Digitizing the 'Sound Explosions' of Anglophone Caribbean Performance Poetry

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The Internet offers new performance platforms for Caribbean poets who prioritize oral expression. One group realizing this potential is the youthled artist collective The 2 Cents Movement, based out of Trinidad and Tobago, who circulate their video poems on social networking sites. Through their DIY approach, they are building a broader youth audience for their work. More generally, Caribbean poets are often underrepresented in online poetry resources, particularly in institutionbased Internet audio archives. This article uses The 2 Cents Movement as a preliminary model to understand how Internet audio archives can be redesigned to amplify the total expression of Caribbean poetry. Admittedly, The 2 Cents Movement offers a partial solution to a much bigger problem; however, this article demonstrates the value of examining poets' engagements with digital technologies to develop better archival standards and practices in sync with the politics of the work.

Introduction

If Louise Bennett, the prolific Jamaican artist, were still alive and performing today, how would the Internet fit into her creative practice? Would she post poetry recordings on Facebook? Would children play with a Miss Lou app? Would Aunty Roachy deliver wisdom via Twitter? Since she embraced emerging technologies to teach her audience about the value of the Jamaican language, social media likely would have played a prominent role in her education activism. She turned to performance early in her career to build an inclusive audience, and her media projects for the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation—her children's television show Ring Ding (1970–82) and her radio program Miss Lou's Views (1966–82)—gave her an expanded terrain to develop her call-and-response poetics. Unfortunately, searching for Louise Bennett online today yields few actual sound recordings of her poetry. Bennett's underrepresentation online—or, more aptly, her silence, since her words can be found but rarely her voice—is characteristic of Caribbean poetry more generally. This article stems from concern about who has the power to define poetry in virtual spaces and whose voices receive airtime. As Kamau Brathwaite establishes in his groundbreaking lecture History of the Voice, Anglophone Caribbean poetry should be celebrated for its sound explosions, yet it has remained relatively quiet online.[1]

Internet audio archives for poetry have flourished in recent years. Websites such as PennSound, The Poetry Archive, the Poetry Foundation, the Academy of American Poets, and UbuWeb have provided excellent resources for contemporary poetics. These twenty-first-century open-access collections offer both live and studio recordings, round-table discussions of poetry, lectures, and taped interviews. While these digital platforms promise democratization, they often repeat the exclusions of

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[1] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), 13.

print archives. Many of these collections, which now determine the content of poetry syllabi in university classrooms, reinforce the United States as the dominant center of Anglophone poetry in the Americas.[2] http://www.upenn.edu/pennnews/news/pennsoundtransformshowpoetrytaught worldover. For example, the Poetry Foundation has 3,649 author pages, almost half of which are devoted to US poets. The site features only eleven poets from the Caribbean region, excluding many major voices from the region, including Louise Bennett. Of the eleven Caribbean poet pages, none include audio poems and only seven of them include actual poetry texts; the other four just feature short author bios. Not only are Caribbean poets underrepresented in these curated collections but their online presence is often sparse, limited to random YouTube videos.[3]

Despite their underrepresentation in web-based audio collections, many contemporary Caribbean performance poets have embraced digital technologies to build their audiences. These new digital poetries offer a solution to what Laurence A. Breiner has characterized as the half-life of Caribbean performance poems.[4] According to him, readers unable to attend a poem's live recitation are always at a disadvantage, because things like tone, gesture, and the poet's relationship with her audience also determine meaning. In terms of distribution,

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[2] See Penn Sound Transforms How Poetry Is Taught the World Over, Penn News, 26 June 2014,

[3] For a discussion of race in digital canons, see Amy E. Earhart, Can Information be Unfettered? Race and the New Digital Humanities Canon, in Mathew K. Gold, ed., Debates in the Digital Humanities (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), Open Access Edition, http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu. Earhart urges that we need to examine the canon that we, as digital humanists, are constructing, a canon that skews toward traditional texts and excludes crucial work by women, people of color, and the GLBTQ community.

[4] Laurence A. Breiner, The Half-Life of Performance Poetry, Journal of West Indian Literature 8, no. 1 (1998): 20.

digitized poetry recordings, unhindered by shipping fees and trade tariffs, surpass print books in their international portability, making them more accessible to Caribbean diasporic communities.

Figure 1 2 Cents Movement Poet

This article examines one of the best examples of innovative digital poetry in the Caribbean: the youth led artist collective The 2 Cents Movement, based out of Trinidad and Tobago, who use social networking sites to circulate their video poems. Students at the University of the Southern Caribbean started the movement in 2010, and their activities have strengthened youth enthusiasm for spoken word poetry. Some of their activities include island wide school tours, open mic nights, slam contests, television and radio broadcasts, video production of poems, and student poetry workshops. They present themselves as a movement to align their poetry with social change. Their digital recordings become modes of production, publication, distribution, preservation, and community activism. Their populist approach builds on the vernacular pedagogical dynamics of performance established

by figures like Louise Bennett. By using these tech
nologies to integrate creative and political praxes,
The 2 Cents Movement realizes Brathwaite's the
ory of nation language and his argument that sound
reproduction technologies can be used to reinvigo
rate Afrocentric oral traditions.[5]

Brathwaite identifies how nation language po
ets challenge the way that paper records were used
to discredit oral ways of knowing and uphold in
stitutional power during colonization. When a
dub poet like Linton Kwesi Johnson recites defin
itive works such as Reggae Sounds, lines such as
footdrop find drum, blood story / bass history is
a moving / is a hurting black story attack print
centric forms of knowledge.[6] He builds on a his
tory of Caribbean people using performance to cir
cumvent the print archive to produce, record, and
transmit knowledge through embodied acts.[7] Such
knowledge depends on the interaction between the
performer and her audience. The format of Ben
nett's Ring Ding, where she would invite children
from the studio audience to join her on stage to re
cite poetry with her, exemplifies this well. Such
communal pedagogies also extend to adult audiences.
For example, Oku Onuora defines the goal of dub
poetry as consciousnessraising: It also mean to
dub out the isms and schisms and to dub conscious
ness into the peopledem head.[8] Performance cre
ates what Brathwaite characterizes as total expres
sion, engendering a space for collective, politicized
vernacular consciousness to take shape:

The other thing about nation language is that it
is part of what may be called total expression. . . .

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[5] Brathwaite, History of the Voice, 13.

[6] Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mi Revalueshanary Fren (Keene, NY:
Ausable Press, 2006), 15.

[7] Here I draw on Diana Taylor's analysis of what she calls
the repertoire to characterize how performance acts create
cultural memory in the Americas. See Diana Taylor, The
Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory
in the Americas (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

[8] Quoted in Mervyn Morris, 'Is English We Speaking': and
Other Essays (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999), 38.

Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition on the other hand demands not only the griot but the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the maker makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence we have the creation of a continuum where meaning truly resides.[9]

Although Brathwaite seems to be arguing here that the full experience of the sonic continuum depends on live interaction, he actually emphasizes the opposite. A central point of his text, originally titled an electronic lecture for his 1979 Harvard presentation, harnesses the potential of sound reproduction technologies to create new pathways for total expression. For him, they intensify the detonations within Caribbean soundpoetry [that] have imploded us into new shapes and consciousness of ourselves.[10] Brathwaite's combustion metaphors of detonations and explosions reveal his prioritizing of electronic sound. As Jonathan Sterne establishes, All soundreproduction technologies work through the use of transducers that convert acoustic waves into electronic impulses.[11] Brathwaite suggests that these energy conversions amplify total expression rather than weaken it, which The 2 Cents Movement substantiates.

So much scholarship focuses on written documents and techniques from the past, yet many digital humanists are early adopters. They embrace the unfinished, they invite collaboration, they move us off the page, and they aim to build things for the future. Inspired by this approach, this article uses The 2 Cents Movement as a preliminary model to understand how Internet audio archives can be redesigned to amplify the total expression of Caribbean poetry. Admittedly, The 2 Cents Movement offers an incomplete solution to a much larger problem; however, I argue that we need to begin

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9 Brathwaite, History of the Voice, 18–19 (italics in original).

10 Ibid., 49.

11 Jonathan Sterne, The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 22.

by examining poets' engagements with digital tech
nologies to develop better archival standards and
practices in sync with the politics of the work. In
this collaborative spirit, I also invite readers to
click on the links as they read this article, to im
merse themselves in what's already online, and to
think about how we can build on this virtual world
of Caribbean poetics.

Part of what makes Brathwaite's History of the
Voice an important catalyst for building digital
archives is that he avoids the tendency in oral schol
arship to fixate on the live event. For example,
Hugh Hodges stresses the difficulty of studying per
formance poetry, lamenting that we typically exam
ine only the textualized trace of it.[12] He considers
sound and video recordings as texts, because he ar
gues that the total expression of the live event does
not get captured on them. Similarly, Peggy Phe
lan claims that what she calls liveness disappears
in recordings of a performance.[13] As Sterne puts
it, this attitude upholds facetoface communication
and bodily presence as the yardsticks by which to
measure all communicative activity and define[s]
sound reproduction negatively, as negating or mod
ifying an undamaged interpersonal or facetoface
copresence.[14] Brathwaite takes a more innovative
approach to sound reproduction technologies by
highlighting their capacity to challenge printcentric
aesthetics. The 2 Cents Movement demonstrates

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[12] Hugh Hodges, Poetry and Overturned Cars: Why Performance
Poetry Can't Be Studied, (and Why We Should Study It
Anyway), in Susan Gingell and Wendy Roy, eds., Listening
Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond: Interfaces of the
Oral, Written, and Visual (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier
University Press, 2012), 98.

[13] As Phelan describes, Performance's only life is in the present.
Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or oth
erwise participate in the circulation of representations of
representations: once it does so, it becomes something other
than performance. Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics
of Performance (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

[14] Sterne, The Audible Past, 20.

how digital technologies provide even more oppor
tunities for this through their use of music videog
raphy and microblogging. However, what Brath
waite envisioned over 30 years ago through res
onating tape[s], eight tracks, and LPs has yet to be
fully realized in the broader terrain of our research
methodologies and poetry resources.[15]

Critical approaches to performance poetry have
been slow to develop because of the Western as
sumption that the text of a poemthat is, the written
documentis primary and that the recitation or per
formance of a poem by the poet is secondary and fun
damentally inconsequential to the 'poem itself.'[16]
While the digital should free us from our obsession
with a textbased idiom in literary studies, it has
yet to do so.[17]http://www.digitalhumanities
.org/dhq/vol/7/1/000146/000146.html. As
this article demonstrates, even the designs of most
online poetry audio collections still privilege the
methodology of textual close reading rather than
encourage us to develop new soundbased methods
of analysis.[18] In a similar vein, recent efforts to
build Caribbean digital archives have focused on
converting print documents and have not engaged
as much with sound media.[19] Resources and fund

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[15] Brathwaite, History of the Voice, 49.

[16] Charles Bernstein, ed., Close Listening: Poetry and the Per
formed Word (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998),
8.

[17] For a discussion about the neglect of sound analysis in digi
tal literary studies, see Tanya Clement, David Tcheng, Loretta
Auvil, Boris Capitanu, and Megan Monroe, Sounding for
Meaning: Using Theories of Knowledge Representation to
Analyze Aural Patterns in Texts, Digital Humanities Quar
terly 7, no. 1 (2013),

[18] Although I do not have the space in this article to explore
their work, studying the standards and practices developed
by music historians for online collections such as the Naxos
Music Library would be another fruitful line of inquiry to
help literary scholars move beyond textbased approaches.

[19] While there are Caribbean sound archives, such as Radio
Haiti, in Caribbean literary studies print archiving is much
more prevalent. For example, major collections, such as the

ing certainly drive this, since print materials are easier and cheaper to digitize. Yet given the oral dimensions of Caribbean cultures, we must address how to represent and archive performance to overcome the structural biases of print archives.

Creating Digital Griots: The 2 Cents Movement

Figure 2 Audience Interaction

Scrolling through The 2 Cents Movement's Facebook page reveals a vibrant online poetry community. As of December 2015, they have more than 13,000 followers, and their page includes announcements about upcoming performances, photographs of performances, political news updates, links to livestream their events, and video poems. Its campus origins explain why Facebook, a social networking site designed for college students, has played a central role in the development of the movement.

Digital Library of the Caribbean, while excellent, primarily hold literary materials converted from print documents.

The founder, Jean Claude Cournand, an undergrad
uate at the time, sought to build a stronger intel
lectual youth cultureto invite youth to put in their
two cents by expressing their views on current is
sues (ranging from marijuana legislation to homo
phobia) through spokenword poetry. In an inter
view, he explained that they chose to go into the
digital habitat rather than trying to reach people
through events alone, in order to attract a youth au
dience.[20] http://www.guardian.co.tt/entertainment/
20130715/notafraidputtheirquote 2cents. Their
bestknown projects are the Intercol and Verses na
tional slam competitions, held annually as part
of the Bocas Lit Festival (Verses was recently re
named the First Citizens National Poetry Slam).
The two different slamsIntercol features high school
teams, and Verses features prominent poets who
compete individuallyreflect their mentorship struc
ture. The 2015 winner of the Intercol slam, Michael
Logie, got to pick a 2 Cents Movement poet as a
mentor to work with him for a year to help him de
velop his poetry.[21] http://www.guardian.co.tt/
lifestyle/20150401/logietopsschoolsspoken
wordquote intercol. The 2 Cents Movement has
also collaborated with the Trinidad and Tobago
Radio Network on the Free Speech Project, where
young artists recite their poems weekly on the ra
dio. These poems are also produced as videos and
archived on the network's YouTube channel. The
majority of the movement's activities are coordi
nated and advertised online, and major events like
the slam contests can be livestreamed. They ex
ist solely through freely accessible sites and do
not have their own server or domain name, which
suggests that a lack of resources does not need to
be an obstacle to building an online presence for
Caribbean poetry. In addition to reaching youth

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[20] Quoted in Bobielee Dixon, Not afraid to put in their '2 cents,'
Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, 16 July 2013,
[21] Logie Tops Schools Spoken Word 'Intercol,' Trinidad and
Tobago Guardian, 2 April 2015,

in Trinidad and Tobago, they have gained an international following by circulating their poetry on social media.

Their Twitter and Facebook updates for their 20142015 Courts Bocas Speak Out Tour of more than fifty secondary schools demonstrates their use of these platforms to enhance audience interaction. During this tour, some of the nation's best performance poets mentored high school students as they wrote and performed their own works through performances and workshops. These school visits provided a way for The 2 Cents Movement to promote the Intercol slam competition. Photo live tweets of their tour performances often focused on the students actively participating in the audience rather than on the poet performing. In these shots, the camera points at the audience, often catching only the performer's back or the corner of her shoulder.[22]

The online viewer gets to stare out at the auditorium filled with students, which allows her to occupy the performer's gaze but also view a student's face as a mirror, inviting her to identify with both the performer and the audience. This elaborates on the pedagogy offered during the tour, where the poets' performances provide students with a model for their own poetry aspirations. Visually, Twitter and Facebook followers become situated in the continuum of total expressionin the reciprocal exchange between performer and audience.

High school students who attended a 2 Cents Movement performance at their own school could then follow them on Twitter and Facebook and connect these images to their own participation in the live event. The photos (and the movement as a whole) downplay individual author celebrity in favor of building a studentfocused collectivity. The 2 Cents Movement uses Twitter and Facebook to create a

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[22] See their Twitter page: https://twitter.com/2CentsMovement. See also their individual albums on their Facebook page, where some of their school tour photos are collected. For example, see the album Five Rivers Sec Speak Out Tour 2014 Day 27: https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.610565

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name: audience_interaction1.jpg
file: audience_interaction1.jpg
        state: unknown
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Figure 3 Audience interaction

Figure 4 Poet performer

constancy of presence to link together different

Figure 5   Audience interaction

high school communities in Trinidad and Tobago.[23]
Although these social media platforms governed
by the commercial needs of US based multination
als certainly hold limitations, rhetoric scholar
Kevin Adonis Browne stresses the possibility for
subversive adaptation. Examining Caribbean In
ternet users' chatting, blogging, and video sharing
practices, he illustrates how users adapt everyday
vernacular practices to assert their presence in dig
ital public spaces that often render them invisible.
While his argument relates to individuals' every
day encounters online rather than large scale digi
tal projects, the parallels he establishes between
a carnivalesque imperative and the Internet lend
insight into The 2 Cents Movement's adaptation

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[23] Dhiraj Murthy, Twitter: Social Communication in the Twit
ter Age (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 39.

of social media to expand on the power of total ex
pression in online environments.[24] Rather than
view Caribbean folk cultures in opposition to digi
tal forms, Browne views the inventiveness of both
as part of what makes them compatible. He demon
strates how communal vernacular practices easily
translate to an online environment because they
emerge out of a history of adaptability necessary
for those who have had to find a way or make one
when none seemed available.[25] For example, in the
colonial era, musicians' invented steel pan drum
ming to get around the ban on using actual drums
and managed to make noise in a colonial environ
ment that aimed to silence them. Corporate social
media platforms also curtail creative expression
through their circumscribed structures. Such re
strictions often reinforce the majority voice, yet
Facebook and Twitter have also proven themselves
useful for the growth of subcultures and movements.

Media scholars have identified how Facebook's
interface encourages users to adopt neoliberal val
ues. The anthropologist Alex Fattal draws a con
nection between a user's desire to gain as many
likes and friends as possible and Facebook's cor
porate desire to become the most dominant social
network in the world, characterizing this as the
unspoken logic of accumulation and curiosity that
undergirds the platform.[26] To what extent can this
logic of accumulation and curiosity, which sounds
eerily similar to older imperial impulses, be dis
rupted? By using social media to augment their
performance events, The 2 Cents Movement inter
cepts this logic of accumulation by bringing users

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[24] Kevin Adonis Browne, Tropic Tendencies: Rhetoric, Pop
ular Culture, and the Anglophone Caribbean (Pittsburgh:
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 129.

[25] Ibid., 134.

[26] Alex Fattal, Facebook: Corporate Hackers, a Billion Users,
and the GeoPolitics of the 'Social Graph,' Anthropological
Quarterly 85, no. 3 (2012): 931. See also Ilana Gershon,
UnFriend My Heart: Facebook, Promiscuity, and Heartbreak
in a Neoliberal Age, Anthropological Quarterly 84, no. 4
(2011): 86594.

into the dynamic of total expression. While schol ars often critique Facebook for weakening face to face sociality, The 2 Cents Movement reveals how it can be used to deepen social connections.[27]

Through social media, they also make their per formances part of everyday life. People browse Facebook as they ride the bus to work, or as they wait in line at the grocery store. The 2 Cents Move ment often depicts the performance dynamics of such quotidian spaces in their studio produced video poems available on YouTube. For example, their most popular video poem Maxi Man Tracking School Gyal (originally titled Yankee's Gone), by Crystal Skeete, takes place on a Curepe street and on a bus. Skeete addresses her concern about adult males sex ually preying on underage schoolgirls by writing a poem in the voice of a teenage girl who refuses their advances. Similar to earlier women poets like Miss Lou and Jean Binta Breeze, she uses the dramatic monologue to give voice to women who are denied respect in the public sphere. Through social media her video becomes even more impact ful because a viewer might be in that particular social space as she watches the poem and even be witnessing what Skeete describes. This restores an important aspect of Caribbean oral traditions, where yard performances blend into everyday prac tices rather than become isolated special events. Miss Lou had a similar aim in her market women po ems, yet her ability to connect her audience to her settings was often restrained by the artifice of the theater stage. By creating a tangible bond between their real life users and the mediated voices in their poems, The 2 Cents Movement invites users to do more than merely like their status updates and con tinue scrolling.

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[27] For a critique of Facebook as a community building form, see Jos Marichal, Facebook Democracy: The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat to Public Life (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Ashgate, 2012).

Figure 6 Embedded video. Youtube
url: https://youtu.be/9DA8eLoPhlU

In addition to microblogging their performances,
The 2 Cents Movement's video poems, like Skeete's
Maxi Man, demonstrate how audiovisual record
ing technologies can be used to enhance the com
munal dynamic of total expression. Their videos
challenge the idea that poetry depends on print pub
lication, since many of their wellknown poems are
available only in this format. By getting us off
the page, their videography expands the possibili
ties for how we might edit and archive performance
poetry. Released in 2013, Skeete's video went vi
ral on social media and received more than 88,000
views on YouTube.[28] Her poem exemplifies the 2
Cents Movement's approach, in that she initially
attended one of their workshops as a medical stu
dent and she is now a leading poet in the movement.
She won the 2013 Verses poetry slam with her per
formance of this poem; however, the popular ver
sion on The 2 Cents Movement's YouTube channel
is a studio recording made by BeatOven Produc
tions with videography by Denithy. Rather than

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[28] Crystal Skeete, Maxi Man Tracking School Ghal, YouTube
video, 5.27, posted by The 2 Cents Movement, 25 June 2013,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DA8eLoPhlU.

aim to recreate the experience of the live perfor mance event, the video invites a viewer to feel in cluded in the street scene being depicted. Through their synthesis of the dramatic monologue form and the music video genre, Skeete and the 2 Cents Movement team cultivate a sense of audience con nection and encourage dialogue beyond the space of the poem.

Figure 7 Maxi man cast

Skeete dresses in a government school uniform to play her character in the video. Her embodiment of the character creates a dialogic relationship be tween her persona and her words because her recita tion critiques the behavior that she acts out. The dramatic monologue's implied addressee is another high school girl who is swayed by a maxi man's ad vances. The speaker warns her that these free rides are going to end in horror / trust me / with that nine month sentence things does go sour.[29] Skeete's

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[29] Skeete, Maxi Man (hereafter cited in text). Since I tran scribed the quotations from a recording, any inaccuracies are mine.

conversational style, enhanced by the video edit
ing and camera angles, encourage the viewer to
feel as though Skeete is speaking directly to her.
Standing in the middle of the street, Skeete begins
with the lines, Posing on every street corner / this
is the resurrection of 'Jean and Dinah'... No Yan
kees here / only maxi man conductor. Referencing
Mighty Sparrow's calypso hit Jean and Dinah,
about how the presence of a World War II US army
base led to prostitution in Trinidad, she draws at
tention to how girls getting free bus rides from
maxi men for sexual favors recreates a similar dy
namic. Through an intergenerational call and re
sponse, she situates her poem in the Trinidadian
oral tradition. Skeete's poem exemplifies how The
2 Cents Movement aims to cultivate a socially con
scious form of learning that values vernacular lan
guage and knowledge.

Similar to music videos, Skeete's recitation al
ternates between a voiceover and her character speak
ing onscreen. By playing with the boundaries be
tween diegetic and nondiegetic sound, the editing
capitalizes on sound's permeability, encouraging
her virtual audience to feel a closer connection to
her words. Skeete's voice extends beyond the bound
aries of the video and infiltrates the listening space,
collapsing the distance between the onscreen per
formance and the audience's experience of it, espe
cially if they happen to be in a similar setting.

In the narrative that unfolds, the camera angles
accentuate Skeete's embodied performance. While
conventional music videos often sexually objectify
women's bodies, the jump cuts between medium shots,
medium long shots, and closeups (often from a slight
low angle) emphasize Skeete's power as she drama
tizes her character's selfactualization and encour
ages other girls to do the same. Skeete's words com
bined with the camera work challenge the male gaze
to create a virtual space of female community. This
reaches its peak when the speaker sits in the back
of the van reciting her critique and a reverse shot
depicts the maxi man gazing at her in the rearview
mirror. His gaze is literally reflected back at him,

while the speaker verbally refuses his objectification. In the middle of the van, a girl flirts with another maxi man. Throughout the poem, the speaker seems to completely condemn this behavior; however, the poem ends with a surprise twist. As she gets out of the maxi man's van, she tells the audience, This brownskinned gyal / going home and mind she child, indicating that her advice is based on her own mistakes with a maxi man (Skeete). This surprise ending builds the speaker's authority (not by separating her from her community but by underscoring her participation in it) and encourages schoolgirls watching the poem to trust her advice.

In the live performance of Maxi Man Tracking School Gyal, Skeete's critique of sexual harassment is likely powerful; however, the video format allows a viewer to experience with greater clarity the embodied experience of resisting sexual harassment on the street. For female viewers who went through something similar, the recreation of the scene and its provocative ending deepens their identification with the speaker. Like a griot, Skeete speaks for a community of young girls, or rather speaks with them, as her performance encourages them to bring their experiences into their interpretation of the poem.

Unlike many poetry recordings available online, which are taped at live events, The 2 Cents Movement engages technologies as part of the artistic composition of the poem through their studioproduced poems. By borrowing from music videography, they invite us to see performance archives as something more expansive than as a place to simply store copies of original live events. This moves us move beyond what Sterne characterizes as the preoccupation with fidelity, which advertisers established early on in sound reproduction history. Sterne reveals how sound fidelity is a story that we tell ourselves to staple separate sonic realities together. It maintains the illusion of reproduced sound as a mediation of 'live' sounds; however, the 'medium' does not necessarily mediate, authenticate, dilute, or extend a preexisting social relation.[30] Rather than

only view an archive as a space to preserve former instances of total expression, we should also view them as an opportunity to engender new forms of it. Rather than use recording technologies to recover or preserve a lost history of the voice, they can be used to actively construct a history of the voiceto create a sonic reality where new social relations can take shape.

Redesigning Internet Audio Archives for Caribbean Poetry

The 2 Cents Movement's DIY approach to digitizing poetry illustrates that a lot can be accomplished by adapting existing platforms and with limited resources; however, the underrepresentation of Caribbean poetry online will not be solved solely through social media and the free culture of the Internet. Merely uploading more poems to YouTube will not be enough to overcome the structural biases that silence (and drown out) Caribbean performance poetry online. As Rick Prelinger establishes, YouTube has become in the eyes of the public, the default online movingimage archive.[31] Yet it lacks many of the defining characteristics of archives that make them valuable, such as a focus on long term preservation and strictly codified lines of conduct that have been carefully developed through academic practice and intellectual debate.[32] The underrepresentation of Caribbean poetry in Internet audio archives is also symptomatic of the global digital divide, which is especially acute for Africa descended populations.[33] However, Curwen Best points out that the flip side to the notion of the

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[30] Sterne, The Audible Past, 219, 218, 226.

[31] Rick Prelinger, The Appearance of Archives, in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, eds., The YouTube Reader (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 269.

[32] Frank Kessler and Mirko Tobias Schfer, Navigating YouTube: Constituting a Hybrid Information Management System, in Snickars and Vonderau, The YouTube Reader, 277.

[33] Mary F. E. Ebeling, The New Dawn: Black Agency in Cyberspace, Radical History Review 87 (Fall 2003): 98. For a dis

digital divide is therefore the formation of strate
gic space. It is this strategic space that opens
up an area and arena of knowledge about evolving
technologies.[34] To take advantage of this strate
gic space, this section of the article evaluates the
standards and practices that have been established
by existing Internet audio archives and considers
how a Caribbean poetry collection could be orga
nized to realize total expression.

A discussion about archiving poetry recordings
would be incomplete without a consideration of
the achievements of PennSound. As the leading
US collection, it has quickly become the standard
for how to create a webbased poetry audio archive.
University of Pennsylvania professors Charles
Bernstein and Al Filreis started the collection in
2003 primarily for classroom use. It holds over
45,000 poetry recordings available for free stream
ing and download. Their files are downloaded roughly
four million times a month.[35] http://www.upenn
.edu/pennnews/current/20100520/features/penn’
srichpoetrylegacy. For poetry, this number is as
tounding when one considers the limited print runs
and book sales for contemporary poetry. Although
US poets and avantgarde aesthetics tend to pre
dominate, the site includes author pages for some
prominent Caribbean poets, including Brathwaite,
and M. NourbeSe Philip. They also hold some
of the few Bennett recordings available online.
The site uses the following archival taxonomies:
authors, series, anthologies, collections, groups,
and classics, which provide the user with a variety
of ways to study a poet’s work. The PennSound
Manifesto is worth examining because it has set

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cussion of the global digital divide, see Pippa Norris, Dig
ital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and
the Internet Worldwide (New York: Cambridge University
Press, 2001).

34 Curwen Best, The Politics of Caribbean Cyberculture (New
York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4.

35 Tanya Barrientos, Penn’s Rich Poetry Legacy, Penn Cur
rent, 20 May 2010,

the precedent for subsequent Internet poetry collections. They provide the following criteria for poetry audio: It must be free and downloadable; It must be MP3 or better; It must be singles; It must be named; It must embed bibliographic information in the file; and It must be indexed.[36] http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/manifesto.php. These criteria have proved successful in terms of encouraging widespread use, particularly on college campuses. They archive each poem individually (rather than entire events), because this makes them easier to find, access, and download, and it allows listeners to create their own playlists. In their own words, they adapt a consumer oriented MP3 file exchange approach for a nonprofit library.[37] By embedding bibliographic information in the file and naming each one, they uphold archival standards and ensure that future researchers will have access to information about the context for the recording, something a social media platform like YouTube does not always provide. Their straightforward interface, which lets users select from an alphabetized list of authors, also erases implicit hierarchies that come from the emphasis on accumulation in social media sites where voices are forced to compete with each other for likes and views.

While PennSound's open access model holds a lot of potential for Caribbean performance poetry, their prioritizing of free resources may not be as easy to achieve for Caribbean poetry. An extreme example of this free culture ethos is represented by Kenneth Goldsmith, the founder of UBUweb, who for awhile maintained a page on the site called the Wall of Shame, where he would publically condemn any artist who asked for her work to be removed from the site by writing her name on the wall.[38] Unlike Goldsmith, PennSound strives to ensure that all of their recordings are cleared for

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[36] Charles Bernstein, PennSound Manifesto, PennSound, 2003,
[37] Ibid.
[38] Astra Taylor, The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age (New York: Picador, 2014), 153.

copyright to be distributed free for noncommercial and educational purposes.[39] While this democratic and anticapitalistic approach may seem appealing for Caribbean poetry, in practice it may be more difficult to implement, particularly for poets who view performance as a central part of their artistic production. In the manifesto, Bernstein states that the debates about file sharing in the music industry do not apply to poetry: One of the advantages of working with poetry sound files is that we don't anticipate a problem with rights. At present and in the conceivable future, there is no profit to be gained by the sale of recorded poetry.[40] Yet Caribbean poets such as Mutabaruka and Linton Kwesi Johnson built their careers through their affiliation with the reggae recording industry and make money off of their albums. The 2 Cents Movement offers their recordings for free; however, as a group of younger poets, they may be more willing to share their work online to build their reputation.

The subject of copyright and fair use for Caribbean performance poetry is a complex issue, which deserves its own treatment in a separate article. In terms of the current discussion, it offers another example of the persistence of printcentrism in poetry scholarship. The emphasis on free recordings implicitly upholds the idea that the artistic labor of poetry is more worthy of payment when it is printbased. Moreover, it demonstrates how we define poems as texts rather than as performances. The Poetry Foundation's Code for Best Practices in Fair Use For Poetry underscores this point. A group of poets, editors, and publishers met at the Poetry Foundation's Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute and collaborated with American University's Center for Social Media and its Washington College of Law in 2011 to create the guide. Although they outline their purpose as identifying obstacles preventing poetry from coming fully into new media and, where possible, imagining how to remove

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[39] Bernstein, PennSound Manifesto.

[40] Ibid.

or mitigate these obstacles, almost none of their ex
amples involve poetry audio.[41] Yet for Caribbean
poets a major stumbling block to coming fully into
new media is a clear set of fair use practices for
performancebased work. In the Poetry Online sec
tion, their examples pertain to the appearance of
text on websites. The document concludes with
a section on Literary Performance; however, it
only addresses poets who incorporate poems by
other artists into their readings. This document be
comes completely irrelevant for groups like The 2
Cents Movement who rarely produce text versions
of their poems.

This printcentrism also extends to the design
of audio collections. I agree with Kate Eichhorn,
who argues that most poetry sound archives (both
digital and analog) have yet to realize the poten
tial of archiving sound due to the widely held as
sumption [in literary studies] that the archive is
necessarily a space of writing and, hence, opposed
to speech and other performative acts.[42] Eichhorn
proposes that we need to create a sound archive de
signed to recover and preserve the embodied, inter
active, and present nature of the performed word.[43]
In her assessment, archived poetry recordings too
often become flat and lifeless artifacts.[44] Although
Eichhorn focuses on avantgarde poets, her argu
ments apply to Caribbean poets who foreground
sound as an integral part of the poem's meaning.
Such work accessible in an archive designed to dis
rupt our textbased conceptions of archival knowl
edge would undoubtedly lead us more assertively
into other forms of knowing rather than allow the
digital to reconsolidate print paradigms.

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[41] Code for Best Practices in Fair Use For Poetry (Center for
Social Media and the Poetry Foundation, 2011), http://www
.poetryfoundation.org/foundation/bestpractices.

[42] Kate Eichhorn, Past Performance, Present Dilemma: A Po
etics of Archiving Sound, Mosaic 42 (2009): 187.

[43] Ibid., 190.

[44] Ibid., 184.

One notable exception to the underrepresentation of Anglophone Caribbean poets in Internet audio collections is The Poetry Archive, supported by the Arts Council of England. This site features more Caribbean poets than most, because the Caribbean Poetry Projecta group of scholars and poets from the Cambridge University Faculty of Education, the Centre for Commonwealth Education, and the University of the West Indiescollaborated with The Poetry Archive to improve access. Out of 476 poets, twentythree are from the Caribbean region. While this is not a huge percentage, it is considerably more than most sites, and every Caribbean poet page has sound recordings that can be streamed for free or downloaded for a fee of 0.89. The Poetry Archive, like many Internet audio archives, specializes in classroom resources. They have a special page for teaching Caribbean poetry with a selection of sound recordings and A Guide to the Language of Caribbean Poetry. The Caribbean Poetry Project's work with The Poetry Archive demonstrates how crossdisciplinary and crossinstitutional collaborations help to break down Anglocentrism.

Yet analyzing the design of the Poetry Archive author pages reveals that we need to do more than add voices to existing archives. As Amy Earhart cautions, for digital recovery projects for writers of color to be successful, we also must theorize the technological with the same rigor as we theorize the content.[45] If one compares the recording of Linton Kwesi Johnson reciting Di Great Insohreckshan on The Poetry Archive with a YouTube recording of him performing it at an outdoor festival in Venezuela in 2008, the total expression feels much more resonant in the YouTube version than on the Poetry Archive site.[46] I make this comparison to illustrate how the design of the Poetry Archive page mutes the insurrectionary tone of Johnson's poem about the Brixton Riots, not to demonstrate that

[45] Earhart, Can Information be Unfettered?

[46] Linton Kwesi Johnson, Di Great Insohreckshan, YouTube video, 2.00, posted by Oscar David De Barros, 25 January 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUMQS7Pwwu4.

the YouTube platform is inherently better at representing total expression. Obviously, the YouTube video allows one to see Johnson's body and facial expressions, which one cannot get from the Poetry Archive audio recording, but it is not as simple as video versus audio. Although the sound quality lacks the clarity of the Poetry Archive recording, the uneven audio levels provide a more authentic experience of what hearing this poem in a large crowd at an outdoor festival would have felt like. The spontaneity of live performances, including sound glitches and background noises, becomes part of what Brathwaite characterizes as the sonority contrasts of total expression.[47] As Eichhorn points out, these intruders are precisely what sound technicians often seek to filter out as they prepare recordings for the archive.[48] The Poetry Archive version of Di Great Insohreckshan follows the predominant sound editing style for Internet audio archives. Martin Spinelli describes this style as the seamless edit, designed to highlight the poet's voice and minimize all other distractions, including the recording scene (whether live or in studio) and the material elements of their production.[49] http://www.ubu.com/papers/object/06spinelli.pdf. Spinelli criticizes poetry sound editing for being too influenced b , questioning why most archived poetry recordings present sound a quotation the seamless, invisible, inaudible edit which dislodges n , which interrupts nothing, which is in fact deployed to remove inte , to remove digression and to clarify (36).

In addition to using conventional sound editing, Johnson's author page follows the standard visual design that can be found on The Poetry Archive as well as other online poetry collections such as PennSound. His page features an author portrait (rather than a performance action shot), a biography, and links to individual poem tracks. Beneath the poem title and author name, one can click the

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[47] Brathwaite, History of the Voice, 46.
[48] Eichhorn, Past Performance, Present Dilemma, 190.
[49] Martin Spinelli, Analog Echoes: A Poetics of Digital Audio Editing, Object 10: Cyberpoetics (2002): 36, UbuWeb Papers, 16 May 2007,

play button and listen to the recording. The Poetry Archive uses a simple audio player that allows a listener to start, pause, and stop the track. Johnson's author biography explains that his poems on the site were recorded from live performances and come from his CD LKJ A Cappella Live. Despite the claim that the energy of his live recitals gives the recordings a unique electricity, interspersed with the laughter and applause of audiences around Europe, the seamless editing of Di Great Insohreck shan allows one to listen to Johnson's entire recitation before realizing that it is a live performance.[50] http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/lintonkwesijohnson. Once the poem ends, the only audible audience noises are a cough and polite applause that slowly fades out. Rather than convey a unique electricity, the cough suggests a subdued audience who tried to remain silent until the end of the performance. The page provides no information about the specifics of the event or who the European audience was, although it sounds like it might be a poetry reading in an academic setting. The track certainly holds no trace of a communal dub consciousness.[51] By not clearly identifying the track as a single performance, the archive presents it as the authoritative audio version. In the lefthand margin, under the heading About the Poem, it lists the themes as social, unrest, race, and Caribbean but provides no information about the Brixton Riots.

Derek Furr notes that while online poetry collections devote attention to different aesthetics, what unites them is the idea that hearing a poet voice her own work is crucial to understanding the poem. Yet despite the interest in vocalization, collections tend to downplay the setting of the poet's performance by providing little information about when and where the reading occurred and why this

[50] Linton Kwesi Johnson Author Page, The Poetry Archive, accessed 23 July 2015,

[51] Onuora quoted in Morris, 'Is English We Speaking,' 38.

particular event was recorded.[52] While certain sites, such as PennSound, make sure that all of the bib liographic info is embedded in the single file with accurate metadata, often all that this provides is the date and physical location of the reading. By di vorcing the poem from its contextual setting, this approach erases the reciprocal relationship between the poet and her audience. Furr proposes that po etry recordings (both live and instudio) become valuable because when we close listen, we hear not only the sounds of the poem and the poet's voicing of them, but also the echoes of previous scenes of reading and listening.[53] Through webpage design and sound editing, The Poetry Archive downplays the previous audiences of Di Great Insohreckshan so that the online user feels as though she is the only person in the audience. While The 2 Cents Movement illustrates how cinematic approaches can be used to deepen total expression, the John son example illustrates the value of preserving the ephemeral qualities of a live performance in a record ing to enrich the listening experience. Furr bor rows Charles Bernstein's term close listening to characterize how a user should engage with audio recordings. Based on his experience with PennSound Bernstein proposes close listening as an alterna tive to close reading, where one prioritizes the ma teriality of sound and the aural experience.[54] Yet, in practice, how much does close listening actu ally deviate from close reading on Internet audio archives?

Annie Murray and Jared Wiercinski, curators of SpokenWeb, a collection of recordings of a Mon treal poetry reading series from 1966 to 1977, point out that while most Internet audio archives make listening the focus, their structure makes them mul timodal. Accordingly, they stress that the visual

[52] Derek Furr, Recorded Poetry and Poetic Reception from Edna Millay to the Circle of Robert Lowell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

[53] Ibid., 149.

[54] See Bernstein, Close Listening, 326.

elements of online poetry archives need careful consideration. They explore what kinds of site navigation, audio visualization, design elements and functionalities could be offered by a Webbased spoken word interface, and how these might enhance the listening process and, ultimately, the scholarly endeavor.[55] http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3808/3197. Because very little scholarship exists on how people engage with sounded poems, they acknowledge that their suggestions for a sound archive 'recipe' that other cultural heritage institutions can follow are based on established reading practices.[56] http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/8/2/000173/000173.htmlp6. They make some helpful suggestions, including using a waveform display for sound visualization, and providing listeners with a media player that allows them more control over the playback. They also suggest incorporating any available images and videos of the performance event, much like The 2 Cents Movement's photo documentation on Twitter and Facebook. However, other suggestions such as tethering audio playback with a written transcript keep the primary focus on reading rather than listening.[57] For example, on the Poetry Archive site, beneath the link to play Di Great Insohreckshan, one can also click on a Read this Poem link. This encourages scholars to engage in what is, for many, the more familiar interpretive practice rather than to develop new modes of analysis based on sound. In digital archives, Bernstein suggests that poems, set adrift from their visual grounding in alphabetic texts, might begin to resemble the songs from which, for so long, they have been divided.[58]

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[55] Annie Murray and Jared Wiercinski, Looking at Archival Sound: Enhancing the Listening Experience in a Spoken Word Archive, First Monday 17, no. 4 (2012),

[56] Annie Murray and Jared Wiercinski, A Design Methodology for Webbased Sound Archives, DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly 8, no. 2 (2014),

[57] For a summary of their specific suggestions for visual design, see Murray and Wiercinski, Looking at Archival Sound.

However, to achieve this we need to 1) be wary of a onesizefitsall approach, and 2) carefully design visual elements to encourage sonic engagement rather than to reify a visual economy of text. Such a divide between song and poem has never existed for Anglophone Caribbean performance poets, yet colonial legacies continue to dictate that we read rather than listen to this work.

Even when one is only listening, Internet audio archives often recreate the feeling of reading alone. Clicking on the link and listening to the poem while one looks at the author portrait (similar to the style found on book jackets) mimics the experience of solitary reading, where one feels in private conversation with the author. Simple audio players that have only a linear timelapse bar (rather than a more complex waveform display) encourage the eyes to move from right to left, as they do in the act of reading. When a poem is presented as a decontextualized single track, a listener is encouraged to adopt a new critical approach and treat the poem as a selfcontained object. Listening, like reading, becomes an isolated, individualistic expression rather than a communal endeavor.[59] Sound reproduction technologies have also encouraged our hearing to become more individualistic. Using headphones as his example, Sterne argues that such devices encourage listening to be more orientated toward constructs of private space and private property, which encourages sound to become a commodity.[60]

In contrast, The 2 Cents Movement recreates the communal experience of listening to a poem, which is a key part of total expression. Their photo tweets and poetry videos make online members a part of their participatory audience. We have much work to do to figure out how to build Internet audio archives that recreate this communal experience of

[58] Charles Bernstein, Making Audio Visible: The Lessons of Visual Language for the Textualization of Sound, Textual Practice 23, no. 6 (2009): 966, doi:10.1080/09502360903361550.

[59] Brathwaite, History of the Voice, 18.

[60] Sterne, The Audible Past, 24.

listening. Everythingincluding sound editing, interface, database design, navigation system and copyright issuesneeds careful consideration to realize the digital potential of total expression. To embark on this work, it is crucial that we turn to the poets themselves and build on their education legacies.

So much of the history of the voice has already been lost, or muted, by the ongoing colonial bias toward nation language, as well as limited resources and funding. Caribbean poetry recordings that survive buried in dusty boxes in attics and library storage rooms sit silently waiting for new audiences to return to them the noise and sounds that the maker makes.[61] Since these reeltoreel tapes, cassettes, eighttracks, CDs, and LPs are fragile media, threatened by technological obsolescence and (sometimes) the tropical Caribbean climate, we must make digitizing this vital record of Caribbean poetry history a priority.

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[61] Brathwaite, History of the Voice, 1819.