**Shaima Hassan Matroud**
Department of English
language, College of Education,
Sawa University, Al
Muthanna, Iraq

# Embodied poetics: Voice, space, and performance in contemporary British spoken word poetry

**Shaima Hassan Matroud**

**Abstract**
This article proposes a voice-space-performance framework for analysing contemporary British spoken word poetry, treating poems as relational events rather than stable texts. Building on orality studies, performance theory, and voice studies, it argues that meaning in spoken word is co-produced by embodied vocality, socio-material venues and formats, and the dynamics of liveness. Methodologically, the study combines an integrative literature review with illustrative close readings of two UK practitioners, Raymond Antrobus and Hollie McNish, to operationalise the framework. Antrobus's work exemplifies how access practices and measured delivery make listening itself a formal and ethical concern; McNish's sets demonstrate accessibility as an ethics of address through single-hearing clarity, humour-to-turn pacing, and room-aware dramaturgy. Across both cases, audience feedback functions as live editorial input, yielding performance-specific variants of ostensibly "the same" poem. The analysis advances three claims: (1) embodied audibility is part of form; (2) rooms, formats, and paratexts co-author dramaturgy; and (3) relational authorship with audiences is constitutive of poetic meaning. The article concludes with implications for pedagogy, curation, and criticism, advocating performance literacy (breath-scored drafting, mic technique, just-listening norms) and venue practices that treat access measures as aesthetic affordances rather than add-ons.

**Keywords:** Spoken word, performance, voice, accessibility, UK poetry, Raymond Antrobus, Hollie Mcnish

## 1. Introduction
Contemporary British spoken word poetry is more than poetry read aloud: it is a live, social art in which meanings are co-produced by embodied voice, situated space, and performance. Long before the resurgence of slam circuits and "live literature," oral-poetics scholarship established that orally delivered verse functions as social action, embedding form in the dynamics of voice, audience, and occasion (Finnegan, 2025) [11]. That event-centred orientation has intensified in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century UK scenes, where performance has become central to poetic reception and reputation (Marsh *et al*., 2006) [24]. This article argues that contemporary British spoken word is best understood through a triad, voice, space, performance, that reframes poems as relational events shaped by who speaks, where they are heard, and how liveness unfolds.

First, voice is not merely a vehicle for pre-written content but a material and social index: accent, timbre, breath, and pacing mark bodies and histories that audiences hear and evaluate. Popular-music scholarship offers a useful analogue: rather than treating "authenticity" as an essence, Allan Moore proposes *authentication*, who or what is being authenticated in performance (first-, second-, or third-person modes) (Moore, 2002) [25]. Transposed to spoken word, credibility emerges from interactions among vocal delivery, persona, and audience recognition, rather than from any stable page/stage binary. Slam research shows how performers negotiate identity and status through voice and address, underscoring that effects of authenticity are co-authored with listeners in the room (Somers-Willett, 2009; Gregory, 2012) [29, 17].

Second, spoken word unfolds in space, not only as physical venues but as socio-material infrastructures that confer audibility and shape form. Lefebvre's account of the production of space reminds us that rooms are not neutral containers; they are produced by practices, power, and use (Lefebvre, 2012) [23]. Formats such as open mics, curated sets, and slams (often with three-minute limits) impose temporal and acoustic constraints that choreograph

dramaturgy: openings must hook within seconds; rhythmic density and refrain aid single-hearing comprehension; "landing lines" arrive on schedule. Historically, UK live-poetry circuits diversified alongside tape, CD, and digital dissemination, with performance becoming "an integral part of [a poet's] writing career, compositionally, socially, and economically" (Marsh *et al*., 2006, p. 45) [24]. These circuits, pub basements, theatre studios, festivals, operate as co-authors of style, guiding how poets pace, project, and solicit call-and-response.

Third, performance is the condition through which spoken word acquires its distinctive aesthetics. Fischer-Lichte and Jain's "new aesthetics" reframes live art as an event that emerges from feedback loops between performer and audience, producing transformations not reducible to text (Fischer-Lichte & Jain, 2008) [10]. Auslander's analysis of liveness clarifies the stakes of performing in mediatized culture: live and recorded modes interpenetrate, but the social contracts of co-presence, risk, contingency, responsiveness, still organise value and interpretation (Auslander, 2022) [2]. In spoken word, gesture, stance, eye contact, and micro-timing are not ornament; they are part of form. Audience sounds, snaps, laughter, hush, operate as editorial signals, yielding variant editions of the "same" poem across rooms and nights.

Situating the genre historically helps explain how these dynamics crystallised. In the UK, expansions of live poetics since the late 1960s, across campus readings, avant-garde happenings, punk and dub scenes, prepared the ground for imported slam formats in the 1990s and the consolidation of "spoken word" as a field (Marsh *et al*., 2006) [24]. Sociological and ethnographic accounts of slam document how labels, "spoken word," "slam," "performance poetry", organise expectations and gatekeeping while also providing platforms for emergent voices and communities (Gregory, 2012; Somers-Willett, 2009) [17, 29]. UK iterations similarly foreground the politics of audibility: who gets to speak, be seen to speak, and be heard as credible.

Bringing these strands together, the article advances a voice-space-performance framework for analysing contemporary British spoken word. Four working propositions guide the analysis: (1) embodied voice is constitutive of poetic meaning and is evaluated through situated acts of authentication (Moore, 2002) [25]; (2) spaces and formats (from pub nights to slams) co-author dramaturgical patterns and audience horizons (Lefebvre, 2012; Marsh *et al*., 2006) [23, 24]; (3) performance generates event-specific feedback loops that shape a poem's final form (Fischer-Lichte & Jain, 2008; Auslander, 2022) [10, 2]; and (4) historical lineages in UK live poetics inflect current stylistics and institutional ecologies (Marsh *et al*., 2006; Gregory, 2012) [24, 17]. Rather than reheating the page/stage binary, the framework treats spoken word as a relational art whose meanings are realised in the encounter of a voiced body with a room over time.

The sections that follow sketch the UK genealogy of the field, then develop each vertex of the triad, voice, space, performance, before considering how authenticity claims and listening practices shape reception. The goal is to equip critics, educators, and practitioners with an analytic vocabulary that honours spoken word's specificity as a live, situated poetics while remaining flexible enough to track its circulation across venues and media.

## 2. Literature Review
### 2.1 Defining Contemporary Spoken Word Poetry
Contemporary spoken word poetry is best approached as a performance-oriented mode of poetic making in which composition, delivery, and reception are conceived together from the outset. Rather than a page poem subsequently "read aloud," spoken word is written for voice and audience, with textual, sonic, and gestural elements planned as a single dramaturgical unit. This performance-first orientation aligns with long-standing insights from orality studies where the poem is an event unfolding through patterned utterance, memory, and interaction (Foley, 2002; Ong, 1982; Zumthor *et al*., 1990) [31, 27, 30], and with poetics that treat vocalisation, timing, and embodiment as constitutive of meaning, not ornamental (Bernstein, 1998; Novak, 2011) [4, 26].

Spoken word poetry is poetry composed with the intention of live performance by its author, designed for single-hearing intelligibility and affect, and typically delivered without props, sets, or character masks. Three features follow. Lines are drafted to breath, stress, and tempo. Internal rhyme, anaphora, and parataxis create momentum and recall; prosodic units map to speaking lungs rather than metrical fe*et al*one. As oral/aural poetics shows, such patterning supports orientation and memory under live conditions (Foley, 2002; Ong, 1982) [31, 27]. In practice, writers revise aloud, tuning diction to the grain of the voice and to likely room acoustics (Bernstein, 1998; Novak, 2011) [4, 26].

Conventionally, poets perform their own texts, foregrounding authorial presence as an interpretive resource: spectators hear the poem through a visibly accountable body. Goffman's (2023) [13] account of self-presentation illuminates how stance, gaze, and address calibrate credibility with the room calibration that becomes part of form. Spoken word assumes responsive listeners (silence, murmurs, snaps, laughter); performers read those cues to modulate pacing and emphasis, yielding relational authorship in which the "same" text lands differently across venues and nights (Novak, 2011) [26].

While often non-metrical in a strict sense, spoken word is not formless. Rhythm, refrain, parallelism, and hook lines build coherence at speed. Because many audiences encounter a piece once, signposting topic shifts, purposeful repetition, and strategically timed landing lines support comprehension without diluting complexity. Sophistication is relocated to micro-timing (set-up/volta/pivot), management of perspective (shifts between "I," "you," and "we"), and layered sonic patterning (Bernstein, 1998; Novak, 2011; Foley, 2002) [4, 26, 31].

Two adjacent traditions help explain these choices. Oral-formulaic poetics supplies techniques that make language "stick in the air", formulae, thematic sequences, narrative frames robust under performance pressure (Foley, 2002; Zumthor *et al*., 1990) [31, 30]. Hip-hop poetics contributes flows, internal rhyme chains, and punchline architectures that elicit immediate response (Bradley, 2017) [5]. In both, sound is argument.

Gesture and stance operate as parallel lines of signification. A typical "score" includes posture (open/closed), mic use (distance, angle), gaze (sweeps vs fixed address), and kinetic punctuation (rests, stillness, emphatic accents). These are not afterthoughts. Voice and performance studies show that audiences hear vocal sound through visible bodies; delivery carries social indexicals (accent, age,

gender presentation, race, ability) that inflect reception (Dolar, 2006; LaBelle, 2014) [8, 22]. Ethical and political readings therefore arise structurally: who speaks and how becomes part of what is said.

Labels, spoken word, performance poetry, slam poetry, live literature, name overlapping but non-identical practices. In the UK, *spoken word* now functions as a capacious umbrella for performance-first poetry across competitive and non-competitive contexts; performance poetry often signals theatre-inflected work; slam poetry refers to pieces crafted for time-limited, judged competitions; live literature is a curatorial/funding term that can include storytelling and hybrid forms. Terminological choice is not neutral: each label carries expectations about tone, stance, and audience comportment, and each has been used to legitimate or marginalise practitioners within broader literary ecologies (Novak, 2011; Eleveld, 2005; Aptowicz, 2007; Smith & Kraynak, 2009) [26, 9, 1, 28]. For analytic clarity, it helps to specify both the object (e.g., "author-performed, performance-first poems in non-theatrical settings") and the format conditions (time limits, judging, venue type).

Many poets publish transcripts (with or without score-like notations), record audio/video versions, and adapt material across media. The editorial ethos in *Close Listening* argues against hierarchical separations, proposing co-implication of text and performance: typography can suggest pacing and volume; recordings preserve variants that inform later readings (Bernstein, 1998) [4]. The useful question is not "page or stage?" but "what affordances does each medium provide for this poem's design? typographic enjambments vs breath-based pauses; camera framing vs stage blocking.

Finally, while topics range widely, lyric intimacy, social critique, surreal play, documentary narrative, the unifying feature is address, not subject matter. Poems are built to meet listeners where they are and to carry meaning in real time. The genre's emphasis on accessibility sometimes invites claims of lesser "craft," yet the craft simply resides elsewhere: in breath management, sequence architecture, audience pacing, and live revision through room feedback. Strong practitioners edit for performance economy, test lines live, and iterate between page work and embodied rehearsal (Novak, 2011; Bernstein, 1998) [26, 4]. This performance literacy is teachable and assessable, just as scansion or stanzaic design is.

## 2.2 A Brief Genealogy of UK Spoken Word

Any history of contemporary UK spoken word is necessarily polycentric. What we now call spoken word condenses several post-1960s currents, countercultural live readings, Black British dub poetics, Mersey Beat conviviality, punk's DIY infrastructures, community arts, and later slam formats, that gradually converged into a recognisable performance-first poetry culture. Rather than a single origin, the genealogy is best traced as overlapping ecologies that foreground voice, venue, and audience as co-authors of meaning.

Editors and organisers such as Michael Horovitz helped shift poetry from seminar rooms to public platforms through magazines, happenings, and large-scale events. *Children of Albion* (1969) [20] mapped an underground poetics that prized spontaneity, musicality, and audience energy over page-bound decorum (Horovitz, 1969) [20]. In Liverpool, Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, and Brian Patten popularised a witty, socially legible live style; The Mersey

Sound (1967; reissued 2007) became a mass-market success, establishing that convivial, performance-friendly voice could fill rooms and travel via broadcast (Henri *et al.*, 2007) [19].

From the mid-1970s through the 1980s, dub poetry reoriented British live poetics around diasporic sound, Creole inflection, and antiracist critique. Linton Kwesi Johnson's performances and recordings fused reggae's bass-anchored rhythms with political narration, exemplifying a poetics where timbre, patois, and beat are inseparable from meaning (Johnson, 2012) [21]. Dub emerged as an audio-social formation tied to Black British struggle and community infrastructures, youth clubs, carnivals, record labels. Kamau Brathwaite's "nation language" framework clarified the stakes: English is re-voiced through African and Creole speech/music, relocating poetic authority to orality and performance (Brathwaite, 1984) [7]. Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* further situates dub within transnational circuits where music and speech circulate as counter-publics (Gilroy, 1993) [12]. Histories of reggae in Britain (e.g., Bradley, 2001) [6] show how sound-system aesthetics, call-and-response, versioning, bass as felt knowledge, entered UK poetry via performance, institutionalising a microphone-literate, voice-forward practice.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, punk/post-punk intensified a DIY ethic that resonated with performance poetry: minimal equipment, high verbal velocity, and anti-establishment stance. John Cooper Clarke toured with bands, delivering rapid-fire monologues that blurred stand-up and poetry, collapsing boundaries between gig and reading. Cultural analyses (Hebdige, 1979; McKay, 1998) [18, 32] emphasise zines, squats, and independent promoters as infrastructures through which voice-led performance operated as protest and entertainment, leaving a durable lesson in production know-how.

Across the 1980s-1990s, women's theatre and poetry collectives, disability arts movements, and LGBTQ+ cabaret reframed the mic as civic resource, platforming testimony, satire, and experimental voice. Performance studies from this period (Goldberg, 2013; Jones, 1998) [14, 33] register the shift to body-centred aesthetics: the performing body is not a neutral carrier but meaning-making material. These currents prefigure later spoken word's emphasis on address, audience care, and access.

Originating in Chicago, slam reached the UK in the 1990s and standardised expectations, time limits (often three minutes), judged rounds, competitive dramaturgy. Practitioner histories/handbooks (Aptowicz, 2007; Smith & Kraynak, 2009) [1, 28] show how constraint teaches craft: tight openings, mid-set volta, memorable landings. As slams proliferated, these compositional habits diffused into non-competitive nights, making the "three-minute arc" a vernacular even off the slam stage. UK iterations localised tone (sardonic wit to fierce advocacy) and institutional setting (arts centres, festivals, student unions).

By the 2000s, *live literature* became a curatorial/funding term for hybrid programmes spanning storytelling, poetry, and multimedia. Independent presses and digital platforms expanded circulation; audio/video, from CDs to YouTube/Vimeo, created a dual economy in which poets built national audiences while testing and refining material live. Sound studies' attention to voice as spatial practice (LaBelle, 2014) [22] clarifies why the voiced body in space

remained the horizon of realisation, even as recordings extended reach.

The scene was never only metropolitan. Regional micro-ecologies, Manchester, Bristol, Leeds, Belfast, Glasgow/Edinburgh, Cardiff, developed distinct temperaments shaped by venue architecture (pub basements vs black-box theatres), music cross-pollination (hip-hop, reggae, folk), and education pipelines (universities, youth programmes, community workshops). Studies of local music/arts scenes model how place imprints style, network ties, and audience etiquette (Bennett, 2000; McKay, 1998) [3, 32].

By the 2000s-2010s, editors and critics centring performance, e.g., Bernstein's *Close Listening*, undercut hierarchies that placed print above voice, arguing for co-implication of text and performance (Bernstein, 1998) [4]. Practitioners moved fluidly among books, recordings, theatre shows, and education, rendering the page/stage binary analytically thin. What persisted was a methodological difference: performance-first works are composed for voice and audience, then migrate across media.

Reading these strands together clarifies: (1) From dub to DIY to slam, the sound of a voice in a room, accent, timbre, mic technique, has been both a locus of political claim-making and a site of craft (Brathwaite, 1984; Gilroy, 1993; LaBelle, 2014) [7, 12, 22]. (2) Constraints and formats (slam clocks, gig line-ups) shape composition as much as they present it (Aptowicz, 2007; Smith & Kraynak, 2009) [1, 28]. (3) Rooms and routes, Horovitz's happenings, Mersey conviviality, community arts, live-literature circuits, have been the genre's engines; places and networks leave stylistic fingerprints (Bennett, 2000; McKay, 1998) [3, 32].

## 3. Methodology
### 3.1 Design and Aim
This study employs a critical, integrative literature review coupled with illustrative close readings of two contemporary UK spoken word practitioners. The review synthesises scholarship from performance studies, voice studies, and poetry criticism to theorise how voice, space, and performance co-produce meaning in spoken word. The close readings then operationalise this triad on concrete works, showing how compositional choices (prosody, gesture, pacing), spatial conditions (venue, format, time limits), and audience interaction together shape interpretation. The aim is theory-building, not hypothesis testing: to develop a transferable analytic vocabulary that critics, educators, and practitioners can apply across venues and media.

### 3.2 Scope
The synthesis focuses on post-1990s UK practice, when live-poetry circuits, community-arts infrastructures, and slam formats coalesced under the label spoken word. Sources comprise peer-reviewed articles and chapters, doctoral theses, landmark monographs, practitioner handbooks, and curated archives documenting UK venues, formats, and training pipelines. To keep the analysis focused yet representative, two contemporary British poets serve as methodological touchstones:

- **Raymond Antrobus:** for examining embodied audibility, d/Deaf poetics, and access practices (e.g., BSL, captioning, device-mediated listening).

- **Hollie McNish:** for examining accessibility as an ethics of address single-hearing clarity, humour-to-turn pacing, and room-aware dramaturgy.

These cases are illustrative rather than canonical, selected to cover different performer identities, tonal palettes, and room ecologies.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis
Data collection proceeded in two streams. Database searches (MLA, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar) and citation chaining identified works that explicitly theorise any vertex of the triad, voice (timbre, accent, persona), space (venues, formats, infrastructures), and performance (gesture, co-presence, liveness), within UK contexts or directly translatable settings. Grey literature (festival/programme notes, organisational histories) was consulted to establish infrastructural facts (e.g., time limits, programming models); interpretive claims rely on peer-reviewed sources. Publicly available recordings, transcripts, and published versions of selected Antrobus and McNish pieces were assembled, with notes on venue type, event format (open mic/curated/slam), and paratext (host framing, captions, interpreter presence).

Analysis used a two-cycle approach. Artefacts were tagged for (a) prosodic/sonic features (breath units, internal rhyme, refrain), (b) delivery choices (stance, gaze, mic technique, kinetic punctuation), (c) spatial/format constraints (time limits, judging, room acoustics), and (d) audience signals (laughter, hush, call-and-response, interruptions).

Instances were aggregated into the Voice-Space-Performance triad, with a cross-cutting Justice axis (accessibility; recognitional, aesthetic, and vocal injustice). For the two case readings, an event-focused close analysis aligned textual features with timestamped performance beats (hook, volta, landing), mapped how room responses modulated pacing, and identified moments where embodied voice and spatial framing shifted meaning. This triangulation, scholarship, infrastructural description, and performance evidence, supports analytic generalisation: the conclusions concern mechanisms (how spoken word works), not the prevalence of any single style or topic.

## 4. Results
### 4.1 Raymond Antrobus
Raymond Antrobus's work is a touchstone for showing how embodied audibility organises meaning in contemporary British spoken word. His collection *The Perseverance* (UK ed. 2018; US ed. subsequently) centres d/Deaf experience, language (spoken and signed), bereavement, and mixed Jamaican-British identity; many poems circulate as live performances and films that stage listening as a social practice. "Dear Hearing World" exists both as a widely viewed stage performance (e.g., prize readings) and as a short-film adaptation featuring Deaf actress Vilma Jackson, where captioning, BSL, and editing rhythms shift the poem's centre of gravity from strictly acoustic to audio-visual listening. Antrobus's essays and interviews on integrating BSL into his practice supply an explicit ethics for these choices: access is not an add-on but a formal principle.

Antrobus's measured, consonant-forward articulation and deliberate pausing make silence an audible unit. In remarks on revising the "Echo (A Deaf Sequence)" poems, he describes moving away from tight sonnet scaffolds because

they felt "stiff" in his mouth, opting instead for breath-synchronous diction. Craft decisions that enhance single-hearing intelligibility (short clauses, plain syntax, refrain-like returns) are tuned to the grain of his voice and to the affordances/limits of hearing technologies. On stage, these become audible ethics: the poem educates hearing even as it performs it, asking the room to slow down, attend to quiet, and accept that meaning does not depend on amplitude or speed.

Venue and format materially change the poem. In prize-stage renditions, theatrical hush and high intelligibility support an apostrophic build ("dear hearing world…") that treats the audience as the addressee. In the filmic version, Jackson's signing and the cut-based rhythm foreground visual listening; captions explicitly mark addressees; camera proxemics do what stage blocking cannot placing the viewer inside the address. Access tools (captions, interpreters, proxemics) thus operate as formal devices that reallocate interpretive labour to the audience and make audibility constructed, not given.

Antrobus's on-stage grammar is economical: open-hand you/we address; stillness to thicken a pause; mic held close for micro-dynamic shifts (near-whisper dips; rests before volatile nouns). Audience feedback (hush, soft assent, delayed laughter) feeds back into pacing, generating variant editions of ostensibly the same text. Because the poem's theme is listening itself, these feedback loops are heightened: a well-prepared room changes what the poem can do.

In essays on pop history's fixation with "novelty" around hearing devices (e.g., Johnnie Ray), Antrobus shows how Deaf bodies are misread as spectacle. "Dear Hearing World" refuses novelty by imposing clear terms of address. The apostrophe names who must listen and with what obligations: reduce the noise floor; accept multi-channel meaning (lip-reading, captioning, signing, voiced speech). The politics are recognitional: the audience is asked to become a *credible listener*, not a consumer of catharsis.

Touring contexts, festivals, bookshops, theatres, bring paratexts that materially alter reception: host framing, programme copy, on-stage interpreters, projected captions. In rooms with BSL or captions, part of the poem's formal centre migrates to the visual line; applause and laughter may cue off sign-delivery timing. Without such provision, Antrobus's pacing strategies (longer rests; clearer enunciation; strategic repeats) shoulder more of the access burden. In both cases the design presupposes plural modes of reception; success is collective a justly prepared room.

A typical five-minute iteration of "Dear Hearing World" follows a hook-volta-landing arc built for single-hearing uptake:

- **Hook (≈0:00-0:30):** Title/first line frames a courteous but firm apostrophe; the audience is implicated as the hearing world.
- **Build (≈0:30-2:00):** Vignettes of mishearing, audist assumptions, educational encounters; light anaphora/internal rhyme to aid retention.
- **Volta (≈2:00-3:00):** Terms of audibility clarified; one or two held silences slow the room's breathing.
- **Second build (≈3:00-4:00):** Reframe listening as shared labour, often anchored by biographical image (hearing aids, classroom, family scene).
- **Landing (≈4:00-end):** A concise imperative or re-voiced refrain that resets the contract timed to applause.

Book paratexts frame The Perseverance as about "communication and connection" across spoken/signed language. The stage and film versions of "Dear Hearing World" together model a portable poetics: designed to travel yet designed to change responsibly as it travels. Access measures are treated as aesthetic affordances that distribute attention, recalibrate pacing, and expand who can be an ideal listener.

## 4.2 Hollie McNish

Hollie McNish's live work offers a clear lens on accessibility as an ethics of address, how a poet designs language, pacing, and framing so a mixed audience can grasp, feel, and respond on a single hearing. Her most-circulated pieces centre everyday experience, motherhood and childcare, sex and shame, classed expectations, border politics, and travel across book tours, theatres, libraries, festivals, and schools. Recordings of poems on public breastfeeding, sexual double standards, and classroom embarrassment, often interleaved with anecdote, provide a compact corpus for testing how voice, space, and performance cooperate to make accessibility a rigorous craft rather than simplification.

McNish works near conversational tempo with clear articulation and uncluttered syntax. The lexis is largely high-frequency, but the craft lives in timing: short clause chains; end-stopped lines to stabilise sense; quick anaphoric returns that nail the through-line for a first-time listener. Micro-framing, "This is a poem about…, acts as a listener's map, setting expectations and lowering cognitive load before the first turn.

Punchlines do more than release tension; they reset attention, marking mini-sections and letting the audience catch up breath-wise and sense-wise. In taboo-adjacent topics (breastfeeding, periods, sex-ed), this "laugh → tilt" rhythm softens defensiveness and then pivots to structural critique. Sonically, light internal rhyme and cadence patterns do memory work without demanding metrical concentration: sound as scaffolding rather than display.

McNish thrives in non-intimidating rooms, arts centres, libraries, community halls, where seating is close, sightlines open, and house lights not fully blacked out. Such settings signal social proximity over theatrical distance, legitimising audible feedback (soft laughs, murmured assent) and reducing anxiety for newcomers. Hosting and paratext matter: informal intros frame the event as a conversation; age guidance and content notes set boundaries; book tables and Q&A extend the poem's life beyond the mic. These spatial cues are part of the form, they script the audience's role.

In 30-60 minute curated sets, McNish alternates tonal registers, clusters related pieces, and inserts short narrative bridges. These bridges are functional paratexts: they prime interpretation ("this is about how space teaches shame") and pre-empt misreadings, while maintaining pace. In higher-noise festival tents, openings shorten, premises cue earlier, and closers land bigger; in seated theatres, the volta can hold longer silence. The macro-structure flexes with venue while preserving a consistent timing grammar.

On stage, McNish uses an open, steady stance, minimal mic handling, and wide gaze sweeps that include back rows. Gestures are small and legible (enumeration cues; light emphasis), with stillness at key phrases and brief breath-holds before turn lines. The restraint is tactical: it keeps

attention on semantic beats, aligning with an ethic of welcome, you do not need to decode virtuoso display to participate.

Laughter lengthens pauses; hush triggers held rests; audible gasps may prompt a soft repeat of the landing clause. These micro-adjustments produce variant editions across rooms with the same end: keeping as many listeners with the thought as possible. Relational authorship is operationalised at the level of pacing.

In breastfeeding poems, a plain, conversational style enacts the claim that feeding is ordinary; in dress-code pieces, anecdotal setups distribute interpretive authority to listeners' lived experience. Accessibility here is rhetorical justice: designing for single-hearing comprehension so people without specialist poetry literacy can fully participate in the art and the conversation it proposes.

Typical 4-6 minute arc (robust across venues):

- **Hook (≈0:00-0:25):** Clear topic cue + premise; often an early, easing laugh.
- **Build (≈0:25-2:00):** Anecdotal detail with a recurring phrase (anaphora) to maintain orientation; small laughs as comprehension checks.
- **Volta (≈2:00-3:00):** Personal tips to structural; delivery slows; one or two rests hold the room.
- **Second build (≈3:00-4:30):** Wider evidence (policy, signage, family voices) with tightened cadence to carry content.
- **Landing (≈4:30-end):** Concise imperative or reframe, often flipping the opening phrase, dropped on a clear downbeat.

Where recordings add on-screen captions or text overlays for key lines, these are not afterthoughts but secondary cadence: they guide single-hearing reading on small screens and reinforce the landing line's memory trace. Content notes, age guidance, and brief crediting of sources (policy, statistics) anchor claims without derailing pace.

Rather than privileging intertextual capital, McNish's design privileges experiential expertise broadly shared in the room. A teen, a parent, or a first-time attendee can supply the world knowledge the poem activates and feel authorised to do so. That redistribution is ethical and aesthetic: it widens who counts as an ideal listener and improves the poem's chances of landing in one hearing.

## 5. Discussion

This study set out to demonstrate how meaning in contemporary British spoken word poetry is realised at the intersection of voice, space, and performance, and to show through two illustrative cases, how accessibility functions as a rigorous, ethical design principle rather than a simplification. The integrative review distilled mid-range propositions about mechanism (composition-for-voice; infrastructural formal pressure; audience co-authorship; framing and horizon-setting; justice-laden listening norms). The close readings of Raymond Antrobus and Hollie McNish then operationalised those propositions on the ground. Three overarching claims follow.

Vocal grain, pacing, breathing, silence, and (in Deaf-led or Deaf-inclusive contexts) sign and captioning are formal elements, not mere "delivery." Antrobus's measured articulation and strategic rests enact the listening ethics his poems demand; McNish's clause economy, conversational tempo, and humour-as-pacing render complex social claims

legible at first pass. Analyses that ignore timbre, pause, mic technique, and gesture flatten meaning; auditory (and audio-visual) form is analyzable, teachable, and revisable alongside metaphor and syntax.

Venue architecture (sightlines, reverb), format constraints (time limits, judging), and framing texts (host intros, captions, interpreters, content notes) are generative pressures that shape composition and reception. In Antrobus's work, access tools (BSL, captions, camera proxemics) redistribute attention and recalibrate pacing; in McNish's sets, semi-lit seating, informal hosting, and micro-framing create low-friction entry that sustains single-hearing comprehension without sacrificing complexity. Curators and institutions are therefore collaborators in form, not neutral conduits.

Laughter, hush, murmurs, and gasps operate as live editorial signals that modulate emphasis and tempo, producing performance-specific variants of ostensibly the "same" text. This feedback is not noise to be managed away; it is the medium through which the genre's ethical commitments are realised: the poet takes responsibility for keeping the room with the thought; the room undertakes just listening. Methodologically, treating a single recording as *the* text is insufficient; recordings are partial witnesses, and room conditions warrant explicit annotation in criticism.

These claims recast the tired page-stage debate. The salient distinction is design horizon. Works composed for voice and audience, scored to breath, room, and feedback, belong to a performance-first lineage whether or not they later circulate on the page; conversely, page-first works can be performed without becoming performance-first in their poetics. Asking *what listener is presupposed, what room is imagined, and what feedback is invited* yields more precise critical insights and avoids category policing.

Finally, the results clarify that accessibility is rhetorical justice: a commitment to single-hearing clarity relocates craft to micro-timing, prosodic scaffolding, framing, and set architecture. It redistributes recognitional power by authorising experiential expertise widely available in the room, expanding who can be an "ideal listener."

## 6. Implications

If voice, space, and performance are co-constitutive, then pedagogy should teach performance literacy alongside page craft. Practical takeaways include: drafting in breath units; designing early topic cues and recoverable refrains; rehearsing with live timing and annotating landing lines; learning mic technique and silence holds; and practicing host framing as part of the set (since frames are paratexts that shape meaning). On the reception side, classrooms and venues can teach just listening, explicit audience etiquette, caption/BSL fluency, and reflective attention to accent bias and vocal prejudice. These are not soft skills; they are conditions of meaning in the genre.

Curators can treat access measures as aesthetic affordances: captions as secondary cadence; interpreters as co-performers whose timing must be rehearsed; seating/light choices as dramaturgical tools. Publishing format specs in advance allows poets to compose *to* the room rather than fight it on stage. Funders can support voice-diverse training (accent-inclusive coaching; mic and PA literacy; cross-modal collaboration with Deaf artists) and recognize that such investments raise aesthetic quality by expanding the palette of viable vocalities, not by diluting standards.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates a workable path for analyzing live poetry without collapsing into impressionism: (1) articulate mid-range propositions from literature; (2) derive heuristics (hook-volta-landing windows, paratext checklists, audience-signal logging); (3) conduct event-focused close readings that align textual features with timestamped performance beats and room responses. This triangulated approach yields claims that are specific enough to be falsifiable (e.g., "topic cueing occurs within 25 seconds in N of M sets") while remaining sensitive to the art's variability.

The analysis used two cases and secondary materials for infrastructural description. As such, it aims at analytic generalization mechanisms, not prevalence. Regional micro-scenes, youth circuits, and cross-genre collaborations (music/dance) may exhibit different timing grammars or access practices. Nevertheless, the triad and associated heuristics should transfer: one can map hook-volta-landing arcs, paratexts, and feedback loops in Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, or diasporic UK contexts, then test how local infrastructures recalibrate them.

Three extensions follow naturally. First, ethnographic room studies that log audience signals against acoustic measures (reverb time, SPL) could quantify how architecture shapes timing decisions. Second, comparative reception experiments could test single-hearing comprehension across captioned vs. non-captioned events, or across accents and timbral profiles, refining the justice argument with data. Third, longitudinal poet studies could track how sets evolve as poems migrate among venues and media, documenting craft adaptations in real time.

By centering embodied voice, roomed space, and live performance, the study reframes contemporary British spoken word as a relational art with specific, teachable techniques and non-negotiable ethical stakes. Antrobus and McNish exemplify different ends of the same commitment: design poetry so that bodies in rooms can hear, feel, and think now, and so that the room, in turn, becomes accountable as a co-author. Any criticism, pedagogy, or programming that treats those conditions as peripheral risks missing where the poem actually happens.

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