
The Idea Of ‘voice’ In Relation To Poetry In P’bitek’s Poem Song Of Lawino And Eckermann's Black Deaths In Custody

When talking about the idea of ‘voice’ in relation to poetry, there are two different yet intertwining interpretation of the concept that must be discussed; voice as an audible experience, and voice as a figurative experience. The voice of a poem that comes from an audible individual may also be representative for a larger community, thus may be politicized to give voice to repressed groups that may otherwise go unnoticed. Both Okot p’Bitek’s poem ‘Song of Lawino’ and Ali Cobby Eckermann’s poem ‘Black Deaths in Custody’ present an individual poetic voice that represents larger issues in their communities, utilizing the creative form as an avenue through which the issues of these marginalized groups can be heard.

Poetry seems to ask to be voiced, not because they must be read aloud, but because the act of reading a poem often incurs a physical experience of hearing the poem. While written works such as poetry may generally be intended to be read silently, they still have the ability to create a ‘virtual soundworld’ in the reader’s mind that is ‘subvocalized’ instead of read aloud (Smith 2019, p. 1). Professor Peter Elbow contends that this phenomena of projecting aural speech sounds such as intonation, rhythm and accent, on to a silent text is caused by the fact that our formative experience of language involves the hearing of speech, thus conditioning us to associate the noises we hear in everyday language on to what we read (Elbow 1994, p. 4). Yet, the sound of a text is not constrained to the normal speech patterns that are heard in everyday language. This is particularly true of poetry, as often rhythmic, rhetorical, and poetic features create sounds that would be considered abnormal in everyday speech (ibid., p. 21). As such, the way a poem is written in regards to characteristics such as rhyming, alliteration, line breaks and even punctuation, have an impact on the way a poem is voiced, even if that is only internally.

However, the voice of a poem extends beyond the actual audible sound of speech when considered in the figurative sense of the word, particularly when interpreting voice as representing an identity speaking from within the text. A voice within a poem is the individualistic sound that is created by the manner of writing, often reflecting particular thoughts and opinions which may not necessarily reflect the authors actual opinions. This voice does not have to be a character, but rather may be the voice of the implied author of the text, or the dramatic voice which interweaves throughout a text to create a distinct style or sound (ibid., p. 7). Nor does the voice need to represent merely one individual speaker; rather the voice may represent a collective of certain identities, bound together through shared community, gender, class, ethnicity or other such communal attributes (Smith 2019, p. 2). As such, the particularities of a voice within a poem has the ability to transform poetry to a political statement that provides a voice to marginalized or repressed groups whose opinions may otherwise remain unheard. Both Okot p’Bitek’s ‘Song of Lawino’ and Ali Cobby Eckermann’s ‘Black Deaths in Custody’ use voice in their poetry to represent all three of these aspects of voice: creating an audible experience through an individual voice, while also simultaneously giving voice to a larger community.

In p'Bitek's poem 'Song of Lawino', the importance of voice is clearly intertwined with its song form, as shown in the title. P'Bitek strongly believed that oral traditions in African tribes such as the Acoli should be considered literature, as "literature stands for all the creative works of man expressed in words. Writing... is a mere tool for expressing ideas" (p'Bitek 1972 cited in Ofuani 1985, p. 89). Although the form of 'Song of Lawino' could not be classified as a traditional Acoli oral song, which are highly changeable and localized to fit the context, purpose and audience response during which they are being sung, p'Bitek's use of symbolism, proverbs and similes stem from the Acoli's oral songs (Okumu 1992, p. 55-56). One such example is the proverb "do not uproot the pumpkin". Since pumpkins grow year-round in the Acoli tribe-lands, it is seen as an importance of food and life, and therefore no logical person would destroy a pumpkin plant (ibid, p. 59). Lawino voices this proverb to her husband:

Listen, my husband,

You are the son of a Chief.

The pumpkin in the old

homestead

Must not be uprooted! (44)

Thus, the pumpkin comes to stand for the Acoli traditions that Lawino's husband, Ocol, is threatening to uproot through his rejection of these traditions for Western culture. Immediately we are set up to create an internal soundworld of the poem's main speaker Lawino speaking these words directly to her husband, who she urges to 'Listen'. Added force to the importance of this proclamation further comes from the exclamation point, and by combining this with the traditional proverb, p'Bitek creates a passionate Acoli woman voice that we are able to hear in the reading of his poem. However, with the knowledge of p'Bitek's personal passion in bringing oral literature to a Westernized scholarly definition literature, so too can we hear the poets voice in this desire to maintain Acoli tradition through the influence of Acoli oral literature in his own work (Ofuani 1985, p. 88). Thus, the influence of the traditional Acoli song format in his poem further acts as a way for p'Bitek to voice his own critique of the Western view of literature, with the poem acting as an avenue for him to provide an example of how the form of oral literature should also be respected.

Eckermann approaches the development of voice in her poem 'Black Deaths in Custody' in an entirely different manner. Rather than using what is literally said to create a voice, she utilizes the silences, the pauses in her poem, to represent an Indigenous Australian voice to show how it is being repressed by the penal system. If we consider the phrase "having a voice", we would consider this to be a phrase wherein the ability to enact speech (and perhaps even more importantly, to be heard) is representative of having power, either as an individual or as a group (Smith 2019, p. 10). Conversely, Eckermann's poetry is representative of the Indigenous Australian community, whose past suffering has been silenced in the history books, the archives and in national literature (Leane 2017, p. 250). Undoubtedly, this silence can be seen in her poem 'Black Deaths in Custody', 'all the stories I have ever heard / stand silent in the space beside me' (Eckermann 2016). Yet, this silence goes even further. The poem is devoid of any cultural references to Indigenous Australians. We cannot truly reveal whether the 'I' voicing the poem is an Indigenous Australian, but further there is not even a reference to the Indigenous

Australian prisoners who are dying: 'the cells are stark and spotless / blank screens watch from the corner' (ibid). Devoid of rhyme, lyrical language, and even punctuation, the stark lack of Indigenous Australian voice in the poem becomes even more prominent, and it is in the silence of this voice that the issue becomes clear. In this way, Eckermann highlights the fact that the real-life deaths in custody are being silenced through the silences, or lack of voice, in this way.

Both poems also utilize the voices in their poems in such a way that gives a voice to a wider community. In 'Song of Lawino', there is an obvious individual speaker, Lawino, however she clearly speaks for the wider community in regards to the divide between the old traditions and the new colonial ways. Annemarie Heywood (1980, p. 236) describes p'Bitek's use of Lawino as a persona as a collective "choral presence", a "mask" which "holds our attention precisely because they are vividly and vitally particularised" yet still utilized in such a way to express the feelings of a greater Acoli community who is struggling to hold on their heritage and traditions in the face of colonialism. Lawino expresses disgust at her husband's new lifestyle:

You kiss her on the cheek

As white people do,

You kiss her open-sore lips

As white people do,

You suck slimy saliva

From each other's mouths

As white people do. (47)

The descriptions of the Western practice of kissing grow increasingly grotesque, embedding Lawino's voice with disgust that can be read as one example of her aversion to the new colonial practices that are wiping out Acoli traditions. As the poem continues, Lawino, an uneducated clans woman, voices a commentary on subjects such as politics and Catholicism, and as such p'Bitek appears to use her as an 'aspect of [his] consciousness' through which he can voice concerns about problems in the wider context of colonialism in Africa (Ojaide 1986, p. 377, 382). As such, the poetic monologue of Lawino voices the concerns of an entire culture in regards to the dangers of losing their traditional practices in the face of colonialism, which is of particular significance because it is likely that the written word would not be accessible for many of the tribal voices of the communities struggling under these issues. As such, the poem becomes an avenue for these voices to be heard by those who may not hear them otherwise.

Eckermann outrightly states that she uses poetry as a 'political tool', particularly in retaliation after the Australian government pushed the removal of anti-discrimination rights through Parliament in 2009 (Werris, 2017, p. 50). As a part of the stolen generation, Eckermann herself is part of a longer history of discrimination and oppression of Indigenous Australians enacted by the government (Etherington, 2016, p. 15). Therefore, her personal bodily experience of trauma and resilience makes Eckermann's experience part of the archive of Indigenous Australian oppression as involving not only official documents and records, but also "blood memory" of the body wherein memories are created, stored and anchored (Leane 2017, p. 242). At first, 'Black

Deaths in custody' does not appear to use Eckermann's archived memories as part of its voice. The first two lines of the poem seem coldly statistical, speaking of the 'cost' of 'a new gaol', 'incarceration rates are trebling', and the 'I' referenced does not seem to be Eckermann, or even an Indigenous voice, but rather 'a Deaths In Custody inspector' (Eckermann, 2016). Yet the second stanza makes the identity of this 'I' voice transform from inspector to prisoner:

... the door closes behind me

the feeling in my heart is changing

from a proud strength of duty to fear (ibid., 2016)

Eckermann's choice of words are stark in the poem's final lines, as 'a coil of rope is being pushed / under the door of this cell' (ibid., 2016). Brevity of form and words are key characteristics of Eckermann's poetry that she intentionally uses to ensure that people are unable to twist her words or misinterpret her meanings (Etherington, 2016, p. 13). With this in mind, the poem twists and gives voice to the true horror of the conditions in gaols that hides behind the statistics of the incarceration rates and costs. This aligns with Eckermann's claims that she hopes her poetry will become a 'counter-reference to some of the history' due to her fears that the government will attempt to 'alter historical fact again' (ibid., p. 16). In doing so, her poetry joins a tradition of Indigenous Australian women's writing that combines the bodily archive with creative expression to expose the parts of Australia's history that are attempted to remain hidden in bureaucratic paperwork archive (Leane 2017, p. 246). In doing so, the voice in Eckermann's poem be said to share the collective experience of thousands of prisoners in the current day, and further aims to allow these voices to remain heard historically in the case that future governments attempt to cover it up.

Thus, through the creation of an individually identifiable voice in their poetry, both poets create a voice for the communities, politicizing the individual voice within their text. Hence, the poetic voices of the marginalized communities revealed in both their poems ask to be voiced, in that they ask to be heard and recognized by the world at large.