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Transatlantic resonance: Orality, resistance, and diasporic lyricism in Hayes and Chingonyi

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Abstract

This paper explores the resurgence of orality and sonic strategies in contemporary transatlantic Black poetry, focusing on the works of Terrance Hayes and Kayo Chingonyi. It argues that both poets use sound not merely as a stylistic device but as a counter-hegemonic force that reimagines lyricism beyond the ocularcentrism of print culture. Drawing on Walter J. Ong's theory of secondary orality, Fred Moten's concept of the phonotext, and developments in sound studies and Black aesthetics, this study analyzes how Hayes's (2018) *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* and Chingonyi's (2017) *Kumukanda* reclaim the auditory dimension of poetry through voice, rhythm, and musical vernaculars. Through close readings, the analysis shows that these sonic positions the ear—rather than the eye—as the primary mode of poetic engagement and resistance. Situated within broader histories of displacement, racialized surveillance, and diasporic cultural survival, this paper suggests that sonic poetics offers new possibilities for decolonizing lyric form across borders.

Keywords: Black sonic poetics, diasporic memory, secondary orality, transatlantic Black literature, resistance through sound

1. Introduction

In recent years, contemporary Black poets in the United States and United Kingdom have increasingly embraced orality, sound, and performance as vital poetic practices. This shift reflects the growing influence of digital and multimedia platforms, which challenge the dominance of print-centric literary forms and open new avenues for sonic experimentation. Amid this cultural and technological transformation, poets are reimagining voice, rhythm, and community in ways that resist the visual hegemony of written text.

In a literary culture long shaped by logocentrism and ocularcentrism—what Martin Jay (1993) calls "the denial of vision" (p. 587) in twentieth-century thought—this renewed focus on the sonic marks a radical reclamation of poetry's communal and affective capacities. Building on Walter J. Ong's (1982) theories of primary and secondary orality and Fred Moten's (2003) concept of the phonotext, this paper contends that Terrance Hayes and Kayo Chingonyi deploy sound not as decorative flourish but as a core modality of meaning-making and political resistance. Their poetry privileges voice, rhythm, and musicality as generative forces,

disrupting traditional lyric expectations and foregrounding the auditory as a mode of insurgent community-making.

Through a transatlantic reading of Hayes's (2018) *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* and Chingonyi's (2017) *Kumukanda*—works shaped by African diasporic experiences in the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively—this study examines how both poets reconceive the lyric form. Departing from the notion of the lyric as a static textual monument, they reimagine it as what Charles Bernstein (1992) terms an "ear-republic" (p. 9): a collective sonic space where language pulses with memory, resistance, and futurity.

This turn to sound is not simply a backward glance or act of nostalgia. Rather, it arises from the material realities of Black life and gestures toward an alternative sensorium—one attuned to the lived conditions of diaspora, displacement, and enduring resilience.

2. Literature review

The intersection of sound, orality, and contemporary poetry has garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly within the frameworks of Black poetics and diasporic literary traditions. A foundational concept in this discourse is Walter J. Ong's (1982) theory of secondary orality, which describes the resurgence of oral modes of communication in technologically advanced societies. Rather than merely signaling a nostalgic return to pre-literate traditions, Ong situates this revival within the rise of electronic media—radio, television, and later digital platforms—highlighting how these technologies cultivate a new form of oral culture that emphasizes immediacy, communal reception, and performance. In the context of poetry, secondary orality enables a return to sound as a primary medium for cultural expression and memory transmission.

Complementing Ong's framework is Fred Moten's (2003) concept of the phonotext, which advances a more politicized and aestheticized view of Black sound. Moten contends that sound, particularly within Black expressive cultures, is not simply communicative but insurgent—"an ongoing resistance to the visual order" (p. 203). Unlike Ong's media-based analysis, Moten emphasizes the embodied and improvisational nature of Black sonic practices. For example, Hayes's fractured cadences and tonal shifts mirror Moten's idea of "the break"—a rupture that opens up new expressive and political possibilities. The phonotext, in this sense, is not just a voice on the page; it is a dissonant archive of breath, pain, and joy that resists textual containment.

These two theories, while differing in emphasis—technological versus aesthetic-political—are not mutually exclusive. In fact, their convergence offers a fuller understanding of how contemporary Black poets use sound as both a mode of identity construction and resistance. Ong's notion of re-mediated orality helps contextualize the broader shift toward auditory forms, while Moten underscores the racialized and insurgent dimensions of that shift.

Expanding this dialogue, Alexander G. Weheliye (2005) in *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, introduces the idea of "sonic Afro-modernities," (p. 9) suggesting that sound technologies—such as vinyl, cassette tapes, and digital sampling—have historically enabled

Black diasporic subjects to encode alternative forms of memory and resistance. Weheliye's work bridges the gap between theory and practice by examining how sonic artifacts (e.g., dub poetry, hip-hop) circulate diasporic memory across geographies. His insight into the translatability of Black sound underscores how poets like Chingonyi use genre-blending—grime, garage, and traditional Zambian orality—to stage a polyphonic identity.

Further deepening this line of inquiry, Jennifer Lynn Stoever's *The Sonic Color Line* (2016) foregrounds the racial politics of listening. Her concept of the "listening ear" reveals how dominant sonic norms—such as "neutral" accents or "proper" pronunciation—reproduce racial hierarchies. According to Stoever, the act of listening is never innocent; it is shaped by historical regimes of surveillance, gatekeeping, and sonic profiling (p. 7). For instance, when Hayes uses African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or when Chingonyi merges street patois with formal diction, they are challenging the biases embedded in what is considered "audible" or "intelligible" within literary institutions. Their poetics resist the sonic color line by amplifying the very textures that hegemonic ears have been trained to ignore.

This politicized approach to listening resonates with Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), where she conceptualizes "wake work" (p. 19) as the creative and affective labor required to live with and respond to the ongoing afterlives of slavery. Sharpe emphasizes improvisation, performance, and sound as central to Black life and memory. Hayes's elegiac repetitions and Chingonyi's celebratory flows can be read as wake work—sounding grief, resilience, and historical continuity through poetic form.

From a transatlantic perspective, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003) provide critical frameworks for understanding how Black cultural production transcends national boundaries. Gilroy posits the Atlantic Ocean as a space of hybridity and exchange, where diasporic music, literature, and ritual circulate across borders. Edwards adds nuance with his idea of "diasporic translation"—the process by which Black texts adapt and respond to local conditions while remaining in conversation across geographies (pp. 11-12). Chingonyi's interweaving of Zambian ritual with British subcultures exemplifies this translation, just as Hayes's interplay of jazz and sonnet structure bridges African American tradition with canonical form.

In terms of critical reception, Hayes's (2018) *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* has been widely praised for its radical reworking of the sonnet form. Critics such as Taylor (2019, para. 3) highlight Hayes's use of "sonic layering" and improvisational form as both homage to and rupture from the literary canon. Similarly, Chingonyi's *Kumukanda* has received attention for blending Afro-diasporic identity with the performative aesthetics of Black British music scenes, with critics such as Wilkinson (2017) highlighting its rhythm-infused language, sonic form, and cultural resonance—a vivid celebration of musical and diasporic identity in poetic form. Both poets situate their work within living sonic traditions, transforming the page into a resonant field of memory and defiance.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, there remains a critical gap in comparative studies that focus specifically on orality and sonic innovation across American and British Black poetic traditions. This paper seeks to fill that gap by juxtaposing the auditory strategies of Hayes and

Chingonyi, offering a transatlantic perspective on how sound reconfigures lyric form and cultural belonging. Their work demands not only to be read, but heard—and through that listening, to be reimagined.

3. Sounding resistance: Terrance Hayes's radical sonnet form

This section examines how Terrance Hayes mobilizes sonic strategies within the sonnet form to resist textual containment and articulate Black subjectivity through sound. In *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018), Hayes transforms the 14-line sonnet—traditionally a fixed and Eurocentric form—into a dynamic vessel for improvisation and sonic force. For instance, in the opening sonnet, he writes, "Inside me is a huge blackness blooming" (Hayes, 2018, p. 5). The alliteration of the 'b' consonant ("blackness blooming") produces an acoustic swell that embodies grief and growth simultaneously. Rather than presenting Black identity as static or confined, the sonic bloom resists containment.

Hayes's use of repetition and rhythm reflects Fred Moten's (2003) theorization of "the break" (p.92)—a moment of sonic and semantic rupture that opens space for fugitivity and new meaning. In the sonnet titled *"Probably twilight makes blackness dangerous,"* Hayes writes:

> Probably twilight makes blackness dangerous
> Darkness. Probably all my encounters
> Are existential jambalaya. Which is to say,
> A nigga can survive.
>
> (Hayes, 2018, p. 38)

The recurring use of "probably" undermines certainty and rhythmically unsettles the poem's flow. Short, percussive phrases mirror the syncopated dynamics of jazz, while tonal shifts—between abstraction and vernacular bluntness—disorient the reader's expectations. Moten's "break" is not only formal but political here; the poem's sonic disjunctures act as refusals of legibility, enacting a radical Black expressiveness that refuses closure or containment (Moten, 2003, p. 92).

Rather than resolving tension, Hayes cultivates ambiguity. His layered sonics demand what Moten (2003) calls "the blur of the social" (p. 203), compelling the reader to listen beyond the surface. Through strategic enjambment, tonal shifts, and Black vernacular, Hayes destabilizes linear readings and insists on poetry as performance. This return to the ear displaces the ocularcentrism of traditional lyric form. The poem becomes not just a site of aesthetic expression, but what Christina Sharpe (2016) terms "wake work"—an act of mourning and resistance that bears witness to the afterlives of racial violence (pp. 19–20).

Hayes's sonic poetics do not merely decorate the page—they intervene in how Black life is registered, remembered, and heard. His work resists textual fixity by privileging breath, resonance, and rupture, reconfiguring the sonnet as a fugitive form of Black survival.

4. Diasporic echoes: Sonic memory and identity in Kayo Chingonyi's *Kumukanda*

Kayo Chingonyi's (2017) *Kumukanda* explores orality through the dual registers of diasporic memory and contemporary Black British music culture. Drawing on Zambian rites of passage and the sonic textures of UK garage and grime, Chingonyi constructs identity as both

performative and polyphonic. In the poem "*Self-Portrait as a Garage Emcee*," he writes, "my flow's a keepsake / passed down the family line" (Chingonyi, 2017, p. 12). Here, "flow" functions doubly: as rhythmic delivery in emceeing and as a metaphor for intergenerational knowledge. Orality, in this context, becomes a means of inheriting and reinventing culture—preserving ancestral voices through contemporary performance.

The title poem, "Kumukanda," exemplifies this cultural code-switching. The term itself refers to a Zambian initiation ritual marking the passage from boyhood to manhood. Chingonyi interlaces formal English with phrases such as "Mwaala" and "Bwanji"—Zambian greetings and terms of kinship (Chingonyi, 2017, p. 17). This linguistic hybridity challenges colonial language hierarchies and asserts diasporic identity as rooted in multiplicity. Through this blending, Chingonyi enacts what Ong (1982) describes as "secondary orality"—a reactivation of oral traditions mediated through written and performed language. His work becomes an archive of memory and a performance of cultural resilience.

Chingonyi's use of rhythm and vocality also invokes Fred Moten's (2003) notion of the "phonotext," where the poem becomes a layered sonic event rather than a silent, textual object. His syncopated phrasing and performative tone—especially in poems like "*Self-Portrait as a Garage Emcee*"—create a poetic surface that demands active, embodied listening. These sonic disruptions and vernacular interjections perform identity as improvisation, not essence. The phonotext, as Moten argues, resists containment: it breathes, pulses, and defies literary decorum (Moten, 2003, p. 203).

While Hayes often sonifies grief and mourning, Chingonyi's poetics emphasize affirmation and celebratory belonging. Lines such as "We dance like the wind / as if home is a body" (Chingonyi, 2017, p. 18) reimagine home not as geography but as rhythm, breath, and movement. This metaphor grounds diasporic identity in kinesthetic memory, suggesting that sound and motion can restore a sense of rootedness in the absence of physical homeland. Here, orality functions as a generative force—one that resists erasure by sounding presence.

5. The politics of listening: Reclaiming the ear in contemporary Black poetics

Listening is not a neutral act. In the context of contemporary Black poetics, it becomes a political gesture—an embodied and ethical form of attention. Both Terrance Hayes and Kayo Chingonyi challenge the ocular dominance of literary culture by centering the ear as a site of resistance, solidarity, and re-memory. As Dylan Robinson (2020) argues, listening carries with it legacies of power—shaping who is heard, who is silenced, and under what conditions that hearing occurs (Robinson, 2020, p. 2). For Hayes and Chingonyi, poetry is not just meant to be read but heard, forcing an encounter with voices that print alone cannot contain.

Hayes's sonnets demand what Moten (2003) calls "participatory listening"—an affective mode of engagement where the reader becomes auditor. His use of syncopated phrasing, clipped enjambments, and tonal ruptures resists the silent consumption of poetry. In one sonnet, he writes:

> My hunch is that
> you are a little bit like me,
> obsessed with the eye

but wild with the ear.
(Hayes, 2018, p. 19)

This self-reflexive moment foregrounds the split between visual mastery and sonic vulnerability. The auditory, here, is cast not as supplement but as the space where truth and intimacy emerge. Hayes disrupts print's distancing effects and invites the listener into the raw, improvisational now of Black speech and survival.

Chingonyi's poetics similarly cultivate a listening practice attuned to diasporic histories and futures. His invocation of grime, garage, and Zambian praise poetry layers voices across time and space. In "Kumukanda," he writes, "a voice like mine / heard across the borderlands" (Chingonyi, 2017, p. 18). This transborder listening dissolves rigid national affiliations, echoing Brent Hayes Edwards's (2003) concept of "diasporic translation"—the process by which Black texts resonate across geographies while remaining locally grounded (pp. 11–12). Chingonyi's lyricism thus becomes an archive of sounded belonging, where each utterance reactivates ancestral memory and cultural continuity.

Listening, as Robinson (2020) demonstrates, is shaped by structures of surveillance and sonic profiling. It is never politically neutral but instead carries legacies of power that determine who is heard, who is silenced, and under what conditions hearing occurs (p. 2). Dominant cultures have long encoded bias into prevailing definitions of what is considered "audible" or "intelligible." Robinson (2020) argues that listening should be understood not as a passive or benign act, but as a contested site—one that can either reproduce regimes of control or open space for solidarity and resistance (p. 2). Similarly, Stoever's (2016) concept of the "listening ear" reveals how whiteness disciplines sound. It privileges so-called "neutral" accents while marginalizing and policing Black vocality (p. 11), embedding racialized hierarchies into auditory perception itself.

Responding to these conditions, poets like Terrance Hayes and Kayo Chingonyi craft sonic interventions that challenge the politics of listening. Hayes's use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and Chingonyi's blending of Zambian cadences with British street slang, actively unsettle dominant norms of speech and sound. These linguistic textures disrupt literary expectations, compelling institutions and audiences alike to confront the sonic color line. Their poems resist passive consumption. They retrain the ear to hear Black voices on their own terms—fractured, plural, and defiant. Through dissonance, rupture, and layered vocal registers, both poets call for a more ethical and attentive form of listening. This is what Moten (2003) might describe as "participatory listening" (p. 25)—a listening practice that is not merely receptive but responsive, not merely aesthetic but political.

Ultimately, the sonic poetics of Hayes and Chingonyi challenge readers not simply to decode meaning but to submit to the vulnerabilities and solidarities that listening entails. In their hands, listening becomes an insurgent act—a way of reconstituting community, history, and future imaginaries against the erasures of ocularcentric modernity.

6. Transatlantic resonances: Comparative sonic strategies in Hayes and Chingonyi

Although grounded in distinct cultural and historical milieus, both Terrance Hayes and Kayo

Chingonyi strategically employ sound as a pivotal medium of resistance and remembrance. A comparative analysis reveals how their sonic poetics articulate nuanced responses to displacement, racialization, and the quest for communal belonging across the transatlantic divide. Both poets foreground orality as a potent form of defiance; however, their sonic expressions are deeply rooted in their respective local contexts. Hayes's manipulation of rhythm and sound in *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018) is heavily indebted to African American musical traditions, particularly jazz and blues—forms that historically serve as modes of improvisation and expression of Black rage and mourning within the United States' fraught racial landscape. These strategies can be understood through the lens of Gates's theory of "Signifyin(g)" (Gates, 2012, p. 44), which outlines the influence of Black musical and rhetorical traditions on African American literature. By transforming the sonnet—a traditionally rigid and Eurocentric form—into a performative lament, Hayes enacts a poignant resistance to racial violence and systemic erasure.

Conversely, Chingonyi's (2017) *Kumukanda* situates orality within the Afro-British experience, intricately weaving the sonic textures of contemporary British garage and grime music with memories of Zambian rites of passage. This fusion facilitates a diasporic negotiation of identity that embraces multiplicity rather than dwelling on loss. While Hayes's sonnets channel the sonic poetics of racial grief and anger rooted in the African American experience, Chingonyi's lyricism reimagines poetry as a space for diasporic celebration, cultural reclamation, and collective transformation. Their transatlantic resonance exemplifies how sound operates as a shared medium of liberation across the African diaspora, even as its expressions remain shaped by the specific historical and geographical conditions of displacement, belonging, and survival. In this sense, Paul Gilroy's concept of "the Black Atlantic" (1993) offers a critical framework for understanding how diasporic cultural forms—particularly music and orality—circulate and evolve across national boundaries, enabling both remembrance and renewal.

Both poets exemplify how reclaiming the sonic dimension of poetry resists textual erasure and generates communal spaces that transcend national and continental borders. In *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, Hayes reimagines the sonnet as a container for racial tension and emotional compression: "I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison, / Part panic closet" (Hayes, 2018, p. 17). The sonic texture of this line—the alliteration of "part prison" and the jarring cadence of "panic closet"—enacts a claustrophobic rhythm that mirrors the lived precarity of Black existence. This formal tension aligns with Moten's (2003) conception of "black sociality": a fugitive mode of collective life enacted through sound and resistance.

Similarly, Chingonyi's *Kumukanda* draws on diasporic sonic heritage to articulate Afro-British identity. In "Legerdemain," the speaker confesses, "I am expert at making my voice / disappear. I learnt this / from the sound system" (Chingonyi, 2017, p. 35). Here, the reference to the sound system—a cornerstone of Black diasporic musical culture—frames silence not as erasure but as strategy, as learned performance. In both cases, sound becomes a means of navigating and remaking communal life, illustrating a transatlantic poetics rooted in orality as a mode of historical reckoning and future imagining.

7. Conclusion: Toward an ear's republic — sonic futures of the lyric

Taken together, Hayes's and Chingonyi's work illustrates how the reemergence of orality in contemporary poetry enacts new possibilities for lyric forms and communities. Their sonic poetics demonstrate that reclaiming the ear is not an aesthetic indulgence but a decolonial necessity. Against the visuality of racialized surveillance, their work insists on a fugitive sensorium, one where lyric reclaims its force not through visibility, but through vibration, resonance, and community. The future of transatlantic Black poetics may lie not in the static permanence of the printed word, but in the fugitive, improvisational survival of the spoken and sounded word.

In conclusion, this study reflects on the broader implications of the sonic turn for the future of transatlantic poetics. The resurgence of orality in contemporary Black poetry constitutes a critical intervention in the politics of voice, identity, and resistance. Through the sonic experiments of Terrance Hayes and Kayo Chingonyi, poetry reclaims its ancient function as a communal and performative art form—capable of shaping both collective memory and future imaginaries. Hayes's reanimation of the sonnet and Chingonyi's infusion of diasporic musical traditions demonstrate that sound is not merely an aesthetic embellishment but a political necessity in an era of textual surveillance and erasure. As theorized by Walter J. Ong (1982) and Fred Moten (2003), the auditory dimensions of language carry possibilities for connection and disruption that silent textuality often constrains. By centering the ear over the eye, these poets reconfigure the lyric not as a static artifact but as a dynamic, living force. Future research might consider how the proliferation of digital media and the integration of new technologies continue to transform these sonic strategies, generating transnational circuits of sound, memory, and resistance. In the work of Hayes and Chingonyi, what Charles Bernstein (1992, p. 9) calls an "ear-republic" is not a nostalgic return to pre-literacy, but a radical reimagining of poetry's futurity.

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