

BOOK REVIEW

Susanna Sacks. *Networked Poetics: The Digital Turn in Southern African Poetry*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2024. 248 pp. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781625347671.

In *Networked Poetics: The Digital Turn in Southern African Poetry*, Susanna Sacks explores the production and organization of Anglophone poetry from Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa with a focus on the nature and identity of digital forms and form-making practices. She argues that the relationship between social media production and poetic production leads to new forms of affiliation for communities that are ever shifting and evolving. In producing this work, Sacks firstly adds to a small but growing body of books in the field led by Shola Adenekan and James Yeku.

Unlike the first two full-length monographs that focused on Nigeria and Kenya, and solely Nigeria respectively, Sacks moves to the south of the continent to address a lacuna that relates to both geography and method. The unique history of Southern Africa informs her engagement with the material that is sourced over about a decade of serious study. For example, connecting late apartheid structures with the festival Poetry Africa's celebration of Pan-African cosmopolitanism (129–31) or profiling the refugee poets in Malawi (149) enables a level of context that would be different were the book set in a different region of the continent.

Sacks opens the book with a clear understanding of the evolution of poetic performance as she traces the digital turn to oral roots. She harnesses Irele and Ngugi to explain how she understands the use of poetry within digital contexts (4–5), leading to a helpful first chapter that explores the ways in which hashtags act as poetic speech, mobilizing language's function to will new communities into being. She also looks at what it means for a hashtag to lend an elevated effect to a poetic movement, as was the case of the University of Malawi's protest dubbed #FeesMustFall. This chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book as she makes the claim that hashtags are expressed in the form of poetry in current poetic rhetoric. An example is seen in Zimbabwe's #ThisFlag (A Lament for Zimbabwe) movement which demonstrated poetry's capacity to motivate collective action by reframing national rhetoric.


Sacks premises her Chapter Four on the contention that festival spaces allow for an investigation into the remediation of forms across technologies and genres (127). By moving seamlessly from country to country and event to event, the chapter is enjoyable and aids the reader in appreciating the vibrancy of the region in terms of its poetry and literary festivals. The role that social media plays in these events makes the chapter formidable. Chapter Five is a provocative

complication of her larger argument of the use of social media and the internet in constructing and appropriating cultural capital by critiquing the implications of the digital turn that she grapples with. The poet Koleka Putuma spoke to canon formation practices after going viral with her work. Yet, Sacks concludes that the larger socioeconomic systems that govern the circulation and reception of literature ensure that the structures continue to retain power with substantial impact on the success of artists (177). This point underpins the thrust of the book as positioning digital technology and the harnessing of it within the larger frameworks that require a more sustainable response if they are to be altered in more equitable ways.

The book is crafted in a clear and accessible style, making it a valuable resource not only for students (at all tertiary levels) and scholars, but also for the general public interested in the intersection of poetry and digital media. Sacks's ability to present complex ideas in an understandable way ensures that even readers that are not familiar with African studies and/or digital humanities can engage with her analysis. One of the most impressive aspects of the book is Sacks's use of method, where she combines ethnographic observation with literary analysis. This dual approach allows her to capture the nuances of how digital platforms shape poetic performance and community interaction. For instance, her detailed observation of how audiences adapt to the rhythm and pauses of live poetry performances (99–101) illustrates the relationship between performer and audience, a dynamic that is further amplified in digital spaces.

However, while her method is innovative, there is a sense that the literary analysis portions could sometimes be further expanded to explore the implications of the use of the poetry and poetic choices. Similarly, a deeper investigation into the impact of these audience-performer interactions in the broader digital ecosystem would have enriched the discussion and provided additional layers of understanding. Another thing that I would have liked to see more of was the treatment of local language poetry. Even though Sacks touches on some examples such as in the third chapter, more examples could have enriched the book even further.

The book makes for compelling reading, even though it is also constrained by the rapid evolution of digital platforms. Similar to almost any book with such a scope of study, some of her case studies have to be consistently historicized and placed within context. She does justice to this, but this scenario highlights a broader challenge in the field of digital humanities: the difficulty of capturing a continuously shifting digital landscape in a static form like a book. Despite this issue, Sacks's work is an extremely important intervention that augments research into African poetic traditions and contemporary poetic performance through the prism of digital technology.

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