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Popping Culture: Spoken Word and Nostalgia

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This article explores the prominent use of popular culture as a thematic concern in contemporary spoken word performance, in particular the ways in which initially nostalgic representations of popular culture can be used to establish community and to interrogate historic cultural production. Using Svetlana Boym's typological distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia, I unpack the ways in which cultural production such as books, films, and television shows are presented in spoken word performances. Through case studies of four performances, I review techniques that build a sense of community through a shared awareness and appreciation of popular culture. I also examine ways in which these case studies reflect on the contemporary relevance of historic popular culture and re-evaluate it through a more contemporary lens to unpack its problematic values and undercurrents. In conclusion, I reflect on the ways in which the formal and affective dimensions of spoken word performance position it as a particularly effective medium for the representation and evaluation of popular culture, thus substantiating its frequency as a theme in contemporary performance poetry.

Introduction

In her article 'Faces of Nostalgia. Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in the Fine Arts' the critic Gizela Horvath states that:

> Nostalgia presupposes a comparison between an overrated past and an underachieving present. Thus, nostalgic representation beckons those forms of art, which make possible the comparison of moments in time and the direct expression of emotions – primarily literature, music, the theatre and film (Horvath, 2018: 147–148).

To this list I would add, or rather specify, spoken word as a form of art that is particularly well suited to nostalgic representation. As I previously argued, spoken word locates many of its operating principles in the direct expression of emotion and the transmission of affect in a live encounter (McGowan, 2021). It is also in the business of establishing a shared frame of reference around its subjects and many successful performances derive impact through the creation, momentary or otherwise of community (Bennett, 2023).

Within the context of community building, nostalgia can generate powerful emotional responses as an artistic method. However, it is the specific vehicle of popular culture that I argue finds particularly effective purchase in contemporary spoken word performances. While Horvath's observations about nostalgia focused primarily upon the fine arts, spoken word, as a medium that has historically been neglected in the wider scholarly field of poetics, is encountering increased attention over the last few decades (Novak, 2011) as a particularly effective tool for interrupting assumptions concerning the binary between high and low art. Conversations concerning this element of the spoken word scene are becoming more prominent as cultural landscapes shift and spoken word artists enjoy wider recognition (Wouters, 2019; Taylor, 2021; Silverberg, 2025). The poet Tyrone Lewis, one of the key poets I discuss in detail in this article, has reflected on the use of popular culture in his writing with the poet and performance poetics scholar, Katie Ailes. In the *Loud Poets: Happy Hour* series of video interviews hosted by Ailes, Lewis discusses his motivation for using popular culture references, and his use of popular cultural as a vehicle to convey complex topics. Lewis draws on strategies that co-opt the popularity of popular culture to elevate poems that may otherwise prove alienating: 'Poetry is not popular in the first place … we can engage with the popular stuff too, fiction and plays do that all the time. Why do we feel like we're above that?' ('Writing Pop Culture: Check in with Tyrone Lewis', *I am Loud Productions*, 2021: 13:52 – 14:09). Due to its own position in the wider corpus of popular culture, spoken word possesses a disruptive potential to critique assumptions about historic cultural production and the impact it has had

on our present experiences. Furthermore, the close community established between audience and performer provides opportunities to draw on popular culture in order to engender complicity through rhetorical techniques such as inside jokes and allusions but also to subvert expectations and encourage reconsideration. In this article, I will discuss how the nostalgic representation of popular culture functions as a complex but valuable creative tool not only for representing our relationship with the past but also for interrogating and informing our sense of the present and the future with a view to facilitating social change. I will contextualise this discussion by evaluating four case studies of British (or British-born) poets, citing specific performances that have occurred in the UK during the last decade. Significantly, three of the four recorded performances I have selected are by artists who have identified themselves as Black. As I will discuss further, nostalgic treatments carry the potential for poets and performers to engage in acts of re-evaluation. My case studies highlight how poets' responses to popular cultural production can often operate as sociopolitical critique, intervening in questions of racial identity and representation, and offering potential strategies to correct historic exclusions.

Defining Nostalgia

The term nostalgia is derived from 'nostos' meaning 'journey' or 'journey home', and 'algia' meaning 'pain' (Illbruck, 2012: 5). This etymology underscores its typical association with sentiments of grief, loss and displacement, and the specific loss of home. Until the late 20th century nostalgia was considered a psychiatric disorder: a subconscious desire to return to an earlier life stage; a variant of depression, marked by loss and grief, and often equated with homesickness (Illbruck, 2012). However, the negative associations nostalgia held began to lose traction due to its cross-cultural pervasiveness, transcending social and age demographics. The contemporary definition of nostalgia as a sentimental longing for one's past offered a new way of thinking about the concept. In 'A Blast from the Past: The Terror Management Function of Nostalgia' in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Wildschut et al. proposed that nostalgia imbues life with meaning, which facilitates coping with existential threat (Wildschut et al., 2008). Sedikides and Wildschut update this idea in 'Nostalgia as Motivation' in *Current Opinion in Psychology*, arguing that some of nostalgia's positive impacts derive from its capacity to return the subject to a safer time by triggering fond memories of childhood and familial security (Sedikides, 2023). Despite its original identity as a psychological ailment, nostalgia has thus been reconceptualised as a potentially positive force that helps us to navigate everyday life and existential angst. Nostalgia provides continuity between our past and present selves, establishing positive perceptions about the past to bolster a sense of meaning, motivation, and to facilitate creativity.

However, as Sedikides et al. warn in 'Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future', 'nostalgia may erode a sense of meaning in the present and may forestall motivation, if the individual is fixated on better days gone by' (Sedikides et al., 2008: 306). Furthermore, as Pickering and Keightley argue in their article 'The Modalities of Nostalgia', nostalgia can all too easily be viewed as 'the conceptual opposite of progress, against which it is negatively viewed as reactionary, sentimental or melancholic. It has been seen as a defeatist retreat from the present, and evidence of loss of faith in the future' (Pickering and Keightley, 2006; 919). This reading of nostalgia, as figuratively being 'stuck in the mud', highlights the wary or ambivalent relationship many of us attach to the term. We can imagine it is aspirational to look back at the past, but we are cautious of overindulging lest we become maudlin about our present. In the words of Charles Maier: 'Nostalgia is to longing as kitsch is to art' (Maier, 1999: 273).

Given this tension how then might we think about nostalgia as a force for positive social change, and determine this effect in spoken word? Nostalgia is a response to loss, the kind of response that typifies modernity and late modernity, but it does not claim a singular identity or role. Pickering and Keightley insist that the meanings and significance of nostalgia are inherently multiple, both accommodating progressive impulses as well as regressive stances and melancholic attitudes (Pickering and Keightley, 2006). These inconsistencies are key to viewing nostalgia as a creative tool because the interrelationship between nostalgia's different modes, positive and negative, makes space for the potential for constructive sociological representation and critique.

If the condition or experience of nostalgia is not inherently good or bad, but some productive interrelationship between the two, it is also important to note the wide-ranging aspect of nostalgic content and nostalgic representation. In his text 'A Careful Longing: The Poetics and Problems of Nostalgia' Aaron Santesso asserts that:

> Nostalgia today is no longer simply a synonym for homesickness: we can be nostalgic for hula hoops and Ancient Greece; we can be nostalgic for homes we never had and states we never experienced … It is a word used in a remarkable number of ways, with a startling range of objects: it has become a catchall term (Santesso, 2006: 14).

This is a fruitfully permissive approach to the boundaries of nostalgia, including an expression of nostalgia for lives we imagined for ourselves. Indeed, the only rule we may be able to definitively impose is that the term signals a recollection of a past state or experience and therefore must be historical. It would be logically unsound to argue that we are nostalgic for the future. The idea of nostalgia allowing for such a wide array

of topics (far beyond the original definition of homesickness: a nostalgia for place) is valuable in the context of its relationship to popular culture. Santesso's argument that we can be nostalgic for things we have never experienced is particularly important when considering its role in spoken word. A key issue we may identify regarding the use of popular culture is that it feels remarkably contingent upon a shared temporality; something that the performer cannot guarantee, and which invites diminishing returns as the age demographics of audiences shift and change. However, if we accept the notion that the effect of nostalgia is somewhat more elastic, then the performer can rely on a sympathetic reaction to nostalgia even if its source is unfamiliar to their audience. As Santesso further argues, nostalgia is also inherently a longing for something that is 'idealised, impersonal, and unattainable' (Santesso, 2006: 16). These features of the nostalgic subject permit the poet to work more freely with knowledge of it, the pull of the performance is instead in the power the poet has to elicit a human feeling that we are intimately familiar with, and to transmit these affects to their audience.

Restorative versus Reflective Nostalgia

Accepting that nostalgia can address a vast range of subjects and operate in a range of positive and negative ways, I further contend the premise that not only can we be nostalgic for the way things were, but we can also be nostalgic for the way things weren't. Svetlana Boym's influential analysis, 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents', provides a succinct definition of nostalgia as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed' (Boym, 2007: 7). Boym articulates a more striking sense of nostalgia as something that is inherently unreal or illusory, further describing it as 'a romance with one's own fantasy' (Boym, 2007: 7). While it appears that Boym is returning us to the narrower definition of nostalgia as homesickness, she later clarifies that 'nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time — the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams' (Boym, 2007: 8).

This depiction of returning to a simpler time is compelling, but it comes with a price tag. The cultural historian Michael Kammen argues that 'Nostalgia [...] is essentially history without guilt' (Kammen, 1991: 688). It allows us to abdicate our personal responsibilities for how things were, to return home in a guilt-free way where we only consider the rosier aspects of the past. This form of nostalgia produces subjective interpretations that cause us to overlook important social issues. While we may empathetically and communally share in the experience of 'algia' (pain), the return home ('nostos') threatens us with becoming myopic. At its worst, nostalgia can trick us into confusing the imagined past with the real past, and while, as Wildschut et al. argue, this can provide positive benefits such as a sense of continuity and assurance that there is meaning in life, these are things that can only benefit ourselves.

Boym issues a stern warning on this point: 'unreflective nostalgia can breed monsters' (Boym, 2007: 10). Her intention in doing so is to make a clear distinction between two types of nostalgia:

> Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt (Boym, 2007: 13).

When we indulge in rosy-eyed and melancholic yearning, we are participating in Boym's category of restorative nostalgia. This may be restorative for us, but it risks conjuring an illusion and setting it in place of reality. We return to a conception of the past, rebuilding it as we imagined it to be and asserting the absolute truth of it; an assertion which ought to be treated with suspicion. On the other hand, reflective nostalgia encourages us to consider alternatives. In Boym's words: 'Re-flection means new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on the recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth, but on the meditation on history and the passage of time' (Boym, 2007: 15). Restorative and reflective nostalgia may overlap in triggering symbols or memories, but the narratives that they tell about these memories are sharply divergent: 'Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous. It reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment, or critical reflection' (Boym, 2007: 15). Reflective nostalgia is couched in an awareness that the thing that is yearned for is always at a distance from the actual past.

Experimentation with reflective nostalgia plays a productive part in the development of spoken word poetry which seeks to enact social change. Through the medium of a spoken word performance, the poet is afforded the tools (presence, attention, voice) to influence their audience by revisiting a nostalgic subject and casting it in a different light. Of note, this value distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia edges us towards a clear good and bad binary that Boym is careful not to establish. She is equally critical of reflective nostalgia for its fear of simple indulgence stating, 'sometimes it is preferable (at least in the view of this nostalgic author) to leave dreams alone, let them be no more and no less than dreams, not guidelines for the future' (Boym, 2007: 18). However, on balance, reflective nostalgia contains within itself an imperative to not only try to separate reality from illusion but to actively critique the past. It is thus a

version of nostalgia that could be productively used to inspire a different kind of poetry. While it is an error of logic to state that one can be nostalgic for the future, it is worth considering the virtue of being nostalgic *for* the future: of using nostalgia as a means to enact social change. Boym argues that nostalgia isn't by definition retrospective, it can also be prospective as well: 'The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future. The consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales' (Boym, 2007: 8).

The relationship between our conceptions of past, present and future constitutes fertile ground for spoken word poetry which often seeks to unpick perceptions of identity or social structures that are damaging and deleterious. Santesso succinctly affirms that nostalgia is often read as a mode which responds to the past, and yet it is in fact always responding to a present need (Santesso, 2006). While unreflective nostalgia can be a form of forgetting or erasure, reflective and critical nostalgia can challenge assumptions or dominant interpretations of the past to see how they have shaped assumptions or preconceptions in the present. The specific quality of nostalgia – where it comes from – grants this reflective activity even greater weight, and is, I argue, why it is worthy of special consideration as a form of creative practice. Nostalgia must involve a sense of longing, therefore the nostalgic poet is necessarily grappling with some element or experience of the poet's past that is, or was, cherished personally. This encourages the nostalgic writer to consider something they are or were fond of rather than something abjectly unpleasant to them. It also encourages the nostalgic writer to question their own preconceptions or even their own participation, or as Stuart Tannock suggests in his essay, 'Nostalgia Critique' (Tannock, 2006), to acknowledge not only the diversity of personal needs or political desires to which nostalgia is a response, but also to step back and interrogate fond memories and to question how the needs and desires of others may have been excluded. As Horvath states, 'reflective nostalgia is a more conscious, complex attitude toward the past, and at the same time, it suggests a more successful interpretation of the past as a resource' (Horvath, 2018: 151).

What then might this look like in contemporary spoken word and performance poetics, and particularly contemporary spoken word that engages with popular culture? To begin with, the term popular culture is highly complex and admits a wide scope of possible definitions. As the critic John Storey discusses in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, popular culture can lay claim to being a quantitative identifier, a binary opposite to high culture, an indicator of commercial mass-production, a label of authenticity, a site of resistance, and the postmodern product of cultural industries (Storey, 2024: 5–12). Building on Storey's analysis of the relationship between popular

culture and postmodernity – particularly popular culture's eminent capacity for parody, pastiche and similar intertextual expression – for the purposes of my analysis popular culture is framed by its relation to high art, but specifically the way in which postmodern, urbanised, industrial society blurs boundaries: 'Postmodern culture is a culture that no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture' (Storey, 2024: 12). As I have discussed, spoken word as an art form is particularly well suited to interrupting assumptions about hierarchical boundaries in art, and thus finds apt purchase in such blurring. Creative industries provide central platforms for nostalgic productions, since postmodern nostalgia feeds and is fed by contemporary popular culture and media (Kalinina, 2016; Niemeyer, 2014). Television shows, films, and toys are often cited as triggers for nostalgic memories of childhood and popular culture. Recalling Boym's assertion that reflective nostalgia can be configured as a 'meditation on history and the passage of time' (Boym, 2007: 15), it is important to distinguish between nostalgia for a generalised past and nostalgia for a particular cultural moment. In the case of nostalgia that engages with popular culture, such mediated (and remediated) subjects often serve to effectively conjure memories of a specific time in our lives by recalling emotions and associations we invested in these subjects. We are thus not necessarily nostalgic for media productions themselves, but for the life that surrounded our initial apprehension of them. By anchoring nostalgia to a particular trigger such as a film, book, or television show, the nostalgic moment can be more profoundly realised. These associations also present opportunities to re-examine the content of the popular culture of our childhoods, re-evaluating whether our nostalgic fondness might have obscured problematic themes or contributed to the marginalisation of identities and communities. This kind of reflective nostalgia has been rather prominent in the last decade, with hitherto significant pillars of 1990s and 2000s pop culture facing scrutiny for sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and a marked lack of racial diversity. The rejoinder to this scrutiny is that popular culture is a product of its time and that this fact should be taken into account when judging creative work produced in the past. My rejoinder to this rejoinder is that we're not really talking about the past work, but about present nostalgia and holding affection for something in an absolute and uncritical way. The result of this potentially abnegates any real expression of self-reflection or meaningful critical engagement, and thus falls into the trap of reducing popular culture to a personal experience rather than a powerful influence on communities and society.

Over the last few decades, the international spoken word scene has witnessed an emerging trend towards poets who deconstruct popular culture, dissect its problematic elements and use it as a mirror to reflect issues in the real world. For example, the

following three performances by American poets performing at poetry Slams in the United States in the early 2010s offer unique performances that are connected by their shared focus on aspects of popular culture. Imani Cezanne's 'The Hunger Games' compares the fictional authoritarian story-world of Panem to the experience of contemporary young African Americans: 'But I can't help but notice how painting poverty in white-face makes it fantasy / makes it fiction' (Cezanne, 2014: 0:26 – 0:33). Melissa May's 'Dear Ursula' (May, 2014) explores female body image and fat shaming from the perspective of Ursula, the villain of Disney's the Little Mermaid. Shane Hawley's 'Wile E. Coyote' (Hawley, 2010) presents the narrative of Loony Tunes' Coyote and the Road Runner and the slapstick failings of Wile E. as a metaphor for addiction. All three are successful performances that adopt different affective palettes to convey feeling and emotion. They ask the community of their audience to reconsider the under-examined subtexts of cherished popular culture and media franchises. This use of popular culture as a subject is also a feature of the work of many British poets, which naturally may invite examinations of different, UK specific pieces of popular cultural production. However, while the vehicle of popular culture and the broad use of nostalgia are common trends, the ways in which these poems operate can be strikingly varied. I have selected four case studies of British (or British-born) poets who utilise nostalgia in different ways. In each case I evaluate how nostalgic representations of popular culture from the late 20th and early 21st centuries are utilised to establish community, interrogate complexities, and propose ways to effect social change.

'Bring on The Eagles' – Joshua Idehen

While by no means a simple poem, 'Bring on The Eagles' (Idehen, 2016) by the British-born Nigerian poet Joshua Idehen is perhaps the most straightforward piece I have selected in terms of how it interacts with nostalgia and popular culture. The performance I am analysing was delivered as part of a Sofar London set performed and recorded on 15 August 2016. The poem was professionally recorded utilising multiple cameras that capture the reactions of audience members in an intimate performance space (**Figure 1**). The poem takes inspiration from the enormously popular 2001–2003 *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy directed by Peter Jackson and produced by New Line Cinema and WingNut Films. It is clear from the performance that the poem is responding to Jackson's film adaptations rather than the original novels. The poem features elements of popular fandom that have developed in response to the film adaptations such as the romantic 'shipping' of characters – 'Gandalf is in bed with Legolas. They've been going steady for a while' (Idehen, 2016, 3:08–3:14) – and the recycling of the famous quote – 'You shall not pass' (Idehen, 2016, 1:58–2:04) – dialogue that features in the film, but is in fact a misrepresentation of Tolkien's original published text (Tolkien, 1954).

Figure 1: Sofar London performance space layout, *Bring on the Eagles*, Sofar Sounds (2016): 0:15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Inik-Q_SOuo>

The poem is structured around a series of increasingly ludicrous and contrived problems that the character of Gandalf finds himself confronted by, which inevitably result in the same solution to bring on the eagles: 'Gandalf has been outbid at the last minute on eBay / There is no god he says, there is no god / Bring on the Eagles' (Idehen, 2016: 0:34–0:42); 'Gandalf is playing chess with Gollum / Gollum is winning, no one can know about this / Bring on the Eagles' (Idehen, 2016: 2:34–2:38). At various points in the performance Idehen utilises his theatrical adeptness, responding to interrupting laughter from the audience or engaging in voice work to demonstrate different personas in the poem, culminating in a comically extended pastiche of the chorus from the British rock band Queen's 'We Are the Champions' (Queen, 1977), but replacing the lyrics with the metrically consonant phrase 'Bring on the Eagles'. Idehen rounds the poem off by referencing a perennial debate in the *Lord of the Rings* fan community regarding the use of the eagles to resolve the film trilogy's central narrative conceit: 'And finally the Fellowship of the Ring politely ask if they can borrow Gandalf's eagles for a quick trip to Mordor and back' (Idehen, 2016: 4:02–4:09). Through this playful interaction with not only the films but also their legacy and popular reception, Idehen further conditions the audience into a sense of community connected by their shared acknowledgment of dissonance from the source material, a connection that is corroborated by audible laughter in the recording indicating recognition. As Lauren McNamara states in her essay, 'Audience as Co-author':

> The audience and the performer together will mould something unique each performance. The audience's knowledge of the subject matter, or how they feel in the moment of the experience will all alter their interpretation and depending on their reactions perhaps even the interpretation of those around them (McNamara, 2021: 157).

Idehen's metaphorical (and at times literal) nod and wink to how fans and fan communities have extended popular tropes and characterisations engages the audience in an act of community building, establishing a sense of involvement in the process of meaning-making.

Idehen's poem is not sharp in its treatment of popular cultural production. It lacks the barbs we may expect when considering Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia in that it does not seek to challenge our uncomplicated enjoyment of the films or overturn problematic elements. Its intention is to entertain, which it achieves by repositioning tropes of high fantasy in the present. In doing so, I would posit that it avoids the trap of restorative nostalgia's reification of truth and instead treats the films and their characters as sites for experimentation in order to distort and challenge our expectations. Significantly, Idehen, a Black poet, is by nature of performing a persona offering an alternative representation of Gandalf that engenders a particular racial identity. As Susan B.A. Somers-Willett argues of poetry and poets in performance in *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*:

> Inhabiting the space where the 'I' of the page translates quite seamlessly to the 'I' of the stage, the author comes to embody declarations about personal experience in performance. This is true even in the case of persona poetry and poetry written in the second or third person, for the act of live performance still hinges on the author's body and its visible markers. The author's physical presence ensures that certain aspects of his or her identity are rendered visible as they are performed in and through the body, particularly race and gender but extending to class, sexuality, and even regionality. Embodied aspects of identity provide lenses through which an audience receives a poem (Somers-Willett, 2009: 69–70).

Such re-presentation of a character encourages the audience to consider how nostalgia may be framing their expectations or assumptions regarding race as well as other aspects of intersectional identity. The impact of this treatment is that Idehen extends to the community of his audience his own license to playfulness and experimentation. In this poem, our nostalgic experience of the films does not allow for reverence. We are offered the space to reimagine a piece of popular culture in ways that contrast its origins, and we receive a clear demonstration of how effective this treatment can be. While the poem does not attempt to vocalise critique, the door is nonetheless left open for experimentation, and the audience is attuned to the idea of questioning their nostalgic assumptions. As a tool for interacting with nostalgia, Idehen's poem exemplifies how the community fostered by a spoken word performance might encourage its audience to place their assumptions in dialogue and invite new ways of conceptualising popular culture.

'Titanic (We Belong Here)' – Salena Godden

Salena Godden is a poet, broadcaster, memoirist and essayist who was born in the UK, of Jamaican-Irish heritage. The recording of her poem 'Titanic (We Belong Here)' (Godden, 2017) was produced as part of the We Belong Here spoken word season. It was published online on the 31st March 2017 by The Space – Digital Skills for the UK Arts Sector. The poem references the 1997 blockbuster film *Titanic*, directed by James Cameron and distributed by Paramount Pictures (*Titanic*, 1997).

Godden immediately announces her intention to engage in an act of reflective nostalgia with the poem's opening line: 'I used to love that film, *Titanic*' (Godden, 2017: 0:04–0:07). Godden specifies that her nostalgic enjoyment came especially from scenes depicting events after the H.M.S. Titanic had catastrophically collided with an iceberg:

> The last 45 minutes or so, you know, after the sex scene / in the car as the sea water starts to flow / The sinking ship all slopping and swaying / The band, how they bravely / keep on playing / And that man dressed up as a girly waif / To hide in a boat and get himself safe (Godden, 2017: 0:08–0:26).

This section of the poem invites the audience to engage in a moment of nostalgic recollection for the film through an itemised reminder of some of the more poignant images from its dramatic denouement. For Godden, her enjoyment of the film is derived from this representation of dramatic events, of 'the human catastrophe' (Godden, 2017:0:26–0:28) and through this brief allusion to moments of strong affect Godden encourages her audience to not only recollect our memory of watching the film, but also to draw up and to feel the emotional responses we may have had to it. Of note, while professionally recorded, there is no audience present (visually or audibly) in the recording of the performance, which establishes a particular relationship between Godden's perspective and the viewer's own. The recording offers an invitation into a private space rather than a live, public performance, a feature which is accentuated by rapid close-up camera shots of Godden's face from different angles (**Figure 2**).

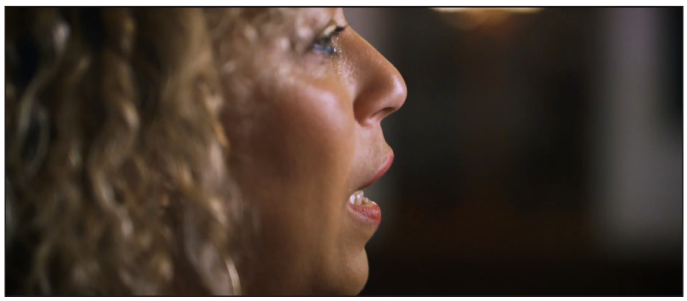

Figure 2: Close-up camerawork, *Titanic (We Belong Here)*, The Space – Digital Skills for the UK Arts Sector (2017): 0:28. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEFS_eDHDFE>

The intimacy of the performance and the lack of a live audience present to respond to the poem requires the viewer to draw on their own experiences of the film, thereby encouraging them to enter a personal, reflective mode of reception.

Armed with the potency of the nostalgic and emotional space she has placed her audience in, Godden's abrupt conceptual turn in the poem is all the more effective: 'I used to love that film *Titanic* / All that melodrama. / But now it just looks like the Channel 4 news / People grabbing for life jackets, with no coat and no shoes' (Godden, 2017: 0:31–0:43). Here the objective of the poem becomes visible. It is a poem that contrasts the artistic representation of suffering in *Titanic*, a film inspired by historical events, and the real and horrifying experiences of refugees who are forced into existential risk on journeys by water: 'Now I'm just reminded of the plight of refugees / All those humans drowning in the open seas / People hungry and cold in overcrowded boats / Crying for help with salt-burnt throats' (Godden, 2017: 0:44–0:56). By placing the modern-day treatment of refugees directly alongside our nostalgic recollection of *Titanic* we are asked to contrast our emotional response to the film (famously a tear-jerker), a response Godden has just summoned into our minds for us to nostalgically delight in, with a much darker, more complex, and emotive response to real human suffering. However, Godden takes the effect of this a step further: 'There's a Syrian Leo and there's Kate the Kurd. / I said I used to like *Titanic*, / But now I think it's absurd' (Godden, 2017: 0:57–1:04). Not only do we form an uneasy and discordant parallel with our nostalgic emotions towards the film and our feelings about the treatment of refugees in contemporary society, but we are also asked to consider what *Titanic* is doing as a piece of popular cultural production. Godden refers specifically to the names of the actors rather than the characters in the film, thus drawing attention to its status as a glamourised representation of real human tragedy. For Godden, this is an act of reflective nostalgia. She used to love *Titanic*, but now the absurdity of its glamorisation of shipwreck is too uncomfortable when faced with the real and tragic experiences of refugees.

Despite this revelation of the poem's political subject, Godden chooses to end the performance with a lighter tone, introducing a joke about Celine Dion and her dislike of one of the film's most high-profile and memorable songs. By directly positioning herself against the popular grain, Godden adds credence to her argument for challenging unreflective appreciation. Harvey A. Kaplan argued in his 1987 article 'The Psychopathology of Nostalgia', that at its simplest (and prior to the bittersweetness of its irrevocability), nostalgia engenders positive feelings: 'The mood is basically one of joyousness, producing an air of infatuation and a feeling of elation' (Kaplan, 1987: 465). As I have discussed earlier, one of the difficulties of engaging in reflective nostalgia

derives precisely from the fact that the nostalgic interrogates something that they are positively disposed towards. It is challenging to balance competing affects in a spoken word performance. Often that challenge can result in the need for levity, where the performer uses humour to relieve some of the pressure. Despite this ending, Godden's poem effects a potent encounter with reflective nostalgia through the vehicle of popular cultural production placed into stark dialogue with challenging contemporary issues.

'Sherlock' – Tyrone Lewis

Tyrone Lewis' spoken word poem, 'Sherlock' (Lewis, 2017), engages with popular culture representations of Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional character Sherlock Holmes. The performance was recorded by Process Productions, Lewis' own production company, and uploaded to YouTube on 22 February 2017. There is a fixed camera with a single shot, and audio responses including laughter and cheering from the audience are captured throughout. Lewis is a London-based poet and producer and winner of multiple high profile Slam competitions including the UK Poetry Slam Championship, the Roundhouse Poetry Slam, and the Axis Poetry Slam. While the most prominent 21st century silver screen adaptation of Doyle's work *Sherlock Holmes*, distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures and starring Robert Downey Jr. as the eponymous character, showcased in 2009 (*Sherlock Holmes*, 2009) it is possible that Lewis' poem also responds to the popular BBC and Hartwood Films television series, also titled *Sherlock* (*Sherlock*, 2010–2017). The television series, featuring Benedict Cumberbatch, broadcast its fourth and final season in January 2017, marking it as roughly contemporaneous with the publication of the performance online.

Lewis' poem begins by offering an alternative casting for an imagined Sherlock Holmes film, with various Black actors such as Samuel L. Jackson, Ice Cube, Morgan Freeman, and Denzel Washington cast in the leading character roles. Initially Lewis suggests that the marketing of the film should lean into this casting: 'The film will be called either Sherlock Homey, or Holmesboy' (Lewis, 2017: 0:15–0:20). The poem begins comically, engendering laughs from the audience, and while it sustains comedy throughout, it quickly becomes apparent that Lewis is addressing more complex and thought-provoking issues around representation: 'I want a scene where young Sherlock puts on a deerstalker for the first time, so people stop touching his hair' (Lewis, 2017: 0:31–0:36). This reference to a common microaggression in Black communities, particularly experienced by Black women (Collier, 2021), is accompanied by physical gesture (**Figure 3**), and indicates to the audience a point of inflection in the poem.

Figure 3: Physical gesture in performance, *Sherlock*, Process Productions (2017): 0:35. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyMte7taKoc>

The point at which the poem's affective tone decisively shifts is signalled by a change in Lewis' vocal delivery to a slower pace and deactivated pitch movement (Van Leeuwen, 1999). This shift introduces the audience to Lewis' strategy for inviting reflective nostalgia:

> There will be no guns in this film / This film does not need to further the idea that is the only way for us to hold power / We do not need another visual representation of how Black people carry death in their hands / There will be no dead relatives to motivate characters in this film / There are enough dead Black people already, we do not need to invent new ones (Lewis, 2017: 0:56–1:17).

Having established the premise of a poem which reimagines a fictional depiction of Sherlock Holmes that incorporates Black characters and Black culture, Lewis begins to unpack the problematic ways in which popular culture has historically established stereotypical representations of Black identity. In doing so, Lewis is drawing on pre-existing conversations around the contentious subgenre of Blaxploitation cinema (Lawrence, 2012), and the ways in which representations of Black identity uphold rather than destabilise racial stereotypes. The poem interrogates the notion of a 'Black' film, firmly denying this problematic labelling: 'This film / Well it cannot be Black / Because I am tired of Black films' (Lewis, 2017: 1:29–1:36). Lewis continues to disassemble associations that he identifies as pervasive in the contemporary film industry: 'One Black actor does not a diverse film make / Hollywood we are more than you give us credit for' (Lewis, 2017: 1:58–2:03).

The poem ends by returning to an image of a young Black child encountering the version of Sherlock Holmes created by the narrative, and through the sudden interposition of Lewis' own experiences, draws the idea of nostalgia sharply into focus: 'I want this / To be the film that I wished that I grew up with' (Lewis, 2017: 2:50–2:54).

Lewis reinforces the sense that he has built across the piece – an absence in his experience of popular culture representations – and aptly demonstrates his objective to critique this absence. Fundamentally the poem operates as nostalgia for an imagined past with a different oeuvre of childhood classics, however this is not a simple transaction. The poem also invites misgivings about how that past could be mistaken or misinterpreted by the audience. In effect, the poem itself serves as a caution against the illusory power of nostalgia, even as we attempt to be reflective, or to rectify it.

'The Girl who Didn't' – Amber Horne

'The Girl who Didn't' (Horne, 2022), performed by the British poet, performer, and Roundhouse and UniSlam Semi-Finalist, Amber Horne, responds to J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series of books, with specific reference to the first novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling, 1997). The poem was performed and recorded at UniSlam 2022 at the Hippodrome in Birmingham and published online on 23 March 2022. While the Harry Potter franchise has produced a number of highly successful film adaptations, unlike the previous three case studies this poem directly responds to the published novel as a medium of popular cultural production. Horne begins by introducing a trigger warning for loss, and an oblique acknowledgement of Rowling's problematic political views concerning transgender rights that is clearly and audibly received by the audience, eliciting recognition and laughter. Similarly to Salena Godden's performance, Horne immediately presents her viewpoint on the subject, emphasising that the poem will engage in critique, thus preparing the audience for reflective nostalgia: 'At 11, I decided the boy who lived was bullshit' (Horne, 2022: 0:12– 0:16). However, unlike Godden's performance, the recording is not professional, and the camera is placed at a distance from the performance space (**Figure 4**) which occasionally renders some of the nuances of Horne's body language difficult to perceive.

Figure 4: Camera proximity and legibility of body language, *The Girl who Didn't*, amber horne (2022): 0:39. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ct6afRZrXd8>

Despite the limitations of the recording, the poem is driven forward by a clear and powerful narrative throughline. Throughout the poem, Horne illustrates how she turned away from the books, using features of Rowling's narrative universe such as the term 'muggle', used to describe a non-magical individual: 'I was done with the magic / And I managed as a muggle' (Horne,

2022: 0:21–0:25). Horne explains how this act was iconoclastic, highlighting the contemporary popularity of the books: 'I was methodical / tearing pages and ripping robes / breaking all their wizard codes / a formidable villain' (Horne, 2022: 0:35–0:44). The audience is given their first sense of the difficulties inherent to reflective nostalgia as Horne describes how personally challenging the experience was for her: 'I wanted to love all these books and these beasts / but the words on the page / they just seemed to cease / when this Gryffindor girl was / overcome with grief' (Horne, 2022: 0:49–1:03).

As we have seen in other case studies, the formal strategy of poems that engage in reflective nostalgia towards popular cultural production often hinge on a shift in the affective tenor, revealing a hitherto unseen dimension that the subject is being held up against. For Horne, this subject is particularly poignant as she reveals the reason for her turn away from Harry Potter at an early age:

> When I turned ten / my mum let me read the *Philosopher's Stone* / the boy who lived, he made me feel less alone / as an only child of a broken home / and then my sister was born / Kate Horne / and she was sick / she died before Harry got out of Knockturn Alley (Horne, 2022: 1:04–1:30).

Horne's deliberate use of a short line naming her sister signifies an emotional shift in the performance and establishes a tension between her nostalgia for Harry Potter and her contemporaneous experience: 'So a Hufflepuff with a broken heart / and a hatred of Harry Potter / because the boy who lived / he's alive to me' (Horne, 2022: 1:49–1:58). Horne offers a strikingly layered and complex approach to nostalgia wherein she presents her contemporary nostalgia for a childhood experience she did not have rather than one that she did: 'I cannot trust the boy who lived / and I cannot trust Joanne / to teach me how to stay brave through grief' (Horne, 2022: 2:07–2:18). The audience is invited to consider the idea that reflective nostalgia can be painful not because of the problematic associations a treasured piece of popular culture has subsequently engendered, but because popular culture is so often linked to a particular moment in time or period in a life.

Reflection is also offered at the poem's end, where Horne discusses how her decision not to participate in an overwhelming cultural phenomenon for private and personal reasons is often met with disbelief or dismissal: 'When they ask me why I haven't read all the books / and I have stopped punishing the people who love the boy who lived / because I know it won't bring back the girl who didn't' (Horne, 2022: 2:36–2:51). Horne presents the grief of losing her sister alongside the complex emotions she feels towards Rowling's novels, and the loss of her opportunity to encounter and derive joy

from them in her childhood. This is a performance of reflective nostalgia which recalls Santesso's description of nostalgia for 'states we never experienced' (Santesso, 2006: 14) but showcases a different way in which it can be interpreted to creatively engage with themes such as grief. The poem also encourages the audience to reflect on how personal experiences can shape our relationship with popular cultural production just as much as these artefacts and media shape our personal experience and sense of self.

Conclusion

In each of these case studies of spoken word performances we encounter different ways of engaging with the theme of nostalgia and the vehicle of popular culture. While a more conventional mode of reflective nostalgia might only seek to unpick the problems of historic films, books, or television and cast them in a new light, these poems offer ways of using nostalgia to engage more deeply with the strange relationships that we often have with popular culture, and to adhere to Boym's injunction regarding the dangers of binary simplification in the relationship between restorative and reflective nostalgia. While Joshua Idehen does not use his performance to incisively critique Peter Jackson's films or to point out qualities that a contemporary audience may find troubling, his playful representation of characters from the source material gives the audience license to conduct their own excavations of nostalgic subjects without abnegating their restorative value. By opening the door to admit experimentation, the audience is encouraged to question assumptions and to detach themselves from modes of unreflective appreciation that may forestall changes of opinion or behaviour. Salena Godden's poem takes a much-loved film and places it carefully next to a social and political issue that has, bleakly, only grown in scale seven years after her performance. Godden is not critiquing *Titanic* directly for its dated approach to representation, but by effecting a parallel she is able to highlight the problems of glamourising real historical tragedies as well as identifying how our nostalgic appreciation for a subject can change in the context of social and humanitarian issues. Tyrone Lewis extends this strategy of complicating the picture by articulating the problem of nostalgia even when we are trying to reflect on and address our discomfort with something we held affection for in the past. Through his poem Lewis demonstrates that the power nostalgia commands can sometimes deceive us with easy answers (such as stereotypical or tokenistic acts of representation) and that its value as a tool for social change requires an interrogation of whether our nostalgic assumptions are only coming back to us in a different guise. Amber Horne's poem examines powerful themes of grief and loss in the context of a nostalgia for opportunities and encounters that were tragically missed. Loss is inherent to nostalgia; it often evokes a sense of longing for things as they were. Horne uses the

interplay between this inherent quality of loss and the loss of a loved one to demonstrate how some of the most profound and poignant experiences of nostalgia are derived from a longing not for how something was, but for something that was not to be.

When considering how society and social bonds are shaped by our shared experiences of popular cultural production, the impact of reflective nostalgia is not to be underestimated. However, the precise mode of our encounter with nostalgia does much to condition this significance. As Marcos Piason Natali argues: 'For many leftist thinkers, this fondness for the past and the local is invariably accompanied by guilt, since renouncing such sentimentality is, according to Marx, precisely the committed critic's obligation' (Natali, 2004: 22). While this argument does not seem particularly cheerful, as Natali subsequently notes, this particular strand of Marxist thought presents politics as something that is 'separated from the private sphere and from affect' (Natali, 2004: 23). We must ask ourselves whether politics should in fact be separated from our affective capacities. Indeed, as can be seen in the case studies I have presented, contemporary spoken word often utilises strategies of reflective nostalgia to form social bonds or to interrogate socio-political issues in ways that are distinctly not separated from affect. As a creative medium, spoken word is uniquely suited to making people think and feel about their status as individuals and as members of a community. The tools that performers use to interact with, question, deconstruct, and represent popular cultural production elevate this sense of community from the local (as members of an audience). They invoke a broader understanding of how society may learn from nostalgia for its past in order to better understand its present and its future.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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