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Platformised Performances: Spoken Word Poetry in the Algorithmic Age

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This article analyses the consequences of the platformisation of spoken word practices. It identifies some of the paradoxes that appear when the countercultural and anti-hegemonic features of the spoken word tradition come into contact with the one-sided, hegemonic governance of dominant digital platforms, as well as with their culturally biased algorithms. The case study of Mexican poet Pilar Rodríguez Aranda is analysed in order to highlight the obstacles to politically engaged poetry. The article emphasises the need to adopt a critical, decolonial and post-global understanding of platforms and artificial intelligence in order to understand the potential incompatibilities between counter-hegemonic spoken word poetry and hegemonic digital technologies.

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Introduction

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has been marked by the massive incursion of digital technologies into the promotion, administration, dissemination and creation of cultural products on a global scale. According to Vincent Miller, 'we live in a world where the internet and the world wide web have, in the matter of only three decades, shifted from being at the forefront of a new frontier of communication technology to being for most people an incredibly unremarkable part of our culture and daily life' (2020: 1). Ted Striphas notes that, as a consequence of this radical change in social practices, 'human beings have been delegating the work of culture – the sorting, classifying and hierarchizing of people, places, objects and ideas – to data-intensive computational processes' (2015: 396). More specifically, through the platformisation of culture, an increasing number of artistic creations are present on, or even exist thanks to, digital platforms, where they can be conceived, advertised, made visible and archived, among other practices. GAFAM (a popular acronym for Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft) are largely responsible for the pervasiveness of platforms in the general infrastructures of most contemporary societies, but many other technology companies, such as Netflix, Adobe and Spotify, have been integral to the digitalisation of culture in general and of the artistic world in particular. The algorithmic management of these platforms entails a transfer of important decision-making powers to non-human agents, which consequently modify many pre-digital practices. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of algorithmic culture, which refers to algorithms' 'capacity and potential to make taste by shaping cultural encounters and crafting our cultural landscapes' and practices (Beer, 2013: 99). Although the notion of algorithmic culture is not restricted to the art world, it is necessary to examine how contemporary artistic and literary creations are affected by their technological environment.

This article examines some of the paradoxes that characterise spoken word performances when they enter the digital realm and algorithmic culture. The genre of spoken word, originally intended as an ephemeral artistic manifestation that is often meant for a limited audience, can easily be understood as an 'off the page' version of what Jorge Locane terms 'local literatures'. According to the Argentinian critic, local literatures 'emerge from productive systems that in many ways are to be differentiated from the productive system of the transnational cultural industry', and 'depend on publishing circuits with low sales projection and limited territorial coverage'; hence, they resist the globalisation of cultural markets (Locane, 2019: 158; my translation).[1]

[1] '*Las literaturas locales emergen de sistemas productivos que se diferencian en muchos aspectos del de la industria cultural transnacional [ya analizado en el capítulo II:] dependen de circuitos editoriales con baja proyección de ventas y escasa cobertura territorial*' (Locane, 2019: 158).

Locane argues that poetry published by local publishing houses in small print runs presents a form of resistance against the heteronomous constraints of a globalised editorial market. The specificity of local forms of poetry echoes the fact that spoken word poetry usually has a countercultural dimension and is often associated with multifaceted political engagements (Somers-Willett, 2009; Gräbner, 2021). What happens when spoken word poetry starts to seek a broader, potentially global reach through digital technologies? The rising practice of filming spoken word performances in order to stream or archive them online significantly expands the genre's potential scope of circulation. Moreover, the growth of alternative forms of oral poetry, such as videopoems whose creation can sometimes involve Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, adds to the question's complexity.

In what follows, I address two conceptual problems. Firstly, if it is true that local literatures present a form of resistance against the heteronomous constraints of a globalised literary market, how do their new digital components affect their autonomy and locality? Secondly, is the political, anti-hegemonic dimension associated with the countercultural identity of spoken word still valid when we consider the neoliberal platforms used for its development? To answer these questions, I analyse the case study of Mexican/Chicana poet Pilar Rodríguez Aranda, who has been developing an oeuvre of anti-racist and anti-imperialist poetry over the last 35 years. Through an analysis of Rodríguez Aranda's videopoems and spoken word performances, I focus on the potentially international dissemination of digitalised forms of oral poetry. Adopting a sociological lens, I examine some of the ways in which algorithmic cultures affect the identity of spoken word poetry as an anti-hegemonic, activist and underground artistic practice.

Spoken Word and Videopoetry as Countercultural Forms of Poetry: The Trajectory of Pilar Rodríguez Aranda

Oral forms of poetry have existed throughout recorded human history, but their first identification under the label 'spoken word' is usually situated in 20th-century countercultural movements in the United States, from the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s to Beat Poetry, the Black Arts Movement and poetry slam competitions (Bagwell, 2021: 271; Somers-Willett, 2014: 5). Originally conceived as an anti-elitist, grassroots form of artistic expression predominantly practiced by marginalised communities in the United States, the genre has since crossed the country's borders while maintaining its countercultural identity. Here, I will consider the artistic trajectory of Pilar Rodríguez Aranda as a revealing case study for the evolution of spoken word in Mexico.

Rodríguez Aranda is a poet and filmmaker born in 1961 in Mexico City. She studied filmmaking in the United States, where she lived for several years before establishing herself in the border city of Tijuana. She identifies as a Chicana woman, and most of her poetry has a feminist and anti-racist dimension. She has been part of slam competitions since their inception in Mexico, and she often participates in various spoken word events across the country. Her collaboration and live performances with rock band Psikedeloum in the Mexican city of Malinalco is a landmark in her career as a poet and performer. Their musicalised slam poetry is collected on the CD *Diálogos de una mujer despierta* ['*Dialogues of an awake woman*'; my translation], where the locality of Rodríguez Aranda's engaged aesthetics can be appreciated. Her poems make constant references to Mexican landscapes, food, politics and toponymy, necessitating an examination of the 'glocal' reach implied by the platformisation of her poems. In an article co-authored with Edwing Roldán Ortiz, Rodríguez Aranda discusses the political engagement frequently associated with spoken word poetry:

> Enunciating a poem increasingly becomes a wake-up call for those who, coming from vulnerable social groups, take the risk of writing and believing that they see not only in writing, but also in reading, an honest way of accessing the world, of confronting and reconciling with it. This is the opposite of what is shown by the artistic system, whose enunciation continues to be elitist, foreign to how people speak, opaque when it projects feelings, ideas, situations, hardened by the solemn enunciation that belongs to the bureaucracy of the creative system (2013: 112).

This quote shows the poet's view that spoken word poetry has a real anti-hegemonic function; indeed, it undermines a classist cultural system in which poetry appears as a symbolically prestigious literary genre reserved for an elite by making it accessible to more 'vulnerable social groups'. The countercultural ideology that underlies Rodríguez Aranda's spoken word practice is consistent with her political engagements as a citizen and as an artist. Furthermore, she has explored multiple ways of returning poetry to orality, including the production of multiple bilingual videopoems in Spanish and English.

In this article, I work on the assumption that the multiple ways in which Rodríguez Aranda creates 'off the page' poetry are part of her intentional practice of non-traditional, countercultural literature. However, as is often the case for activist poets, the material constraints of the cultural world prevent artistic labour from being completely autonomous. Rodríguez Aranda's legitimate desire to be remunerated for her literary practice, and the subsequent necessity of giving a certain degree of visibility

to her poetry, oblige her to become part of cultural circuits that are too hegemonic to be considered materially and ideologically autonomous. For example, she participates in international events, such as conferences and sponsored book fairs, that are highly institutionalised and cannot be seen as countercultural from a sociology of literature perspective. However, the paradox that I would like to focus on is widely present among many artist-activists: namely, the friction between anti-hegemonic political engagements and hegemonic online spaces.

Artists and poets who do not have the material possibility of creating and maintaining a professional showcase website often find in digital platforms an inexpensive, easy and user-friendly alternative for archiving their work and making it globally accessible, at least in theory. For this reason, Rodríguez Aranda has long maintained an online presence on multiple social media platforms as a videomaker and poet. For instance, she used YouTube for many years to archive her videopoems and some recordings of her performances. More recently, she opened an account on Suno, a streaming platform that enables its users to create music with AI. In addition, the poet has an artist profile on Facebook, where she posts news about her poetic activities and publications, while also sharing some recordings of her spoken word performances.

In recent years, poetry scholars have reflected on the fact that spoken word no longer exists exclusively within the remit of live events: it is now also shared online, through digital media (Wehmeier, 2024: 235). Multiple publications have focused on the question of liveness, interrogating Erika Fischer-Lichter's famous assertion that 'a performance is inseparable from the bodily co-presence of various groups of people who come together as actors and spectators: this is linked to the medial conditions of performance, or its mediality' (2014: 18). Some researchers, such as Beatrice Ekesa, Alina Rinkanya and Kimingichi Wabende, attempt to nuance Fischer-Lichter's conception of performance by arguing that Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality sheds light on digitally mediated live spoken word performances. They propose that scholars regard these performances as a form of liveness that does not necessitate the bodily co-presence of the performer and the audience, but rather constitutes 'a totally new form of performance that replaces the original theatrical event by exhibiting features that cannot be traced in the real performance' (Ekesa, Rinkanya and Wabende, 2023: 11). Additionally, in a recent study on slam poetry, Henrik Wehmeier explains that some performances have become popular on digital platforms through recordings that imply a 'lossy reformatting'. The fact that the videos are often of poor quality reinforces their success as a countercultural product, since their amateurish aesthetics appear to be in line with the poetry slam scene's self-definition 'as accessible to all, as

non-hierarchical, and, above all, as the antithesis of the professional literary scene', while rejecting 'the professional media business just as much as the literary business' (Wehmeier, 2024: 243–4). As these examples show, many formal features of the presence of spoken word on digital platforms deserve our attention.

The aforementioned issues, such as the lack of co-presence or non-professional recordings of performances, are observable aspects of Rodríguez Aranda's use of digital platforms. However, the tension that interests me most here is ethical rather than aesthetic in nature, since it has to do with the problematic governance structure of digital platforms and the hegemonic ways in which algorithms process information in order to prioritise standardised, mainstream cultural content. The presence of spoken word artists such as Rodríguez Aranda on digital platforms is almost inevitable in a cultural context that forces artists into a constant race for self-promotion; yet I argue that local artists' use of such platforms is often double-edged. In exchange for visibility, they can face multiple problems that are representative of the precarious working conditions that have persisted alongside the rise of new technologies, even when these technologies are marketed as helpful tools for the creation and dissemination of artistic production. Indeed, these technologies are nowadays presented as an inescapable and effective part of their work. However, in what follows, I explore the idea that the platformisation of their work is actually just transforming old forms of artistic precarity into new ones. This can be observed not only when artists use platforms for the visibility and dissemination of their art pieces, but also when they mobilise them as tools of creation, as I will show.

The Platformisation of Arts and Literature

In the introduction to their edited essay collection *Post-Global Aesthetics: 21st Century Latin American Literatures and Cultures*, Gesine Müller and Benjamin Loy state that

> From 1989 onwards, the historical present has undoubtedly been dominated by optimistic and progressive discourses of all-embracing global integration, borne by the ideals of economic and social liberalization (King 2017). It has also been steeped in optimism, both in terms of the philosophy of history (Fukuyama 1992) and in terms of technology, as promoted by the digital revolution. (2023: 1).

The two authors address the fact that these mostly hopeful views surrounding globalisation have later been debunked in multiple fields of knowledge, including social and human sciences. Hence, they observe 'a manifest exhaustion of said globalization paradigm' (2023: 3) that leads several of their contributors to adopt

'a post-global aesthetics perspective on Latin American literatures and cultures' (2023: 5). The social impacts of digital transformations occupy an important place in Loy and Müller's reflection. Following a similar pattern to that described above, the rise of new technologies at the end of the 20th century led to a widespread optimism regarding the possibilities they enabled. It was soon offset by multi-layered concerns about the dangers they implied, without hindering the ongoing developments in global networking phenomena. The digital cultural sphere is, as a consequence, central to the post-global framework of analysis that needs to be adopted. My investigation seeks to combine this post-global approach to Latin American literature with a critical and nuanced understanding of the role of digital platforms in the creative work of spoken word artists. It is now common to hear concerns about the alienation of contemporary subjects in the digital era, in which 'digital technologies are able to cause an illusionary feeling of subjectification and agency without having any empirical consequences – it is possible to voice opinions and thoughts without anyone listening' (Nygren and Gidlund, 2012: 515). It is my contention that those issues apply equally to artists and writers, and that the fields of cultural studies and sociology of arts and literature need to pay special attention to them.

Most digital platforms are publicly available, and are inherently intended to be widely accessible on a global scale. However, it is crucial to remember that the problems generated by platforms manifest themselves in multiple different ways around the globe, and that they replicate the inequalities between Global North and Global South that are already present on the Internet:

> Although the egalitarian promise of the world wide web was initially at the core of works engaging with the onward march of digitalization, more recently the focus has been placed on global asymmetries (Chan 2014), stemming from the West's technological head start, and on regional opportunities. (Müller and Loy, 2023: 5)

In this context, 'digital platforms' can be understood, based on Margherita Pagani's definition, as existing 'wherever a company brings together two or more distinct groups of customers (sides) that need each other in some way, and where the company builds an infrastructure (platform) that creates value by reducing distribution, transaction and search costs incurred when these groups interact with one another' (2013: 625). In this sense, platforms generate interactions between groups, such as suppliers and buyers of goods and services, providers and consumers of information, or creators and audiences of cultural products, among many other things. In his paper 'Balancing Act: The Role of Digital Platforms in Shaping the Conditions of Creative Work', Drew Gardiner analyses

the impact of new digital media on the creation and distribution of content produced by creators, among whom artists and writers occupy an important place (2024: 10). He identifies two main, opposing trends in the common perception of the role of digital platforms in artists' working practices. On the one hand, there is an optimistic view that regards the development of platforms as an opportunity to democratise access to the distribution of creative work to a global audience. On the other hand, a more pessimistic stance is held by those who see platforms as a risk to the security and fair remuneration of creative labour, despite the relative freedom and flexibility they allow. This danger stems from the very strategy of these private platforms, which continually promise high visibility thanks to their network effects, yet offer no guarantee of economic success. They rely on a romanticised idea of aspirational work that tends to see artistic creation as 'false labour', while disregarding the need for decent working conditions (Gardiner, 2024: 12).

Gardiner's work allows us to see how the socio-economic conditions of artistic autonomy are evolving in the age of mass media and the widespread use of GAFAM and similar digital platforms. His analysis examines the tensions between creators' desire for autonomy and the platforms' desire to control the content created. According to Gardiner, a fundamental conflict can be observed. Platforms' quest for control is driven by the mission to attract advertisers and subscribers, with governance structures set up to moderate content: 'From the perspective of creative workers, autonomy has always been a fundamental dimension of the creative process, and platforms have introduced new opportunities for autonomy and flexibility in terms of when, where and how often creatives work' (Gardiner, 2024: 14). Hence, new tensions appear, especially regarding the content and amount of work that creators need to produce if they want to gain visibility or economic compensation. For this reason, Nieborg and Poell state that 'as cultural production is becoming increasingly platform dependent, the autonomy and economic sustainability of particular forms of cultural production is increasingly compromised' (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4277, cited by Gardiner, 2024: 14).

In the age of omnipresent digital labour, it is essential to understand to what extent cultural workers – such as poets and spoken word artists – rely on these platforms in their practice in order to examine the influence platforms have on the content created through their mechanisms of digital regulation. The platforms' internal governance rules of moderation concerning the published contents are accepted by every user from the outset, since this agreement is necessary for the use of the services (Gardiner, 2024: 18–9). This situation creates an imbalance of power between creators who use platforms to distribute their work and the platforms themselves. Although

such an imbalance already existed between creators and the entities responsible for distributing their work before the generalisation of mass media, we can argue that this dynamic has been reinforced by digital platforms, since the possibility of dialogue offered by traditional distributors – such as publishing houses – often disappears. By accepting the terms of service of companies such as GAFAM, users agree to their platforms' moderation rules, which may result in the removal of content or entire accounts that fail to abide by content restrictions. These typically concern sensitive themes such as physical violence, hate speech, or sexuality. However, moderation principles are unilateral in determining what is violent, hateful or sexual: platforms are not required to justify their decisions, and their criteria may remain opaque. This unilateral decision-making power has significant consequences: as Gardiner states, 'Today, content moderation plays an increasingly important role in setting cultural norms and cultural consumption habits. What is allowed and not allowed to be posted on cultural platforms has direct repercussions on creative workers, because when content is rejected, so is the possibility of compensation' (2024: 20), with the latter taking the form of either a financial or a visibility reward. While platforms can be a source of income, they are under no obligation to provide it and rarely do so, even when they generate profit from the artistic profiles they host. In any case, the income artists can obtain by using platforms comes with a self-employed status, which often entails greater economic insecurity and informal work, especially in low- or middle-income countries (Gardiner, 2024: 28–32), reminding us of the global asymmetries mentioned above.

Digital censorship plays a central role in new forms of precarity that can potentially affect artists working in the current algorithmic culture. The US-based campaign 'Don't Delete Art' gives visibility to this issue by offering artists – including video artists, photographers, painters, performers, etc. – the possibility of exhibiting artworks that have been censored or shadow-banned on digital platforms in an online gallery (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2025). An analysis of the initiative's website shows that most of the reported cases of digital censorship are due to the presence of artistic nudes in the images. Some of the documented artistic nudes also have a political dimension, since they challenge stereotypes about disabled bodies (such as in the work of Phil Pool), aging bodies (Susan Silas) or fat bodies (Sylvie Blum); or give visibility to mixed-race couples (Daniel Hobbs) or gay couples (Ken Gruenholtz).[2] These removals

[2] All of these artworks can be viewed on website of the campaign "Don't Delete Art" led by the National Coalition Agaisnt Censorship.

correspond to the 'algorithmic censorship of artistic nudity' recently theorised by Piera Riccio, Thomas Hoffman and Nuria Oliver (2024). Other political artworks are deleted by platforms on the grounds that they violate 'community guidelines', sometimes without further explanation. A drawing by Jill Goldman-Callahan, a painter and former public school teacher, depicting targets placed on children's bodies, was ironically censored by the META platforms on the grounds that it was 'in the genre of child sexual exploitation', when it was actually intended as a 'social protest art against child violence' (Goldman-Callahan, n.d.). Similarly, an artwork by Loz City, who makes artistic frames using pharmaceuticals cast in resin, was censored by Instagram on the grounds that it constituted a 'Sale of illegal or regulated goods', when the piece was in fact intended to denounce 'the hypocritical drug and medicine culture we live in, which is so heavily influenced by money, media, and corporations' (Loz City, n.d.). Many of the artists represented on *Don't Delete Art* testify to the negative emotional and economic impact that these deletions have on their career, as they lose one of their main sources of visibility. As we will see, spoken word poetry can similarly be affected by those measures.

Pilar Rodríguez Aranda's Politically Engaged Spoken Word Poetry on Digital Platforms

Throughout her artistic career, Rodríguez Aranda has expressed her political stances through videopoetry, a genre that she helped develop as a new form of oral poetry. *La idea que habitamos* ['*The Idea We Live In*'] (1990), one of her first videopoems, is at first sight merely an introspective video on the theme of home as a central place for the construction of the self. However, there is an underlying political metaphor behind the filming of Mexican American families: the emphasis on the walls of their houses refers to the border wall that separates their two countries. Furthermore, the Chicanx poetic texts, articulated in a voice over, allude to the ideas that houses can be left behind in pursuit of a new future and that having a house can be a privilege. In that sense, they refer to the precarious living conditions of Mexican immigrants in the United States and present housing as a basic need that can be difficult to fulfil. In her bilingual videopoem *Ella es frontera/Border She Is*, created in 1994, Rodríguez Aranda further explores Chicanx identities and the racism they often face. The short film includes poems written by the videomaker herself and by other Chicana poets. The texts are again integrated into the film as a voice over, while the images depict the story of a Chicana woman torn between her two cultures. The video includes imagery of nudity and a scene evocative of masturbation, bringing visibility to female sexuality and emancipation in a patriarchal culture.

Figure 1: Collage of a man walking on a naked female body. Screenshot from *Ella es frontera/ Border She Is* (1994), 17 min 39 sec. Reproduced with the authorisation of Pilar Rodríguez Aranda.

Figure 2: Scene evocative of female masturbation. Screenshot from *Ella es frontera/Border She Is* (1994), 14 min 56 sec. Reproduced with the authorisation of Pilar Rodríguez Aranda.

Until February 2022, Rodríguez Aranda had a YouTube channel on which *Ella es frontera/Border She Is* had been available for many years, along with most of her videopoems and multiple recordings of her spoken word and slam performances. The

existence of this channel potentially gave her artworks a wide reach. In early 2022, the channel was completely and permanently closed by YouTube without prior notice or clear justification other than the presence of 'nudity and pornography' on the channel, a fact that the author perceived as a form of digital censorship and that indeed falls into the category of algorithmic censorship of artistic nudity.[3] **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** were the only images on the channel that matched this description; thus the closure of the entire account, including the recordings of her spoken word performances, rather than the deletion of that single video – which indeed violated the platform's policies, although it had not posed a problem during the previous years – can be seen as a disproportionate measure.

This event, which might appear to be anecdotal, deserves our attention, since algorithmic bans are a common pitfall that many Internet users, including many local independent artists, encounter in the exercise of their profession (Riccio, Hoffman and Oliver, 2024; Meisner, 2023; Myers West, 2018). According to Rodríguez Aranda, the suspension of her channel occurred shortly after she had a political conflict in the comment section of an online post by a Mexican right-wing news commentator. She perceives this conversation as the likely cause of the closure of her YouTube account (Rodríguez Aranda, 2024). Indeed, although she tried to obtain an explanation from the platform, she never received any answer, as often happens in such cases. Therefore, there is no proof to support the hypothesis that a strategy of reporting her artistic channel could have been adopted by one or more Internet users in retaliation for the online conversation conducted through a personal, non-artistic account on another platform. However, it is important to highlight that in such situations, it is precisely the vagueness of the decision-making process and the lack of adequate communication from platforms that prevent artists from securing their rights and taking action against such irreversible verdicts which result in the suspension of their content on digital platforms. Regardless of the details pertaining to the deletion of Rodríguez Aranda's YouTube channel, the fact remains that politically engaged artists and creative workers often lose their primary means of dissemination on digital platforms owing to their (sometimes obscure) moderation policies. As Colten Meisner has stated, 'the infrastructures for platform governance on sites like Instagram, TikTok, Twitch and YouTube have become increasingly weaponized against social media creators', through techniques of mass reporting that '[intensify] power asymmetries between platforms and creators in the social media economy' (Meisner, 2023: 474–5). In the case study that interests me here, the one-sidedness of the moderation policies of digital platforms

[3] Rodríguez Aranda recently opened a Vimeo channel where her videos are now available again (Rodríguez Aranda, n.d.a).

can be seen as a first example of the incompatibility between these new technologies of visibility and the feminist and anti-racist activism that Pilar Rodríguez exemplifies through her videopoems. Moreover, in the current generalised context of online self-exposure by both professionals and private individuals, citizens' political engagements sometimes become inseparable from their professional practice, since professional and personal accounts can often easily lead to one another. A first paradox emerges when global visibility is turned into total invisibility within a matter of seconds.

The Coloniality of Algorithmic Cultures

With the rise of new technologies, the paradoxes of the use of digital platforms in the cultural world manifest not only through the fact that they can almost instantaneously make artworks both highly visible and completely invisible. Platforms are no longer only tools of dissemination: artists increasingly use them as means of creation in multiple ways. As a consequence, platforms can have multifaceted impacts on the making of art itself. Software widely used by artists is increasingly sold by companies that employ the online *modus operandi* of digital platforms. For example, access to Adobe Creative Suite and its graphic design, photo and video editing, page layout, and other services comes with the possibility of using the Adobe Portfolio platform to share creations in a personal gallery with the online Adobe community. On the other hand, more and more platforms are incorporating AI-based tools, sometimes for the exclusive purpose of enabling creation, raising debates about the authentic artistic nature of the pieces produced through them. Platforms such as DALL-E, Midjourney or Suno are meant to generate aesthetic creations with AI. Their popularity is one of the most evident ways in which the art world is affected by algorithmic culture, 'a symbolic and subjective regime profoundly shaped by automatic systems that produce meaning, hierarchies, choices, desires and norms without explicit mediation' (Gribomont and Berck, 2026; my translation).[4]

The use of AI as an integral part of artistic creation gives rise to varied reactions, ranging from very negative to highly optimistic. Saheli Nath shows that many artists denounce the use of AI in artistic creation, highlighting that it has led to a crisis of relevance for human artists. Furthermore, she underlines the risk that generative AI technologies may be responsible for multiple problematic forms of appropriation in their training processes, including 'appropriation, misrepresentation and misuse of Indigenous creative works, as well as those from the Global South whose creative

[4] '*Un régimen simbólico y subjetivo profundamente modelado por sistemas automáticos que producen significados, jerarquías, elecciones, deseos y normas sin mediación explícita*'.

labor may not be adequately protected' (Nath, 2025: 4). Conversely, many techno-optimistic discourses argue in favour of the democratisation of artistic creation enhanced by AI. According to this logic, technologies have the 'potential to increase and expand creative possibilities. The emphasis on automation and efficiency is aimed at empowering creatives by enabling them to focus on tasks considered rewarding' (Caramiaux et al., 2025: 11). Despite criticism, AI artworks are already a reality. Vinchon et al. have reviewed the work of multiple artists who recently used AI tools in their creative labour, including the French collective 'Obvious', which created the 'Portrait of Edmond de Belamy' with the help of AI; the artwork was subsequently sold for more than US$400,000. Similar instances include the American artist Ross Goodwin, who wrote the novel *1 the Road* with the help of AI, and the Japanese manga author Rootport, who generated *Cyberpunk: Peach John* in collaboration with Midjourney (Vinchon et al., 2025: 206–13). Given this reality, it is necessary to stress that if AI is gradually incorporated into the platforms that are used for artistic creation, and if the presence of AI-generated artworks increases in the artistic and literary worlds, the likelihood that those creations will echo the biases of algorithmic culture will increase as well.

Arguing that technology is not separate from society but is, in fact, a deeply social artefact, Gabriela Elisa Sued explains that the notion of algorithmic cultures draws its meaning from the double materiality of algorithms: they are '*digital* in their constitution and *cultural* in their functionality' (Sued, 2022: 45; my translation).[5] The first aspect refers to their mathematical and computational commands, while the second refers to how 'algorithms are rooted in their producers as much as in their users and are activated through the interaction between both' (Sued, 2022: 45) and therefore play an important role in economic, social, cultural, informational, governmental and marketing practices. Critical algorithm studies have shown the problematic ways in which algorithmic technologies are based on liberal designs that benefit small groups of privileged people. They produce data on huge groups of individuals while trying to seduce them by generating positive cognitive feelings and preventing them from appropriating those opaque technologies (Sued, 2022: 54). The data collected can be used for commerce, surveillance and population tracking, among many other purposes. Chaka Chaka has shown that

> the deployment of algorithms in harvesting and mediating big data has spawned a [...] process in which Northern societies are privileged and affirmed by algorithmic

[5] '*digital* en su constitución y *cultural* en su funcionalidad'.

> inclusions as they serve as a model society for machine learning, while Southern societies tend to be disadvantaged and disaffirmed by algorithmic exclusions as they are a non-model society for machine learning (2022: 84).

In this sense, algorithmic cultures are inclined to reproduce forms of coloniality that already existed in analogue contexts. The algorithms that are used in software or AI and are designed for artistic purposes also contribute to those tendencies: their creative dimension does not prevent them from being 'biased toward Euro-American, White, middle-class, racial demographics' (Chaka, 2022: 90), nor from 'systematizing discrimination' (Chaka, 2022: 89).[6] As a contemporary occurrence of what decolonial theory calls the zero-point episteme – namely, the Western belief that Euro-American worldviews are universal values (Castro-Gómez, 2005) – the default images created by generative AI will be more likely to represent this population, and the default music it produces will also be more likely to resemble the North American or European tradition, since most AI has been trained mainly on Global North data.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in AI-based language technologies that are used in some artistic contexts. According to FengYi Yin:

> Generative AI developed by tech corporations in the U.S., Europe, or China is often built on large language models (LLMs), which rely heavily on training datasets such as Common Crawl – the largest publicly available internet crawl dataset and a foundational component for these systems (Baack, 2024). The top languages on the Common Crawl dataset of web pages are English (44%), followed by other European languages (20%), Russian (6%), Japanese (5%), and Chinese (5%) (Common Crawl, 2025). In the field of artificial intelligence, the classification of languages as high-resource or low-resource is not necessarily based on the number of speakers, but rather on the amount of high-quality digital data available for training LLMs (Howe, 2024) (Yin, 2025: 2).

AI-based natural language processing technologies used for cultural or artistic creation will, as a result, be likely to reproduce the power dynamics that exist between languages. In his appropriation of Immanuel Wallerstein's theory of World-Systems Analysis, Abram de Swaan describes these hierarchies as part of a Global Language System (de Swaan, 2001), showing that central languages, like English or French, are economically and symbolically more powerful than most (semi-)peripheral languages, like Japanese,

[6] According to decolonial studies, coloniality has to be seen as the remaining forms of ontological, epistemological and material colonial norms and hierarchies that persist after the official and legal ending of colonialism (Chaka, 2022: 88).

Swahili or Quechua. The nature of these relationships leads to the greater influence of certain languages over others, within a set of cultural connections that includes the art world and the literary field.

Spoken Word Translations and AI in the Face of the Global Language System

In May 2025, Rodríguez Aranda was invited to the Muscat Book Fair in Oman as a member of its Latin American poetry panel. This event is of high interest here, since it represents a case of interaction between two distant literary fields emerging in Mexico and Oman that are economically and culturally not central to the World-System, and whose languages – Mexican Spanish and Omani Arabic – are also not among the most central in the global language system. In the context of globalisation, viewed through the critical post-global and decolonial lens, it is relevant to analyse how two semi-peripheral cultural fields from the Global South can come into contact, and through which tools and technologies. During the book fair, Rodríguez Aranda had the occasion to perform her poems in Spanish, and a translator translated them into Arabic. However, she could not offer or sell her books, as invited writers usually do at book fairs, since most of the Omani audience were not fluent in Spanish. For this reason, she used AI tools to produce an Arabic version of her practice as a spoken word artist. Generative AI here serves the purposes of both dissemination *and* creativity: the poet used previously existing, human-made translations of her poems into Arabic and generated songs and spoken word tracks of the texts on the AI music platform Suno. Her idea was to use platform technologies to facilitate artistic communication between two Global South cultures, remote from one another. The purpose was to distribute the AI-generated spoken word performances of her poems in Arabic on flash drives or through the Internet. This is how she used a translation of her poem 'Historia desenterrada', initially published in her 1995 poetry collection *Asunto de Mujeres*, to create a musical videopoem about the common feminist struggle of Mexican and Omani women, evoking her regular poetry performances with live music accompaniment. The images in the video were also generated with AI and manually edited by the artist (see **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**).

However, Suno's linguistic algorithm did not generate a song in proper Arabic on the basis of the text, even though it was written in that language. Due to glitches in the algorithmic black box of the platform, the generated song was enunciated in another language, which was unrecognisable and perhaps AI-generated. This bug made it impossible for Rodríguez Aranda to share the videopoem, once she became aware of the problem.

Figure 3: Screenshot of the videopoem 'Historia desenterrada' (2025), 0 min 2 sec. Reproduced with the authorisation of Pilar Rodríguez Aranda.

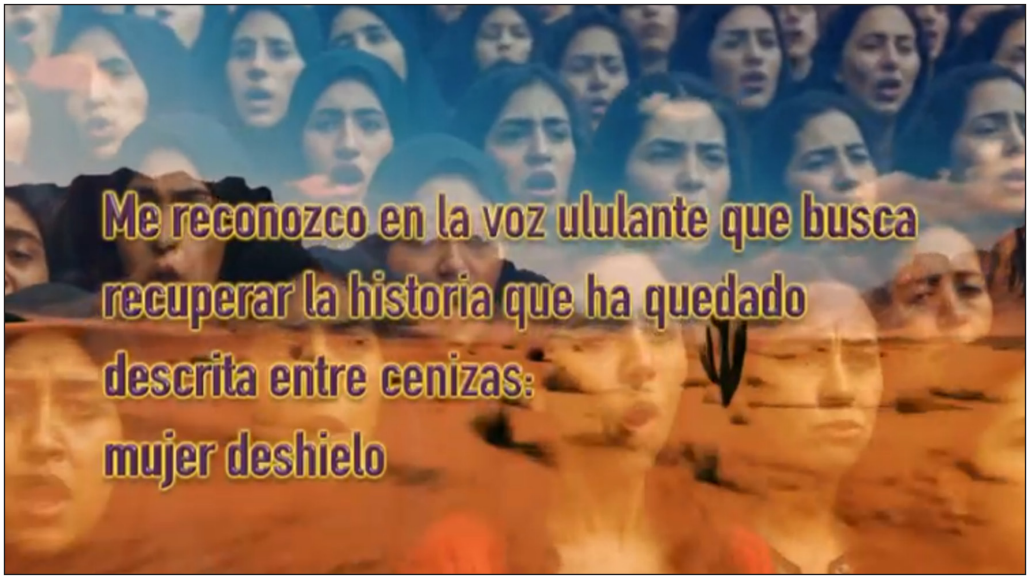

Figure 4: Screenshot of the videopoem 'Historia desenterrada' (2025), 1 min 23 sec. Reproduced with the authorisation of Pilar Rodríguez Aranda.

Other Suno-generated tracks presented more convincing settings of the poems to music.[7] For example, the musicalised version of the poem 'فمان' presents a surprising bilingual version of Rodríguez Aranda's text 'Dos bocas', sung by an artificial bilingual male singer, backed by a bilingual choir, as can be seen in the following extract – in which the backing vocals sung by the choir are shown in italics –:

[...]
Son solo eso
Supervivencia y hambre
Placer y grito
Son dos bocas
Salvaje sutileza
Promesa y silencio
Son solo eso
Dos, son dos bocas
Solo eso هما هذا فقط
بقاء على قيد الحياة وجوع
لذة وصرخة
Son dos bocas
هما هذا فقط
دقة وحشية
الوعد والصمت [8]
[...]

This track is presented on Suno as part of the new musical genre of 'Omani-Mex fusion', raising numerous questions about the possibility of creating intercultural art with the help of technology, in contexts in which such a dialogue between distant cultures would otherwise not have been easily possible. However, it is necessary to keep in mind our decolonial approach of critical algorithm studies. It leads us to note that, in its interpretation of 'فمان' ('Two mouths'), the AI singer makes multiple linguistic mistakes. This is not an exceptional case, since a similar phenomenon can be observed in most of the tracks generated on the platform, such as 'هي حُدود', which mixes spoken word and sung poetry in a musical setting of the Arabic translation of 'Ella es frontera':

[7] The songs are available on Rodríguez Aranda's Suno account (Rodríguez Aranda, n.d.b).

[8] Translation of the original poem: '[...]They are just that/Survival and hunger/Pleasure and scream/ They are two mouths/ Wild subtlety/ Promise and silence/They are just that/Two, they are two mouths [...]'. The original poem is only available on Rodríguez Aranda's Suno account.

Spanish (original)	**Arabic translation**	**Transliteration**
No hay coyote que valga	لا مُهَرِّب ينفع	La muharriba yanfa‘
No la puedes alcanzar	لن تستطيع نيلها	Lan tastatii‘a naylaha
sin su permiso	إلا بإذنها	Illa bi’ithniha
Su boca	فمها	Famuha
es la inmigración	هو الهِجرة	Huwa l-hijra
sin burocracia	بلا بيروقراطية	Bila byruqratiyya
Ella es frontera	هي	Hiya
de pies a cabeza	حُدود	Hudud
Río, cañón, montaña	من رأسها حتى أخمص قدميها،	Min ra’siha hatta akhmas qadamayha,
Horizonte arcano	نهر، وادي، جبل،	Nahr, wadi, jabal,
[...]	أفق سري.	Ufuq sirri. [...]
	[...]	

Multiple problems appear in this track. For example, some sounds are randomly added to various words: the word ‘جبل’ is pronounced ‘jabalal’ instead of ‘jabal’, and the word ‘وادي’ is pronounced ‘wawadi’ instead of ‘wadi’. Other mistakes can be heard in the pronunciation of the vowels. For example, the word ‘أفق’ is pronounced ‘Af’aq’ instead of ‘Ufuq’. In written Arabic, short vowels are usually not written, and Arabic speakers simply supply these vowels when reading texts thanks to their instinctive knowledge of the language and their extensive linguistic repertoires. Why, then, is the AI singer of Suno unable to do the same, and why does it make many other mistakes? Once again, the opacity of the algorithmic black box makes it difficult to give a completely accurate answer, but we should consider the possibility that the platform’s text-to-speech functionality has not been primarily trained for Arabic. Suno seems to make less similar mistakes when setting poems written in European languages such as English, French or Spanish to music. Being a US-based mainstream platform, developed in partnership with Microsoft, Suno has every opportunity to reproduce the colonial biases delineated by Chaka Chaka. This situation shows that, paradoxically, if digital platforms can sometimes be of great help for sharing spoken word poetry on a global scale, and if they apparently enable cultural connections between two Global South cultural fields, this very possibility can at any moment backfire. Despite the hours of video editing and effort invested into the multimedia translation of her spoken word practice, Rodríguez Aranda could not share her creations with her Omani audience.

Conclusion

The new technologies that are constitutive of contemporary algorithmic culture are often presented as helpful tools for artists and writers who need to find new modes of creation and want their productions to be widely shared. With online presence today being an important part of working life for most people and in most professional sectors, digital platforms are an almost inevitable showcase for those who desire to be remunerated for their artistic practice, and spoken word poets do not escape the rule. This article has analysed some consequences of the platformisation of spoken word practices and has identified some of the paradoxes that appear when the countercultural and anti-hegemonic features of the spoken word tradition come into contact with the dominant digital platforms and their one-sided, hegemonic modes of governance and biased algorithms. On the basis of an analysis of selected spoken word creations by Mexican poet Pilar Rodríguez Aranda, an artist whose work is illustrative of contemporary spoken word activism, I have highlighted various struggles that stand in the way of politically engaged poetry on digital platforms. For example, algorithmic censorship can hinder the online dissemination of artworks. In other cases, the cultural biases that seem to permeate generative AI software can give rise to creations that are problematic at several levels, especially when they mobilise cultural features originating in non-hegemonic areas of the world. The article has emphasised the need to adopt a critical, decolonial and post-global understanding of platforms and artificial intelligence if we want to acquire a clear understanding of the potential incompatibilities that exist between counter-hegemonic spoken word poetry and the hegemonic technologies that are sometimes used to create and disseminate it.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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