

Poetry and Body Positivity: Listening to Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body is Not an Apology*

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Abstract

The article highlights Sonya Renee Taylor's performance of *The Body is Not an Apology*, a spoken word poem asserting radical self-love for the body, no matter how it looks or how ill it is. It is a reclamation of space and voice hitherto denied to certain types of bodies, which are the primary loci of people's identities. Activists, artists and writers often find in electronic media an avenue for raising awareness, for creating alternative definitions of (women's) beauty and generating body-positive content to promote self-love and radical self-acceptance. The body is central to control and oppression, hence, feminist discourses and activism must necessarily consider the body as a foundation of self-love and self-acceptance. The most potent way to reach the people with such messages is not through theory or jargon, but through art or entertainment. In this context, contemporary performance poetry is of significant relevance. Rooted in a history of resistance, modern performance poetry has found platforms in digital and electronic media, in ways such that it can reach thousands in just a click of a button. One such performance poet is Sonya Renee Taylor, an African American woman who has emancipated thousands of women through her movement '*The Body is Not an Apology*'. The objective of the close reading (or watching) of this spectacular work is to highlight Taylor's feminist attempt at resistance through art, body-positivity and self-love using her own body, voice and ingenious creativity. The paper highlights how performing the poem is an act of resistance itself.

Keywords: *Body, self-love, resistance, radical, spoken-word poetry, performance poetry, body-image.*

Twentieth-century Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin put forth the illuminating 'speech-act theory' in his book *How to Do Things with Words*. It became a branch of pragmatics which deals with how words are used to embody actions (Nordquist). Austin made a distinction between constative and performative utterances. Constative statements are linguistic

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expressions that are used to describe affairs or states of the world. Performatives are statements which are used to perform certain actions while uttering them. The performance is implicit in the utterance itself. Performative utterances have two aspects: the illocutionary act, that is the function that the speaker intends to fulfil. The second one is the perlocutionary part, which is the effect that an utterance has on the hearer or addressee. On this basis, Austin classified illocutionary acts into six performative verbs that make the act evident. There are six types, verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives. The following table summarizes and explains his classification.(Barrero):

Austin's Speech Act Classification

Speech Act	Description	Example (explicit performatives)
<i>Verdictives</i>	Verdictives are those capable of truth value (what Austin initially called constative sentences).	Estimate, date, assess, describe, value.
<i>Exercitives</i>	Exercitives relate to decisions in favor or against a course of action. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt's request for the US congress to recognize the state of war.	Appoint, demote, veto, command, warn, pardon.
<i>Commissives</i>	A commissive commits the speaker to a certain course of action.	Promise, guarantee, vow, pledge oneself, contract, covenant.
<i>Behabitives</i>	These are reactions to other people's behavior; they express an attitude toward someone else's conduct.	Thank, apologize, deplore, congratulate, criticize, bless, curse, protest.
<i>Expositives</i>	Expositives are used to expound views and arguments.	Revise, understand, report, affirm, inform, deduce, conjecture, deny.

(Austin 152-163)(Barrero)

Austin (1962) states: “The term ... performative is derived, of course, from “perform” ...: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action...The uttering of the words is, usually the, leading incident in the performance of the act. (Austin 6-8) It was developed by philosopher John Searle who further classified the concept according to the functions it performs in his book *Expression and Meaning* (1979), he classified illocutionary acts into twelve parts.

Searle's Speech Act Classification (1979)

Speech Act	Illocutionary Point	Direction of Fit	Examples
Assertives	To commit the speaker to something being the case (truth value)	(↓)	Assertions, statements, claims, hypothesis
Directives	Attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something	(↑)	Commands, requests, invitations
Commissives	Commit the speaker to some future course of action	(↑)	Promises, pledges, vows
Expressives	Express a psychological state	It is presupposed	Congratulations, apologies, condolences
Declarations	These speech acts, they create new states of affairs by representing them as being the case.	(↕)	Baptisms, marrying, hiring/firing, terminating a contract

(Barrero)

From the above classifications, there are certain types of illocutionary performatives which are relevant and applicable to spoken word performative poetry. Behabitives (protests) and assertives (statements) are the two different types of illocutionary performatives that can be applied in performative poetry as they include such utterances as protests and statements. The history of performance poetry can be traced back to performances of ancient Greek drama but modern performance poetry has been rooted in highlighting marginalised identities (Attridge). This is because in the twentieth century, slam poetry was popularised by the Negritude poets who worked for acceptance of black consciousness(Madhu) . The proliferating practice of

performance poetry especially among the youth suggests that it provides with an avenue to discuss social issues at various levels through personal experiences. In more recent times, self-help and spiritual coaches underline the power of the spoken word and note repeated affirmations as a way of empowering oneself (Tomar 250). Historically, spoken word poetry has critiqued systems of oppression by engaging in social, political and poetical opposition to the hegemony (Fincken). In the context of the Speech Act Theory, spoken word poets acquire an agency while reciting, which makes their utterances against mainstream ideas an act of resistance. Spoken word or slam poetry often highlights social, political and spiritual experiences, realities and cultures of marginalized bodies and identities (Granados De La Rosa 1). Julia Novac elaborates in her book 'Live Poetry' how performance poetry is a context-dependant art. The spatio-temporal situation of the poet and the audience informs the larger aims of the performance.(Novac 13) Because of privileging the written word, slam or spoken word poetry has not received much academic attention. The academic interest shown to oral performance of poetry is a relatively recent phenomenon. This started when it was realized that "poetry was not an art experienced best in print"(Novac 16) and soon after it was adopted as a means to voice political concerns and demand social justice.Live poetry became a means to move the live audience to consciousness. However, the World Wide Web and the proliferation of the Internet have enabled the publicity of spoken word poets and their performances, such that they no longer need an actual live audience to create an impact, but can spread their word digitally on audio-visual platforms. Companies like Button Poetry specialise in this genre and popularise slam poets and their works. Aside from publishing the spoken word poems as videos, the company also brings out these poems as books. Slam poetry by members of marginalized communities has a special significance as such performances provide a way to speak truth to power and allow these identities to assume agency to lend a voice against existing hegemonies. According to Valerie Chepp, spoken word poetry is an efficient tool for social justice activism because it utilizes the political power of storytelling, identity, creativity, and healing. People can leverage social media tools and the spoken word to maintain their activism. Activism through spoken word poetry also helps to initiate relationships and maintain community interactions. It is also often aimed towards radical self love and healing from past traumas. These may appear micro level changes initially, but it is recognized that these changes form the foundation to bring about more lasting transformation. (Chepp 9) . Many scholars have dealt with poetry slam as a space for marginalized voices to speak to and against oppressive structures. Scholars like Maisha Fisher, Korina Jocson, Mia Fiore, and Susan

Weinstein—have pointed to the beneficial nature of spoken word poetry and / or slam poetry (Schoppelrei 6). This is where spoken word poetry becomes relevant to body positivity. By its very nature, spoken word or performance poetry requires the presence or the visibility of the poet-performer. The performer or the poet cannot hide behind the text and his or her physical presence (either through online or by actual presence) informs the performance of and the meaning generated from the poetry. A spoken word poet therefore can appropriate space and voice to embody the concerned activism directly. Body positivity movement began as a fat rights movements in the 1960s. The National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA) was instrumental in campaigning for fat persons and their rights. Gradually, this campaign evolved into the body positivity movement (West). Research from 2021 notes that the movement emerged on Instagram in 2012. According to a 2019 study, body positivity aims to challenge societal standards of appearance. These standards are mainly defined by white, Caucasian and capitalistic norms. The movement advocates acceptance of all body shapes, sizes, genders, and skin tones (West). This article will further explore the intersection between body positivity activism and spoken word poetry through the work of a select performance poet. Valerie Chepp points out that spoken word poetry or slam poetry is “a type of storytelling,” specifically an “activist storytelling” that builds upon a “political tradition of ‘testifying’”—“speaking in public to inform opinion by deploying one’s own subjective experience or vantage point” (Chepp 45–46). Chepp explains that testifying “is linked to a broader community ritual of affirmation and learning”(Chepp 46), even though there may be only an individual on stage. Oftentimes, for poets the stage is not the only place in which activism manifests” (Schoppelrei 8).

According to the biography section of her website, Sonya Renee Taylor is a “New York Times best-selling author, world-renowned activist and thought leader on racial justice, body liberation and transformational change, international award winning artist, and founder of *The Body is Not an Apology* (TBINAA), a global digital media and education company exploring the intersections of identity, healing, and social justice through the framework of radical self-love.” (Taylor) She is a performance poet with fifteen years of experience. In the summer of 2010, Sonya found herself in a vulnerable conversation with her friend when she first spoke the words “your body is not an apology”. This single sentence or sentiment later developed into a poem, a Facebook page followed by an international movement centred around body positivity and radical self love. The movement is primarily based on digital platform. The

website on *The Body is Not an Apology* has reached millions of people across the globe and has over a thousand articles which makes the website an outstanding medium and educational platform for “exploring bodies, understanding identities and connecting radical self-love with global issues of intersectional social justice”.

Beauty standards become an important component of consideration on the subject of body positivity. Beauty standards are context dependent and culturally and temporally influenced (Ubelejit-Nte 18). The modern western beauty standard revolves around thinness, youth and whiteness. These ideals are pushed through the media, fashion industry, celebrity culture and even the food industry. Body positivity is a movement that resists the hegemonization of bodily aesthetics. ““Body positivity” refers to the movement to accept our bodies, regardless of size, shape, skin tone, gender, and physical abilities. The movement is often implicitly understood as the effort to celebrate diversity in bodily aesthetics and to expand our narrow beauty standards beyond their present-day confines”(Leboeuf 114) As a black woman who defies these conventional beauty standards, Taylor has been highlighting body image issues and she has pioneered the body-positivity movement with her works. She advocates resistance through radical self-love. Embracing one’s body is an aspect of it. In her book of the same name, she talks about the centrality of the body in the universal human experience and how bodies are the sites where oppression takes place and therefore they can be the sites for political resistance. According to Vance, bodies are active agents in the social world as we act on our world through the medium of the body. When human bodies are subjected to social control, the embodied self can use the body to express resistance. Nadia Brown puts it astutely: “Bodies are sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings. Subjecting the body to systemic regimes – such as government regulation – is a method of ensuring that bodies will behave in socially and politically accepted manners. The body is placed in hierarchized (false) dichotomies, for example, masculine/feminine; mind/body; able-bodied/disabled; fat/skinny; heterosexual/homosexual; and young/old”. It is these same false dichotomies that categorise bodies as healthy or unhealthy and beautiful or desirable or undesirable and unattractive. The social perception of one’s body affects one’s own attitude towards one’s own body. Body dissatisfaction has been found to be linked with self-esteem and plenty of industries profit out of body dissatisfaction in both men and women. (Chandhok 28) She embodies her words when she presents herself on stage or in video to talk and recite about accepting our bodies. Her poem *The Body is Not an Apology* also happens to be the title of her book on self-love.

The book as well as the poem is a hard-hitting declamation against the world that is built on domination and extraction, against capitalism which tries to define our worth. The poem, which was ignited by a conversation with a disabled friend and developed eventually into a book, an entire movement and platform (Body Is Not An Apology — Sonya Renee Taylor). The poem initially had led to an Facebook selfie post of Sonya, on February 9, 2011 as she was not just happy by uttering the words “*The Body is Not an Apology*” to comfort her friend, she wanted to live up to the phrase. She was aware that a queer body of her size, colour and orientation is never represented in the media worthy of visibility or desire. But her photo was where she felt like an embodiment of power and desire. The foundational idea was very simple: “no human being should be ashamed of being in a human body.” This post gave birth to the movement based on body positivity. Her website outlines the birth of the movement in the following words:

Less than 24 hours after posting that picture, a movement was born. People across the country began posting their own pictures and stories. Folks began sharing photos of empowered, perfectly imperfect bodies, shaped by differences in age, race, size, gender, dis/ability, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, class, and other attributes. They were willing to exist unapologetically for just that moment. Sonya felt moved to create a space where people could practice living without apology in their bodies. She created a facebook page named after the words and poem that creating a new way of being for her and so many others. (Taylor)

So, it is clear how Sonya’s spoken word poetry is an expression of this movement. The two are intricately woven together because spoken word poetry has been known to construct counternarratives and resist oppression. (Curwood and Jones 50). According to Valerie Chepp, poets use spoken word as a platform to advocate for issues, a technique to build allies and networks and a means to engage and mobilize these networks. (Chepp 44). When Chepp had asked Taylor about how spoken word can be a tool to dismantle oppression, the latter had replied : “ That’s a big task for such a little art form...I believe that humans have the power to dismantle oppression. I think that spoken word can be one of the many tools that go into that work. Unto itself, no. Because unto itself a clarinet can’t play music; it’s only about how people use it. So I think that if people choose to use this as a tool for that work, then it absolutely can be done.” (Chepp 44)

The poem is a eulogy to the human body. Sonya Renee Taylor says that we should not treat the body like it is a common thing or change it to accommodate our identities.

The Body is Not an Apology. Let it not be common as oil, ash, or toilet.
Let it not be small as gravel, stain, or teeth.
Let it not be mountain when it is sand.
Let it not be ocean when it is grass.
Let it not be shaken, flattened, or razed in contrition. (Taylor lines 9-16)

Taylor utters the words with a certain passion, from deep within herself and does not try to make herself pleasing to watch. She uses all her physical gestures to state her resolute stance on her body. She raises points in which we show displeasure and uneasiness with our bodies and compares them to vivid images to negate each of them:

The body is not a crime, is not a gun.
The body is not a spill to be contained. It is not
a lost set of keys, a wrong number dialed. It is not
the orange burst of blood to shame white dresses.
The Body is Not an Apology. It is not the unintended granules
of bone beneath wheel. The body is not kill.
It is not unkempt car.
It is not a forgotten appointment. (Taylor lines 20-28)

Our self-image is intricately rooted in our relationship with our bodies. It affects one's self-confidence and, therefore, one's ability to take up space. A recent government report in the UK noted that more than 60 per cent of adults and children feel negatively about their bodies (Body Image Survey Results). Women are socialised into prioritising looking beautiful and desirable. "Compared to men, women may suffer more from social anxiety, prejudice, and inequality based on their appearance" (Kim and Lee) Beauty standards are the criteria that women (and also men in some aspects) are required to meet to fulfil the beauty ideal for their sex and be personally and professionally successful. These criteria are set by the global fashion and beauty industry, film, television, literature, magazines, the school system, the medical system, politics, personal relationships, social media, the law, and advertising (Defino). According to Naomi Wolf, perception of beauty or beauty standards is not fixed. Nor do they have historical or biological basis. It is only a result of what the existing power structure along with its economy and culture needs today to control women. (Wolf 13) The beauty industry is built on making women feel inadequate about themselves. In the age of media and technology, the fashion and media industry has successfully created an unattainable beauty standard by circulating the 'thin ideal' (Gu). This is particularly applicable to women. Print and digital media also routinely portray unrealistic and filtered images of women which are manufactured after airbrushing and editing. Proliferation of such images along with celebrity culture leads to attitudes that carry a feeling of inadequacy about one's body (MacCallum and Widdows). Additionally for women, some traditions and customs vilify natural bodily functions such as menstruation, which is often stigmatised and considered to make one dirty (Standing and Hughes). Hence the poet also affirms :

Do not speak it vulgar.

The body is not soiled. Is not filth to be forgiven. (Taylor lines 29-30)

People who are chronically ill or who suffer from disabilities are particularly susceptible to poor body image. It is difficult to accept one's body when it becomes the site of suffering (Taleporos and McCabe). According to the stigma theory, "individuals with disabilities possess discrediting attributes that prevent them from meeting culturally constructed standards of beauty. An individual with a disability may find that his or her body is viewed as being somehow defective, deviant, or grotesque." (Reel and Bucciarelli 91) Consequently people with disabilities struggle with body image issues even more. This refers to the restricting quality of the normative standards of physical being and functionality and bodies that fail to comply are excluded thereby implying control. It then feels as if it imprisons the subject it embodies. So the poet says that despite all its imperfections and oddities the body is something to be worshipped and this is true even for those bodies which are sick and have deadly disorders or diseases. And she vocalises the following words with a surge of praise and love for the (her) body:

The body is not prison, is not sentence to be served.

It is not pavement, is not prayer.

The Body is Not an Apology.

Do not give the body as gift. Only receive it as such.

The body is not to be prayed for, is to be prayed to.

So, for the evermore tortile tenth grade nose,

Hallelujah.

For the shower song throat that crackles like a grandfather's Victrola,

Hallelujah.

For the spine that never healed, for the lambent heart that didn't either,

Hallelujah.

For the sloping pulp of back, hip, belly,

Hosanna.

For the errant hairs that rove the face like a pack of Acheronian wolves.

Hosanna,

for the parts we have endeavored to excise.

Blessed be

the cancer, the palsy, the womb that opens like a trap door. (Taylor lines 40-54)

She goes on as if articulating a monologue, an ode on the body and ends it by underlining the sacredness of the human body and why it should never be belittled and apologized for no matter how it is:

Praise the body in its blackjack magic, even in this.
 For the razor wire mouth.
 For the sweet god ribbon within it.
 Praise.
 For the mistake that never was.
 Praise.
 For the bend, twist, fall, and rise again,
 fall and rise again. For the raising like an obstinate Christ.
 For the salvation of a body that bends like a baptismal bowl.
 For those who will worship at the lip of this sanctuary.
 Praise the body, for *The Body is Not an Apology*.
 The body is deity. The body is God. The body is God:
 the only righteous love that never need repent. (*Taylor lines 55-69*)

It is significant how she gesticulates the verse with her entire body as if the poem was being unleashed not just by her mouth but by the poetry of her physical movements. To show herself as she is on stage and be herself live on an online platform viewed by millions and articulate the words displaying unconditional love towards her own body and extending that message for all is a powerful statement in itself.

Bodies are central to any performance. “The body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice and of presence” (Sosnowska and Sajewska). To assert the sanctity of the body and to embrace it with pride through performance poetry in a culture that criticizes and tries to erase it to present more conventionally acceptable bodies is an act of resistance. Taylor quotes : Racism, sexism, ableism, homo- and transphobia, ageism, fatphobia are algorithms created by humans’ struggle to make peace with the body. A radical self-love world is a world free from the systems of oppression that make it difficult and sometimes deadly to live in our bodies.” (Black Artist – Honey Williams) This is particularly true for a black woman who does not fit the usual beauty standards of being slim, fair and with luxurious hair. In one of her interviews she remarks on the importance of assuming the body as the site of resistance and the starting point of radical self love: “we believe that our relationships with bodies, our own bodies, and other people's bodies really are some of the foundational bricks of oppression. Transforming that relationship is how we create a transformed world, and that all oppression is experienced on the body. Even when it isn't about the body, it's experienced on the body. So using the body as a site to begin to dismantle oppressive systems just seemed like a no-brainer to me” (Taylor) As bodies are the sites and basis of racial (and also other forms) of discrimination and repression, bodies can be instrumentalized to collapse systems of oppression. As oppression on the basis of differences in bodies is internalized and often expressed as hatred towards one’s own body, radical self love and loving one’s bodies can be a way to dismantle the effect of such conditions. This is

what Sonya Renee Taylor's performing *The Body is Not an Apology* is all about. She presents herself in her raw and authentic self and delivers on the same platform that promotes air brushed images of conventional beauty, her stance on her own body and self. Her performance sends a louder message to all young women who feel unsure about their bodies, than it would have had if the poem had just been in simple textual form, because in the latter case, it would not be her body that would be making that statement.

There is a particular force in watching the poem be physically recited by Taylor as a performance poem instead of reading it from a screen or paper. Her physicality adds a gusto which passive paper cannot. (Taylor Sonya Renee)

Sonya Renee Taylor did not stop at just reciting poems, she went on to create a platform to provide support and coaching to inculcate radical self-love and body positivity as a basic tool for social justice. In this analytical article, I have shown how performance poetry can be an evocative tool of activism and how it can be used to actively promote and practice body positivity. Taylor's performance has demonstrated that an authentically inspired spoken word poem can go a long way in igniting a meaningful journey towards dismantling oppressive systems, and foster community and healthy self-image for the oppressed. Today what started as a mere conversation and a simple slam poem is an international movement.

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