the speaker celebrates his heritage (Batavia, Namaqualand, Kuila) and affirms his own power to protest: "my soul is a clenched fist / that owns blackness" (ll. 48-49). The poem concludes with a repeat of the first stanza to bring the audience back to the fact that he is present "on this stable ground" (l. 51) and that he is leaving his mark – "engraving my name into the earth's / surface with my big toe" (ll. 53-54).

### 7.2.6 General remarks

I hope that the preceding discussion and analysis have helped to clarify my own personal understanding of the meaning of these poems and the topics which they address. Some themes which have stood out across different poems are being determined by a historical legacy (Odendaal and Van Wyk's poems), defiantly asserting an identity against this determination (Mvamva, Williams and Van Wyk's poems) and the call to use poetry to advance the ideals of black liberation (Hoskins, Williams and Van Wyk's poems).



Hopefully, these poems have helped to provide a glimpse into the kinds of poems that have been performed at InZync over the years and the ways in which they address the themes that were identified in section 5.6.

## CHAPTER 8

### 8 Conclusion

In order to conclude this thesis, we will revisit the research questions and discuss the ways in which this study has helped to answer them. We will address the research questions in the reverse order that they were stated in section 1.3. The questions (in reverse order) are as follows:

- To what extent can the sessions be understood as an alternative learning space?
- What is the nature of the intercultural interactions that the poetry sessions make possible?
- How have the poetry sessions helped to facilitate identity formation and self-expression?
- Which characteristics of the InZync poetry sessions enable the (re)negotiation of personal and social identities?
- How can performance poetry be used as a vehicle for sociocultural transformation?

Firstly, it emerged from the interviews that many participants had experienced InZync as an informal learning space - even though people generally did not primarily attend the sessions because of the learning possibilities they entail, a great deal of learning still took place. This finding is consistent with the literature on spoken word poetry in the USA which also emphasised spoken word as pedagogy (see section 2.2.5). The learning at InZync included being educated about the various local poetic genres and traditions, understanding the different social realities of different people in the greater Stellenbosch area, learning how to engage productively with difference through deep listening and how to better understand people from different cultures by engaging in intergroup interactions.

In this regard, we see how Abdi's four characteristics of intercultural communication (2002, section 2.8) were also identified by participants as being applicable to the InZync system: the sessions are voluntarily accommodating, and emergent properties of the sessions are that they help to "de-otherise" the Other, stimulate interrelational responsiveness and recognise and appreciate difference. Furthermore, seeing ubuntu in action has also been a learning curve for some of the participants, whereas the perspectival shifts which the InZync system enables and nurtures also repeatedly emerged as something that participants had learnt from the sessions. These perspectival shifts can be related to the different kinds of intergroup effects which follow from the imagine-self and imagine-other perspectives as identified by Batson and Ahmad (2009).

Secondly, our discussion of encountering linguistic and cultural difference at InZync helps to answer the question of what the nature of the intercultural interactions at InZync is.

Here, we see how a complex systems-view helps us to understand that there is a differential and dynamic sense of understanding which changes throughout the course of a session depending on the different languages and different social contexts which are performed. An important insight that emerged from the interviews is how experiencing non-understanding can help to de-center traditional cultural hegemonies. Furthermore, the central role that language plays in creating inclusive and exclusive spaces also came to light in the interviews. Here we see how the varied use of languages in a multilingual context can help to subvert traditional linguistic power relations such as the hegemony of Afrikaans at Stellenbosch University. Lastly, we also looked at the ways in which a performance of the continually changing boundaries between those that can associate closely with a poem being performed (an “us”) and those that cannot (a “them”) help to create a space of complex togetherness. Here it is also essential to point to the finding that multilingual poetry sessions have the potential to cultivate togetherness, even in a context which still bears the marks of centuries of systemic segregation.

Thirdly, the research question on how InZync facilitates identify formation and self-expression was explicitly answered by InZync participants in sections 6.4.2 and 6.4.4. Furthermore, the poems contained in section 7.1 act as examples of how performance poetry functions as a tool for self-expression. The different themes that participants identified as being addressed at InZync also show us the various ways in which self-expression took shape at the sessions (see section 6.6). Furthermore, the interviewees repeatedly emphasized how InZync enabled them to tell their own stories, to recognize the singularity of their voices and the consequent contributions they realised they could make to the sessions by expressing themselves through poetry. The important role that performance poetry can play in identity formation as identified by the literature on spoken word poetry in the USA (section 2.2.3) is corroborated by the research on InZync

Fourthly and relatedly, the following characteristics of the sessions have been identified as contributing to the re-negotiation of social and personal identities: the self-reflection which the sessions enable (section 6.4.4); the parrhesiastic nature of performance poetry (section 6.4.6); and the actual performance of a poem as a performance of identity. Relatedly, the dialogic relations which are established between audience and poets in the InZync system mirror the mutual constitution of identity and the dialectic logic between self and others which enables identity formation to occur in the first place (section 6.7). In relation to identity formation, it also emerged from the findings that various participants had used InZync as a platform to engage with and publicly affirm their sexuality. It can also be argued that certain emergent characteristics of the system, specifically of InZync being both a comfortable and welcoming space and one that tolerates agonism, directly contributed to its potential to serve as a platform for safe but robust identity exploration and negotiation. These findings also support the notion of identities as being mutable and dynamic as stated in section 2.5.

Fifthly, we have repeatedly seen throughout the study the various ways in which the InZync poetry sessions, understood as a temporary complex sociocultural system, have been employed as a vehicle for sociocultural transformation (see sections 6.8-6.10). What follows here is a summary of the various findings. InZync functions as an inclusive space where people feel welcome (the space itself is thereby transformed). This inclusion is not superficial, but complex, especially given the dynamics of non-understanding at the InZync sessions to which we have already referred. At InZync there is an acknowledgement of different cultures and languages and their distinctiveness. InZync's location on the periphery of Stellenbosch is definitely seen by participants as one of the factors that enables the transformations at the sessions. This is because it enacts spatial transformation by disrupting traditional patterns of movement and interaction between Stellenbosch central and Kayamandi.

Furthermore, InZync is seen as a public platform for the deliberation of current and historical socio-political realities. Here we hear echoes of how traditional performance poetry in South Africa has formed a part of socioregulative discourse (see section 2.4). This characteristic of the sessions is therefore nothing new, and InZync draws on the history of performance poetry in South Africa. The fact that InZync enables conversations about current realities not only on the stage but also afterwards between participants establishes InZync as a transformative space. This platform contributes to the larger need for democratic spaces in South Africa where people are allowed to have divergent opinions – in this regard, it becomes clearer how the agonism at InZync is central to enabling transformation to occur.

Then, the links between identity formation and transformation should not be underestimated. By allowing for the emergence and negotiation of new identities, InZync directly acts as an experimental space for transformation where new forms of being can be performed and reflected upon. Relatedly, InZync can be read as a performance of transformation, as a representation of what transformation might mean in Stellenbosch at the present moment. Here, the logic of inclusion and exclusion which plays itself out in the differential understanding of the participants of poems performed in different languages is in my opinion a particularly potent demonstration of how language use is central to questions of sociocultural transformation.

Before we conclude this study, let us consider some of its limitations and some of the possibilities for future research that the study has opened. In terms of limitations, the most prominent limitation is probably the researcher-bias which is a function of my proximity to the InZync system. There is the risk that the findings merely reflect the ideals I have had for the sessions rather than being an accurate description of how the sessions have actually played themselves out.

I hope that this risk has, at least partly, been offset by the fact that I interviewed a range of participants to uncover their subjective experiences of the sessions. The findings of the research also rely heavily on context-specificity so it is unclear to what extent they can be generalised to apply to other times and places where public art has been employed to bring about transformation. Furthermore, due to time restrictions, I was only able to interview twenty participants, which means that my sample size was quite small. The interviewees were also not chosen at random but because of my subjective conviction that they would best be suited to respond to my enquiries. Lastly, the research also has limitations in so far as the people who come to InZync are generally those that are pro-transformation and the transformative effects that the sessions had on them could therefore also be a function of the willingness of participants to transform, rather than a consequence of the sessions in themselves.

In terms of suggestions for future research, it would be interesting to do a comparative study including other regular performance poetry events in South Africa (or elsewhere) to better understand which transformational characteristics of the InZync system are a consequence of the specific context in which it is situated and which might be the result of the structural properties of a performance poetry system in general (i.e. the dialogic interactions established between audience and poets). Furthermore, the scalability of projects like InZync is also worth researching, especially if we are to take the findings of the study seriously, namely that performance poetry events can contribute to transformation. Then, further research can be done with regards to whether the characteristics of the InZync system that have been identified as crucial to the sociocultural transformation that it enables are generalizable in terms of the creation of transformed, inclusive spaces. Lastly, the research also opens up questions about the relations between sociocultural transformation and other forms such as socioeconomic transformation. How can these different processes be used complementarily to advance the ideals of transformation in general? In other words, how might poetry contribute to the reduction of inequality, and vice versa?

In closing, this study has shown how the InZync poetry sessions have contributed to sociocultural transformation in Stellenbosch from 2011-2016. However, we cannot forget that this sociocultural transformation is part of a larger ongoing process of transformation which we are still going through as a country with no easily identifiable end and one which operates at different scales from inter-individual interactions to systems like universities and whole cities. At the time of writing (October 2016), there have been renewed student protests around the country calling for the transformation of the higher education system.

These protests help to remind us that transformation is an ongoing process and that the ways in which society is to transform depend on the places and times we find ourselves in. In this context, performance poetry cannot claim to bring about all these transformations single-handedly. However, this study has repeatedly shown how intercultural public art practices like InZync can make singular contributions to the transformational challenges we still face in this post-apartheid state.

## CHAPTER 9

## 9 References

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## 10 Appendix

The English translations of Aphelele Mvamva and Chrystal Williams' poems as they appear in Chapter 7 follow below:

### **Untitled**

*Aphelele Mvamva*

*translated by Mbongeni Nomkonwana*

I have suffered

In the deep

In the dark

God, all doors were closed

My heart has been trialled.

Yes, they trampled on me

Provoking my wounds, child of Mbeleko

Not knowing that they were paving my way  
Their insults connected me to my pen  
Their thrashings sent me to deep thoughts  
and I was compelled to share them with the page

This has always been my dream  
To be a voice that mends all hearts  
Of victims abused by bastards who reside on the coast that oozes alcohol  
This revelation has been long overdue  
I endured suffering because of traditions  
I was not meant to be worshipped by the whole world as it does money  
They sang for me but shared nothing with me  
They just hated and insulted me  
I do not know why my time has not come yet  
But it is here now!  
I am worn-out from explaining myself to everyone

Grrrr! I am fuming.  
This is my body  
Why does my truth hurt you?  
I forgot it is unpalatable, unfortunately you will have to wash it down with your saliva.  
I am!  
I love people of the same sex.  
I am tired of gratifying others before me.  
I am who I am,  
And I will never be who you want me to be

**Untitled**

*Chrystal Williams*

*translated by Pieter Odendaal*

stop talking shit to each other  
that I wear natural hair  
that I extend my Afro  
by twisting in braids  
that I wash my body in rivers  
and stay in shanties  
always walkin' round without bras or panties

stop talking shit to each other  
that I grow dreadlocks  
that I drag around in plastic bags  
filled with weed and tobacco  
that I walk barefoot  
sir I respect her toot

my form is abstract  
I prize open your mouth against injustice

you can't fool me with your godly-complex  
and wordly hashtags  
#prayforparis #feesmustfall #endrapeculture

I am consciousness  
when racism sees me  
he pretends to be unconscious  
I am the wind that dances when a whole generation lifts their fists

I am consciousness  
and I am a verb  
you cannot demand my presence  
by throwing adjectives in the air like  
misogynistic, patriarchal, chauvinistic

tell the competing activist that  
I cannot be obtained by picking for oppression points  
tell the white girl  
that I cannot be imprinted in her mind  
cause she twisted braids in her roots

don't limit me to  
a hairstyle, a wardrobe, a status, a profile pic  
a forearm-sized dick and a melanin shade

I'm not sexually transmitted  
I won't just bust if he puts me in  
I take my time

You can catch me in her playlist  
I hang with cats like Lauryn Hill & Jitsvinger  
Go to places like InZync & protest

I am consciousness  
and as long as we are pals  
you'll never catch a boyfriend that's  
not on my journey



find me in your family tree  
in your no means no  
and no stays no  
coz the guys from there  
can't seem to understand that

so stop talking shit to each other  
I warm my hands by her warm breath  
sit at the table with politicians  
I wear every pattern  
not just African print  
I'm not just an African child  
I am everything but blind