Healing words: A study of poetry interventions in dementia care

Aagje M.C. Swinnen
Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Abstract
The personhood movement in dementia research has established the theoretical foundation for implementing cultural arts interventions in care practices. The underlying assumption is that professionals from the visual and the performance arts are well equipped to see the person behind the condition and to focus on possibilities for meaningful relationships in the here and now. This article focuses on poetry interventions as one example of cultural arts interventions. The use of poetry might seem counterintuitive, given that people with dementia lose their language abilities and that poetry is regarded to be the most complex literary form. I will argue that expanding on existing research on poetry interventions from a health and science perspective with a humanities approach will help illuminate how poetry works to enhance the exchange with people with dementia. Drawing on participant observations of poetry interventions by Gary Glazner (Alzheimer’s Poetry Project, USA) at the New York Memory Center, I will frame poetry interventions as a specific form of oral poetry in which people with dementia are positioned as cocreators of embodied texts and directly benefit from the power of the spoken word.

Keywords
poetry interventions, the arts in person-centered care, personhood in dementia, oral poetry, Alzheimer’s Poetry Project

Just as to a sick daughter you say
my tiny person, my home-made
sorrow, and it doesn’t help;
or, as thinly as snow settles,
you touch her hot forehead
with your hand –
and it doesn’t help
so poetry helps.
(De Coninck, 1975, Transl. Bosselaar, 2014)

Corresponding author:
Aagje Swinnen, Department of Literature and Art/ Center for Gender and Diversity, Maastricht University, Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands.
Email: a.swinnen@maastrichtuniversity.nl
The poem "Just as to a Sick Daughter You Say" is based on the simile between the function of poetry and the way a parent cares for a sick daughter. It argues that poetry simultaneously "works" and "does not work." Whispering in the daughter's ear as well as putting a hand on her forehead do not cure her from the disease. In the same vein, poems cannot heal the pain one may be confronted with in a lifetime. Both are effective, though, in the sense that they might bring relief and consolation not only for the daughter but for the worried parent as well. What struck me when reading this poem is that the figure of speech heavily relies on the interaction between parent and child, or between caregiver and patient. The intervention of the parent refers to the ancient art of healing through performed words, and poetry is placed in the same tradition. It is not to be compared to medicine. Yet, this doesn't imply poetry is deprived of healing value. We just have to look for its value in the social realm rather than the medical. This brought me to the argument that I am going to build in this article.

Since the early 1990s, the personhood movement in dementia research (cf. Hughes, Louw, & Sabat, 2006; Innes, 2009; Leibing & Cohen, 2006; Post, 1995) has questioned the tendency of the medical approach to dementia as a disease of the brain to reduce its sufferers to the frightening category of "lost selves." It has criticized the emphasis on autonomy, productivity, and development in definitions of what it means to be human in hypercognitive cultures like ours. As an alternative to the predominant Cartesian model that designates the mind as the locus of personhood, advocates of the personhood movement have engaged with other models of subjectivity, such as the notion of the body-subject (cf. Kontos, 2003) and the symbolic interactionist concept of the relational self (cf. Kitwood, 1997). They have reclaimed the person in dementia by drawing attention to evidence that personhood is not exclusively located in the mind but in the body as well and emerges from people's relations with other human beings and things. The personhood movement has furthered the theoretical foundation for the implementation of cultural arts interventions in the development of person-centered care and dementia-friendly communities (cf. Allan & Killick, 2000; Basting, 2009; Basting & Killick, 2003; Hayes & Povey, 2011; Innes & Hatfield, 2001; Lee & Adams, 2011). The underlying assumption is that the arts offer a style of communication and self-expression that is particularly able to capitalize on the emotional and social capabilities of people with dementia. Cultural arts approaches appeal to their creativity and imagination and, in doing so, could stimulate dormant cognitive, functional, and communicative abilities, as well as lessen their feelings of isolation, depression, and low self-esteem. In terms of initiating personhood-upholding exchanges with people with dementia, therefore, formal and informal caregivers could learn from artists and art therapists who are particularly skillful in generating meaningful exchanges in the here and now.

This article focuses on poetry interventions as one example of cultural arts approaches in dementia care. I use the word "poetry intervention" as an umbrella term referring to poetry performances and collaborative improvisations.1 Poetry performances are recitations of (usually canonical) poems often selected around a theme, such as love or spring. These poems can serve as inspiration for the joint creation of new poems when participants respond to open-ended questions—a process which I call collaborative improvisation. The open-ended questions may be inspired by the topic of the poetry performances or build on a specific poetic technique such as simile. Finally, the poet-performer reads the newly created poems and, in doing so, validates the words that the participants have contributed.
Literature review

Since 1988, a dozen publications on poetry interventions have appeared, primarily from the perspective of psychology (Hagens, Beaman, & Bouchard Ryan, 2003; Kidd, Zauszniewski, & Morris, 2011; Petrescu, MacFarlane, & Ranzijn, 2014; Potenza & Labancz, 1989), pedagogy (Aadlandsvik, 2008), poetry therapy (Furman, 2012; Reiter, 1994; Silverman, 1988; Wexler, 2014), and nursing (Green, 2009). I make a rough distinction between two types of publications on the subject. The first starts from the idea that creativity is a vehicle for the expression of personhood. Poetry is understood to offer a window to the soul of the dementia sufferer which otherwise remains hidden. Typically, this type of publication presents findings of creative writing projects in which people with dementia are stimulated to share their experiences of the disease (Aadlandsvik, 2008; Killick, 1999, 2003; Petrescu et al., 2014). Caregivers and poetry performers support them in turning their expressions into poetic form. The facilitators’ help varies from the almost verbatim recording of the words of the people with dementia to more substantial editing including the arrangement of the words in lines and stanzas and the improvement of the words’ rhythmic structure. The collectively created poems are then examined for their themes and affective dimensions. The final publication of the poems (e.g. Killick, 1997, 2009) is assumed to be a powerful means to fight the stigmatization of people with dementia as “nonpeople.” Reading about their inner lives could educate the larger audience. The effect of collectively created poems to make readers see people with dementia in a new light is what Aadlandsvik calls “the second sight” (2008, p. 326). Simultaneously, for people with dementia whose voice is hardly acknowledged, to see their own language celebrated in published poems is “an experience of real power” (cf. Kahn-Freedman, 2001, p. 196). Still, the first type of publication has a tendency to revert to a romanticized view of “dementia language” as inherently poetic. For example, Killick suggests that “Many people with dementia… display an unforced propensity for metaphor and simile. It is as if the condition had unlocked their imaginative powers while at the same time inhibiting the capacity for logical thought” (1999, p. 46). This statement risks reiterating the romantic myth of the creative genius whose art emerges without conscious thought or effort, and perpetuating the troublesome connection between “madness” and creativity.

The second type of publication aims to explain the method behind the poetry intervention and prove its positive impact on the functioning and well-being of people with dementia. Occasionally, this includes the evaluation of the intervention’s benefits for caregivers. Characteristically, in this type of publication, poetry therapists and performers (Furman, 2012; Glazner, 2005; Gregory, 2012; Wexler, 2014) testify to the techniques behind their individual poetry programs such as their preferred poems, performance style, way of eliciting responses, means of validation, and use of props. By detailing the method behind their program, the facilitators call for “doing poetic service” (Wexler, 2014, p. 45). The idea is that anyone who is a good listener and has a positive approach to the capabilities of people with dementia can take the lead in a poetry intervention. Increasingly, the testimonies from the work floor include an attempt to prove systematically the effect of poetry interventions, which is stimulated by the demand of funding agencies for the assurance that “art works.” So far, the methods to measure poetry interventions’ effect on sociability, communication, and self-esteem have included interviewing the caregivers present at the event (Gregory, 2012), interviewing the participants who are in the earlier stages of dementia (Petrescu...
et al., 2014), and participant observation (Green, 2009). Because people in the more advanced stages of dementia are often incapable of verbally reflecting on their experience and caregivers may not always give accurate accounts of the impact of an intervention on the participants, participant observation is a promising tool. Green (2009), for example, combined the qualitative description of verbal, facial, and other bodily responses of people with dementia to an intervention with the phenomenological analysis of the meaning of these responses. She concluded that the themes of connectedness and self-awareness are key in the description of the impact of poetry interventions. Interviews conducted by Petrescu et al. (2014) with people with dementia revealed that the participants especially enjoyed the social interaction as well as the sense of accomplishment that making poetry gave them. Nonetheless, the assessments do not look into how poetry as a specific cultural arts intervention is capable of establishing positive effects. Poetry is mostly defined in reference to other interventions, such as music and reminiscence therapy. This lack of differentiation between genres limits the understanding of the meaning of individual cultural arts interventions. The question remains what the significance of poetry is in dementia care and how a poetry intervention “works.”

This article does not focus on the representational quality of the poetry created by people with dementia as evidence of their personhood and experience of the disease, nor is it an attempt to measure the effect of poetry interventions. I examine the way live poetry works as a means to include people with dementia in dialog and as a specific site for interpersonal contact. I look at the poetry intervention as “a mode of social collaboration and play” (cf. Selberg, 2015) and attempt to identify some of its key strategies. In my opinion, the perspective of literary scholars can complement the existing research because they bring an established theoretical and analytical apparatus to study poetry and its live expressions, such as tools to describe the audiotext and body communication. The term “audiotext” is coined by Bernstein (1998, p. 12) and refers to all the verbal and nonverbal vocal features of the acoustic performance such as intonation, pitch, tempo, accent, and timbre. According to Novak (2011, p. 158), body communication comprises posture, gesture, facial, and artifactual communication. Aging studies scholars with a humanities background have mostly focused on analyzing how dementia is represented in diverse cultural texts, such as literature and film (e.g. Burke, 2007; Cohen-Shalev, 2012; Swinnen, 2012a, 2012b; Wearing, 2013; Zeilig, 2014). I find it timely that they turn their attention to the study of cultural art interventions, which offers the opportunity to engage with older people themselves and find out where significant contributions can be made from their unique expertise. In the remainder of this article, I will situate poetry interventions in the oral poetry tradition to construct a theoretical framework, touch upon some aspects of my methodology including my case study and its performance context, and start identifying some of the key strategies to enable people with dementia to participate in poetry performance and collaborative improvisation.

**Poetry interventions in the oral poetry tradition**

Poetry is a particular form of language that complicates and delays meaning (Jakobson, 1987; Lotman, 1977; Riffaterre, 1980). For people with dementia though, language production and comprehension are problematic, especially in the later stages of the
condition (Bayles & Tomoeda, 2007). Hence, seeking to help people with dementia through poetry seems counterintuitive (cf. Zeilig, 2014, p. 161). To understand the value of poetry interventions in dementia care requires a change in perspective about poetry. This change is twofold.

First, we have to move from the notion of the poem as a singular text in print (or “a fixed, stable, finite linguistic object” cf. Bernstein, 1998, p. 9) to the performed poem that is characterized by its plurality of versions. This shift from written to oral poetry implies abandoning the formal standards associated with canonical poetry. Written poetry offers readers the opportunity to pause and rethink earlier passages as well as the chance to reread verses. In the context of live poetry, by contrast, there is little time for reflection on past utterances as long as the participant wants to follow the pace of the performer (Novak, 2011, p. 227). Repetition—of words, images, syntactic structure, intonation, rhythmic patterns, and movements—is therefore the ultimate vehicle for meaning and artistry in oral literature (Foley, 2002, p. 113). Poetry performers who work with people with dementia emphasize this characteristic of live poetry. They turn what generally is perceived to be a weakness of the participants resulting from the disease, namely their inclination to ask the same questions or say the same lines again and again, into a strategy to improve the interaction with them (cf. Moore & Davis, 2002). In addition, taking the oral poetry tradition into account clarifies that music is an integral part of the live poetry experience and cannot really be separated from other voiced words. This explains why popular song is often part of poetry interventions for people with dementia.

The second assumption we need to put aside is that poetry is an essentially secluded genre encouraging both private production and private consumption. Ignoring oral traditions makes us overlook the social function of poetry and disregard the simultaneity and collectivity of live poetry’s production and reception. The scholar Novak (2011, p. 177; 2012, pp. 7–8) proposes a communication model for live poetry that visualizes the direct encounter between an author (or poetry performer) and an audience in a shared space and time. She locates the poetry performer and the audience in the same box (Figure 1) rather than in two boxes separated by a published text, which would be the case in a conventional communication model for literature. The horizontal arrows point both ways, illustrating the ongoing exchange between the performer and the audience and the conflation of the moment of production and reception. As such, live poetry reveals itself to be “the most social and socially responsive—dialogic—of contemporary art forms” (Bernstein, 1998, p. 15). Literary scholars have argued that dialog is the primary mode of ethical relations (Scanlon, 2007, pp. 3–4; Scarry, 2014, pp. 42–46). This suggests that poetry interventions are a literary vehicle to an ethics of inclusion for people with dementia. They stimulate people with dementia to sound their voices and guarantee that those voices will be heard.

In Novak’s model, the fictive speaker can only be experienced by the audience simultaneously with and through the physically present poet-performer in the given time–space. Accordingly, the fictive addressee can only be experienced by the poet-performer simultaneously with and through the physically present audience in the time–space. When a performance brings the poem’s fictional time–space, addressee, and speaker together with its actual speaker, audience, and setting, these may overlap. This explains, for instance, the success of famous love poems such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “How Do I Love Thee” (1850) and Shakespeare’s sonnet “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day” (1609) in poetry interventions. When performing these poems, the lyrical subject of the text and the “I” of the performer standing in front of the audience come together, and the use of the
The apostrophe implicates the audience in the speech act (Novak, 2011, p. 200). When the poet-performer, moreover, moves closer to a specific addressee to meet him or her at eye level while holding hands, the performance of the love poems becomes an intimate act of recognition. The live poetry event then turns out to be the setting for intersubjective exchange through the performed word (cf. Silliman, 1998, p. 373).

Methodological approach

To study the techniques that enhance dialog in the poetry intervention, I have opted for an ethnographic approach. Ethnography has gained recognition as a method in the study of live poetry where it is called ethnopoetics (cf. Dubois, 1998; Foley, 1995; Tedlock, 1983). It is also increasingly implemented in the study of personhood in dementia (cf. De Medeiros, Saunders, Doyle, Mosby, & Van Haitsma, 2011; Kontos, 2004; Sabat, 2001) because it does more justice to the voice of people with dementia than research that lets caregivers speak for them. Moreover, ethnographic research over a longer period guarantees that the researcher has time to familiarize herself with the repertoire of responses of individual participants.

Data collection

I make use of a variety of data sources that together offer the most complete impression of the live event. This article is based on:

- Detailed descriptive data from participant observations of 19 poetry interventions by Gary Glazner in the New York Memory Center (NYMC) (the next section offers a full description of the case study and its performance context), including reflexive notes on my role as participant;
- A sample of audio recordings to supplement my “thick description” of the observation with an even more accurate verbatim transcription of the specifics of the audiotext;
- Fieldnotes on the workshops that the performer organizes to train caregivers in his method;
The corpus of canonical poems that the performer makes use of during the interventions, i.e. *Sparking Memories: The Alzheimer’s Poetry Project Anthology* (Glazner, 2005); Video footage available on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/user/alzpoetry) and photographs taken during my observations; Semistructured conversations with the performer.

**Data representation**

To represent my data in this piece, I primarily make use of excerpts of verbatim transcriptions of the audiotext that I match with details about body communication (almost in the form of stage directions). I follow the transcription rules of conversation analysis (cf. Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1977); each conversational turn serves as a “line” or “segment” of the live poetry event. I add some pictures to the transcriptions because gestures and bodily responses play an important role in my analysis. I tried to take multiple shots of some participants from a similar angle to establish a sense of duration and address subtle changes over certain time intervals.

**Keys to transcription**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
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<td>,</td>
<td>comma</td>
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<td>period</td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>question mark</td>
<td>rising intonation</td>
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<td>…</td>
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<td>word</td>
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<td>emphasis</td>
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<td><em>word</em></td>
<td>asterisks</td>
<td>smiling voice</td>
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<td>&gt;word&lt;</td>
<td>“greater than” and “less than” carrots</td>
<td>rushed talk</td>
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<td>heh heh</td>
<td>onomatopoeia</td>
<td>laughter</td>
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<td>zz</td>
<td>onomatopoeia</td>
<td>sleeping/snoring</td>
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<td>knock</td>
<td>onomatopoeia</td>
<td>knocking on door</td>
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<td>wo-</td>
<td>hyphen</td>
<td>self-interruption</td>
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<td>wo:</td>
<td>colon</td>
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<td>closing square bracket</td>
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<td>((word))</td>
<td>double round brackets</td>
<td>description of paralinguistic elements or body communication</td>
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<td>ṁ</td>
<td>musical notes</td>
<td>singing</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>Gary Glazner</td>
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<td>A</td>
<td>audience</td>
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<td>P</td>
<td>(initial of) individual participant</td>
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**Data analysis**

To analyze the different data related to my participant observations, I make use of the strategy of “close listening.” Bernstein (1998, p. 4) coined this term by analogy with close
reading of a printed text. Close listening is the hermeneutical approach of the meaning of a live poetry event. This implies that I listen over and over again to the audio recordings of the exchanges between the performer and the participants in order to gain insight into the poetic strategies used. While doing so, my detailed descriptive data and reflective notes serve to complement the audio recordings, especially with regard to the nonverbal, bodily aspects of the exchange and the specificities of individual participants’ contributions. The photographs are used to the same end. Close readings of the corpus of poems illustrate the differences between the canonical printed texts and their live adaptations by the performer. Content analysis of the conversations with the performer and the fieldnotes on the workshops serve to identify recurring themes.

**Ethics issues**

The legally authorized representatives of the people with dementia who participated in the poetry interventions consented to their family members’ participation in all cultural arts interventions at the NYMC as well as in related activities, such as my project. The release forms they signed include permission to refer to the people with dementia on a first-name basis and to incorporate the photographs in this article, which were taken by me.

**Case study: Alzheimer’s poetry project (APP) and its performance context**

**Participants**

*The poet-performer.* From February till July 2014, I observed and participated in the poetry interventions by Gary Glazner, founder and director of the APP. This organization of professional poets-performers has reached over 20,000 people with dementia in more than 300 care facilities spread over 23 American states. For this achievement, the Met Life Foundation awarded APP the 2012 Creativity and Aging Leadership Award in America. Glazner arrived at developing poetry interventions for people with dementia through his engagement in slam poetry (cf. Glazner, 2000), which aspires to make poetry accessible to nonacademic audiences (conversation 3 February 2014). Specifically, slam poetry inspired Glazner to introduce group poems or collaborative improvisations as well as the call and response technique, reciting a line from a poem and coaching the people with dementia to echo that line. Glazner makes use of the expressiveness of body language but does not play another character. He easily switches from the theatrical comic evocation of the nonsense poem “The Purple Cow” (1895) by Gelett Burgess to a sensitive and intimate recitation of “I Carry Your Heart” (1920) by e.e. cummings. When training other people, Glazner encourages performers to use props but he no longer feels the need to use them himself (conversation 3 February 2014). In contrast to art therapists, performance artists like Glazner do not bear a clinical duty to care and have no individualized therapeutic goals (Broderick, 2011, p. 97). They are not supervised by medical or health professionals and do not have access to files with confidential medical information. Hence, Glazner always enters care facilities without previous knowledge of the personal history or health status of the people attending his sessions. As Killick explains: “Prior knowledge creates power in a relationship, and it is important in these special circumstances not to add to the
imbalances that already exist” (1999, p. 49). Glazner certainly attempts to proceed on “equal” footing to the extent this is feasible in the dementia care setting.

People with dementia. The group size of the people Glazner works with in 1-h sessions is typically between 15 and 35 people. All groups include participants in different stages of dementia and with different capabilities. In terms of describing the responses of people with dementia, I start from a range of nonverbal and verbal reactions such as eye behavior (e.g. visual tracking of the poet-performer), facial expressions (e.g. smiling and blushing), movements of hands (e.g. imitating gestures that illustrate the text), feet (e.g. tapping toes to the beat of a performed poem) and head (e.g. nodding), posture (e.g. straightening ones upper body), touching the performer or other participants, repeating the words of the text (sometimes just moving the lips without producing sound), chatting with audience members and verbalizing comments (e.g. commentary on the event itself). After the interventions, Glazner and I have repeatedly talked about what seems the most rewarding intervention. We often agreed that it is especially worthwhile when people seemingly impossible to reach suddenly show a slight form of engagement even if it is only for a couple of seconds. I believe we should develop antennae to discern minimal responses and humble performances of selfhood resulting from the exchange between human beings through art rather than look for radical instantaneous transformations. From this perspective, YouTube videos of people with dementia staring ahead until they suddenly react when headphones with their favorite music are put on are somewhat misleading. Because of our desire for the arts to “restore” the person behind the disease (thereby positioning the arts as cure rather than tool for care), we forget that these videos may result from hours of observation or might be edited to increase their dramatic effect.

When surprising things happen in an intervention, these are often of a different nature than the sudden return of former identity. This was, for instance, the case when Bob, whose participation is largely limited to tracking the poet with his eyes and occasionally contributing a word to a group poem, rose from his chair to greet William, a fellow participant who had been absent for four months (Figure 2(a) and (b)). Glazner did not immediately recognize William because of the dramatic change in his physical appearance. Bob though, expressed instantly his connection to William and insisted on greeting him and holding his hand for at least 5 min (Figure 2(c)). This prompted Glazner to improvise on the topic of friendship and invite the audience to join him through call and response. The words of the poem basically supported the act of greeting an old friend, which Bob was performing. When Bob had returned to his seat, he kept an eye on William and even joined in as the group started singing “America, the Beautiful” (Figure 2(d)). Both the performer and William’s wife were moved to tears. The performer and observer will never know whether Bob has always been a very compassionate man. The fact is, despite his disease, he was able to express his emotions regarding the return of a coparticipant and provide comfort to William as well as his wife.

The participant observer. During my first participant observation, I sat down among the people with dementia who immediately assumed I was a new member. They were very welcoming and took care of me, for instance by making sure that my coat didn’t fall on the floor. I was seated between Ola and Nelly. Ola asked me many questions, and when she heard that I was visiting from Europe she told me about her travels. I assumed she was a volunteer until she started repeating the same questions again and again. Nelly, on the other hand, seemed
Figure 2. (a to d) Bob greeting a friend (NYMC, 2 April 2014).
incapable of speaking but made contact with me by smiling and letting me hold her hand.
When the poetry performance started, I made more mistakes in repeating the words and
accompanying gestures than the people with dementia even though I had watched the APP
YouTube clips before and read the APP anthology. This was certainly not only because I am
not a native speaker of English, but also I clearly lacked experience with the intervention’s
procedure. In other words, the participants gave proof of their capacity to learn beyond
memorizing poetry, which Glazner noticed upon several occasions as well (cf. conversation 3
February 2014) and sometimes is ascribed to the plasticity of the brain (cf. Cohen, 2005).
Within a month, I moved to a seat next to Glazner and intermittently took the lead in the
call and response. This confused some of the people with dementia because they were
familiar with repeating Glazner’s words, not mine. My presence implied a shift in their
routine. Gradually, the participants grew accustomed to my presence. During a session in
June—four months after my arrival—two participants surprised me by asking when I was
going home to Holland.

Spatio-temporal situation
As space is constitutive of social relations, it is important to consider the setting of the poetry
interventions. Does the environment of the intervention offer the sense of safety and freedom
that collaborative creative explorations require (Lee & Adams, 2011, p. 8)? The APP
interventions that I participated in took place in the NYMC, located in South Park
Slope, Brooklyn. NYMC offers adult day programming that meets the needs of people
from the early stage to the early–late stages of memory loss. Part of NYMC’s
programming appeals to the creative arts, ranging from music, fine arts, and dance to
poetry and phototherapy to establish a community in which people with dementia
have the opportunity to experience a sense of purpose and success. Key staff are certified
in the Therapeutic Thematic Arts Programming (TTAP) Method developed by
Linda Levine Madori. Through engagement in creative activities, this method aims to
promote the strengths and abilities of people with dementia such as the continuing
capacity and desire to communicate and connect with others, indicate preferences and
dislikes, and express emotions (Madori, 2012, p. 29). Christopher Nadeau, Executive
Director of NYMC, has identified improved cohesion among members of the program,
decreased feelings of isolation and depression, and delayed institutionalization as results
of the implementation of TTAP (Nadeau, 2012, p. xi). For its comprehensive
complementary treatment approaches, NYMC has been awarded numerous times, such as
with the Enhanced Project Award of the New York City Department of Aging. In short,
NYMC is a unique space in which the arts are an important tool for person-centered care.

The moment one enters NYMC, there is very little that evokes the clinical atmosphere often
characteristic of professional care environments. NYMC is located on the first floor of a
former school. The room where the poetry interventions take place has a high ceiling and
wooden floor. A mural with a spring scene, a piano, an old chalkboard, and art works made by
the participants themselves serve as decorations. Large windows let natural light in. The
participants are sitting in half a circle surrounding the artist, which is reminiscent of the
way a stage is set in site-specific theatre to provide a great flexibility of performer–audience
interaction (cf. Novak, 2011, p. 208). The participants face each other because mutual
visibility enhances spectator–spectator communication. Glazner does not simply stand in
front of the audience but walks about and initiates physical contact like handholding to
create more intimacy. Some of the participants with dementia have fixed places. This reflects the friendship among them, the importance of which often remains unacknowledged in care settings (cf. De Medeiros, Saunders, Doyle, Mosby, & Van Haitsma, 2011). In addition, fixed places undermine potential irritation by certain participants over the obsessive–compulsive behaviors of others, such as the repetitive kicking of one leg. Glazner has collaborated with NYMC as an artist in residence for several years and performs there sometimes up to three times a week. This has given him the opportunity to work with the same people over a longer period of time and establish a sense of trust and comradeship. The following section is dedicated to the analysis of Glazner’s key strategies to establish interaction with people with dementia through poetry.

Key strategies to enhance dialog through poetry

The social and instructive function of paratext

Glazner consistently makes use of paratext, a concept originally introduced by Genette with reference to written literature but transferred by Novak (2011, p. 139) to the context of live poetry. Paratexts concern all elements that are not really part of the performed poem proper but do have an influence on its meaning and reception. I distinguish between two types of paratextual elements in Glazner’s poetry interventions depending on their function.

The first and most prominent paratext is social in nature. It serves primarily to establish contact with the participants, to get them immersed in the live event, and to give them a sense of accomplishment. There are different ways to achieve this. One way to trigger responses is to announce what the topic of the poem is or to give some background information on the poet. In his trainings, Glazner refers to this technique as discussions around the poems. For an outsider, it may seem as if the performer starts teaching a class on poetry. Yet, the paratextual elements are introduced not so much for their informational as their social value. When Glazner, for instance, introduces “The Raven” (1845) by Edgar Allan Poe, he might write the name Poe on the blackboard asking what the result would be if the letter “t” were added to the word. Participants predictably will reply “poet,” which prompts the performer to comment that Poe’s name already foretold his future as wordsmith. Some members of the live audience will not only arrive at “poet” but also extend their response with rhyme: “He’s a poet and doesn’t know it, but his feet surely show it, cause they’re Longfellows.” Hence, the initial paratextual question and comment by the performer get the ball rolling. What is characteristic of the poetry intervention is that this type of social paratext generally is not linked to a visual cue such as a photograph or a prop that invites role-play. Poems are the starting point for the exchange.

Discussions around poems not only precede poetry performances but may come after them as well, as the following transcription of an audiotext illustrates:

1  G so that’s the raven by edgar allan poe, what do you think about ravens? has anybody ever seen one?
2  A (noise)
3  P park
4  G there is crows too right?
5  P oh yeah
6  G yeah. you’ve seen them a lot in the park? how big are they?… what do you think?… not that big right?
This exchange between performer and audience shows that Glazner adopts an “intentional stance” (Sabat, 2001, pp. 37, 89) toward the speech acts of the participants. He assumes that everything they try to communicate makes sense in the context of the conversation. The poet makes use of gestures to support his question about the size of the crow and adjusts his tempo to give one participant ample opportunity to make the comparison between the crow and a baby. He then validates this response by repeating it twice, as well as by improvising about holding an imaginary baby crow. He even embodies the crow and uses onomatopoetic sounds to shriek like a restless young bird. In the end, they will all sing the lullaby “Rock-a-bye Baby” to quiet the bird. The playful social paratext about holding a baby crow is a way to strengthen the interpersonal relationships within the group, to build a sense of community (cf. Stevens, 2012), and to establish a failure-free zone. Buoyancy is characteristic of Glazner’s performance style. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the first ever poetry recitation of the NYMC Poetry Precision Drill Team” is, for instance, his typical announcement of the performance of the poems that he has created with the audience. Of course, we cannot be sure that the participants always understand the performer’s witty comments on a cognitive level. They might just mirror his smile and laughter. Not coincidentally, one of the exercises that often accompany the poetry performances is precisely the passing of a smile, which all participants are capable of executing.

Another type of social paratext honors the words of the participants and, in doing so, stimulates their sense of self-esteem. It can take the form of positive feedback by the performer, such as “that’s really beautiful” and “give yourselves a round of applause.” Or, the poet might offer the people with dementia the chance to verbalize their experiences by asking questions like “how does it feel to say the words of the poem out loud” and “can I come back another time?” I have only witnessed affirmative replies to these questions, which in their turn contribute to the confidence of the performer.

The second type of paratext is instructive, as it aims to make the intervention’s procedure explicit and understandable to the participants. For instance, Glazner explains the call and response technique by conscientiously declaring that he will say a line and inviting the audience to repeat after him. In this case, the paratext “I say it, you say it,” reinforced by deictic gestures pointing to performer and participants, clarifies their respective roles (Figure 3(a) and (b)). Another paratext that highlights the procedure refers to the way the poet-performer encourages the people with dementia to create a new poem together. He will, for instance, explain that they will apply the poetic technique of simile. In short, in the context of poetry interventions, social and instructive paratexts are really meant to induce responses in the people with dementia and to keep the dialog going in a comforting and mutually appreciative atmosphere.
Call and response through words and illustrators

The second aspect central to Glazner’s approach to poetry interventions is call and response or antiphony, a performance model that relies on audience participation. Although the origin of this performance model reaches back to ancient times, we are probably most familiar with call and response today as a specific style of religious singing such as gospel (cf. Bernstein, 1998, p. 7). Antiphony demands that the performer and participants work together to guarantee that the artful encounter will be meaningful to both parties present (Sale, 1992, p. 41). The success of the exchange does not lie so much in the faithful reproduction of the original text as in the ability to involve others. In the context of Glazner’s poetry interventions, the performer says one line and the people with dementia repeat this line on their terms. This implies that they may only partially take over the words, change the words, or just make lip movements without producing sound. Especially for people who are moderate to very verbal, call and response works perfectly to induce active vocal involvement in the performance. Again, we will never be able to tell whether the repetition of a line is a “true” iteration or rather an example of “empty” speech (cf. Wray, 2010, p. 229). The point is, however, that call and response enables the participants to take a turn, which involves them actively in the speech act.

Glazner’s version of call and response entails more than verbal expressiveness or the repetition of words. Typically, after a round of group recitations, the performer invites the participants to suggest gestures to accompany the words. Rhetoricians have long acknowledged the potential of hand movements to improve the efficiency of verbal...
communication. Austin’s standard work Chironomia (1806), for instance, contains detailed drawings of standardized hand movements that were an intrinsic part of the poetry reading in the early 19th century. Today, in slam poetry happenings and events of the national recitation contest Poetry Out Loud, the use of gestures is less formalized and less predominant. Glazner’s interventions, though, go back to the reliance on hand movements in a more systematic way. In particular, he encourages the audience to come up with “illustrators” (cf. Novak, 2011, p. 162). These are gestures that illustrate the verbal text and amplify its meaning. In the use of illustrators, Kontos (2012, p. 338) sees evidence of Merleau Ponty’s claim that speech is an inherently gestural system. Glazner’s interventions capitalize on the particular union of speech and gesture in oral poetry.

A poem that turns out to lend itself particularly well to the integration of illustrators is “The Eagle” (1851) by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. In the following audiotext, the performer starts off with an instructive paratext emphasizing the advantages of movements before initiating call and response enriched with gestures that the participants provided earlier in the intervention:

1. G > so let’s try it again so the idea of putting these movements to the poem is that when we can perform the poem together, but we also it’s almost like we are doing an exercise right so we are bringing in oxygen and spending it out through saying the poem but we are also moving our bodies to it, so you can extend your arms out, really feel your arms extending when you do the crooked rock, will you feel (...) your arms extend out okay, alright here we go I say it you say it, the eagle< ((arms spread like wings))
2. A the eagle ((arms spread like wings))
3. G he grasps the rock with crooked hands ((both hands make a firm grip))
4. A he grasps the rock with crooked hands ((both hands make a firm grip))
5. G below the sun in lonely lands
6. A below the sun in lonely lands
7. G the wrinkled see beneath him crawls ((right hand makes a wave))
8. A the wrinkled see beneath him crawls ((right hand makes a wave))
9. G he watches from his mountain walls ((both hands form a pair of binoculars))
10. A he watches from his mountain walls ((both hands form a pair of binoculars))
11. G and like a thunderbolt he falls ((right hand strikes downwards))
12. A and like a thunderbolt he falls ((right hand strikes downwards))

The gestures that the participants came up with provide information on spatial relations such as the size of the eagle, or draw a picture of the referent, the wrinkled sea for instance. Yet, most gestures depict bodily action, like holding the rock with crooked hands. The hand movements offer the people with dementia not only another chance to communicate meaning beyond the voicing of words but also an opportunity to express their personality. Some of them show great esthetic sensitivity when suggesting especially graceful and creative movements. By appealing to the movement repertoire of the participants, Glazner gives proof of his “kinaesthetic empathy” (Coaten & Newman-Bluestein, 2013, p. 678). In his appreciation of the gestural quality of the interaction, he sometimes even goes so far as entirely leaving out the words of the poem.

People with dementia who only sporadically contribute verbally to the call and response of poems do participate in making movements. The facial expression of the participant Virginia, for instance, predominantly seems vacant during Glazner’s interventions, as if
she withdraws into a world of her own (Figure 4(a) and (b)). But we should not too quickly read disengagement from people with dementia’s faces. After several repetitions of “The Eagle” accompanied with illustrators, Virginia starts imitating the gestures, often at a different pace than the performer and most of the audience (Figure 4(c) and (d)). She clearly needs time to become involved in the communicative world of the event. Virginia’s sudden, more active engagement in the intervention endorses the idea that “strategies relying on nonverbal behaviour have the potential to be inclusive” (Hubbard, Cook, Tester, & Downs, 2002, p. 164). Her performance confirms research that has shown that older people with dementia still possess skills in body communication and use gestures to compensate for verbal loss (Hubbard et al., 2002). The integration of illustrators in the call and response technique, therefore, is an especially fruitful way to stimulate the interaction with as many participants as possible through poetry within the time frame of the event.

**Rhythm and rhyme in call and response**

Glazner’s performances start from published, often canonical poems. The most common way to analyze these written poems’ rhythm is the distinction between metrical and nonmetrical. When a poem is recited, though, this distinction usually becomes unproductive (Novak, 2011, pp. 86–87). Instead of evoked aurality, that is the inherent sound of the written word, the audiotext does not follow lines on a page as a rhythmic unit. Instead, regular and irregular rhythmic patterns and tempo variations set a mood, express an attitude, or add humor. Bernstein (1998, p. 14) uses the word isochrony to refer to the audible tempo that outshines the significance of meter in poetry performances. Yet, in Glazner’s adaptations of famous poems, the meter and rhyme of the original often become the backbone of the performance. For instance, we can compare the trochaic octameter (eight trochaic feet per line, each foot having one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable) and internal rhyme scheme (AABCCB) of the first stanza from “The Raven” with Glazner’s version:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary, AA
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore— /B
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping, CC
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door. CB
‘‘Tis some visitor,’’ I muttered, ‘‘tapping at my chamber door— /B
Only this and nothing more.’’ B

1  G there we go ready? once upon a midnight dreary
2  A once upon a midnight dreary
3  G while I ponder weak and weary
4  A while I ponder weak and weary
5  G while I nodded nearly napping
6  A while I nodded nearly napping
7  G zz: ((pretend to be asleep))
8  A zz: ((pretend to be asleep))
9  G suddenly there came a tapping
10 A suddenly there came a tapping
11 G knock knock knock ((knock on door with right hand))
12 A knock knock knock ((knock on door with right hand))
13 G as if someone gently rapping
14 A as if someone gently rapping
15 G rapping at my chamber door
16 A rapping at my chamber door
17 G quote the raven: nevemore
18 A quote the raven: nevermore

Figure 4. (a to d) Virginia performing “The Eagle” through illustrators (NYMC, 19 March 2014).
Glazner’s adaptation is a much-simplified version of the original first stanza. Instead of using “only this and nothing more” to end his sequence, the performer incorporates “quote the raven: nevermore,” the most famous line of “The Raven.” This line, however, seems out of context in Glazner’s audiotext. The raven has not been introduced yet as a character, nor has the lyrical “I” started questioning the enigmatic and frightful bird. Hence, pleasure seems less located in the comprehension of the words than in the physical sensation of the rhythmical declamation of the words. Meter and rhyme serve primarily as a loud regular beat that supports participants’ engagement in the call and response process.

In poetry interventions, voicing the response makes participants feel the beat in their vocal tract. To expand and intensify the bodily experience, Glazner invites them frequently to use motor gestures (Novak, 2011, p. 161) as well. These are rhythmic movements such as hand clapping, thigh slapping, and feet tapping that reinforce the emphasis of the spoken words. In other words, motor gestures are another type of gesture besides illustrators that are meant to assure that the performance of poetic language feeds body and senses. Motor gestures make “body and words beat as one” (Robson, 2012, p. 96). Occasionally, Glazner leaves words and gestures behind and engages in a rhythmic call and response of click consonants only. When great intimacy has been established among participants during an intervention, he even might start orchestrating the audience’s breathing until they all breathe together rhythmically. Usually, the performance of the religious song “Amen” makes the bridge to a collective breathing session based on the melody’s “a-” sound.

In the video “Manuela Drums the Raven” on the APP YouTube channel, we can see how participant Manuela supports Glazner’s performance of “The Raven” by turning the table into a drum instrument. During the first round of repetition, Glazner initiates click consonants to accentuate the beat together with Manuela. Thereafter, they do a call and response. When Manuela stops drumming, it becomes increasingly difficult for her to repeat the words of the live text. She almost stumbles over “weak and weary” until she uses her hands again. Traditionally, meter and rhyme have functioned as a memory aid in the process of learning texts by heart (Robson, 2012, p. 116). It seems as if Manuela intuitively adheres to motor gestures to be able to recall the line and execute the response. Nelly, a second example, is one of the participants who never speak during the interventions. She also is not capable of producing gestures that illustrate the performed poems. The majority of the time, she frantically rubs her hands. However, motor gestures emphasizing the beat of the performance sometimes distract her from her nervous twitch. At the end of one of the sessions, a percussionist entered the room and handed out instruments to the audience. Without hesitation, Nelly grabbed a tambourine, jumped from her chair, and started to move the instrument and her body to the beat of the spoken poem (Figure 5). From these two examples, it follows that regular audible beats enhance the involvement of participants with different capabilities in poetry interventions.

**Call and response and memorized song**

Glazner moves from speech to song and back during his interventions; he brings poems together with popular songs into thematic medleys. The sonnet “The New Colossus” (1881) by Emma Lazarus about the statue of liberty merges, for instance, with the patriotic song “America, the Beautiful” (1895). A part of Edward Lear’s “The Owl and the Pussy-Cat” (1871) blends with the first stanza of Sinatra’s “Fly Me to the Moon” (1964), of which the
last words, “baby kiss me” are poignantly replaced by “don’t you kiss me.” Sinatra is the favorite singer of one of the participants, who has learned to make the bridge between the poem and the song and to take the lead in the performance of the song:

1. G hand in hand
2. A hand in hand
3. G by the edge of the sand
4. A by the edge of the sand
5. G we danced by the light of the moon

Figure 5. Nelly participating in the performance of “The Raven” by playing the tambourine (NYMC, 4 April 2014).
The inclusion of songs serves to intensify and expand the verbal engagement of the participants in the intervention. Indeed, research has shown that nursery rhymes, pop, and folk songs as a specific type of speech act are unaffected by progressive cognitive illnesses that cause language decline (Van Lancker Sidtis, 2009). They invite spontaneous recollection of words and melodies, which isn’t cognitively motivated. This explains why the participants easily can move back and forth between on the one hand repeating the lines of a classical poem through call and response and, on the other hand, collectively singing songs and reciting nursery rhymes such as “I See the Moon,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and “Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary.” In the context of my argumentation, nursery rhymes are an interesting case because they are part of the oral poetry tradition. Why is it that participants in the poetry interventions can always spontaneously recollect nursery rhymes while they only sporadically are able to recite poems by heart without support of the performer?

We learn nursery rhymes by heart during early childhood. Once learned by heart, they enter the realm of ritual and become a “thing beyond languages” and cognition (Derrida, 1988, p. 229; cf. De Roder, 2002). All poetry might have the potential to become a “thing beyond languages,” but in all likelihood this requires training in poetry performance during childhood. According to Robson (2012), the period of 1870 till 1950 was the heyday of the memorized poem in the United States (most participants of the NYMC grew up between the 1920s and 1940s). The memorization and recitation of literary texts formed a regular part of a child’s learning experience each year (Robson, 2012, p. 65). Educational administrators selected literary works, for instance “The Arrow and the Song” (1845) by Henry W. Longfellow to develop a literary canon targeted to specific age groups. The underlying assumption was that continued training in memorizing poems would improve and expand people’s ability to remember (Robson, 2012, p. 71). We can only speculate that when a participant in a poetry intervention today is capable of reciting poems by heart, he or she must have learned how to do this earlier in life. Alternatively, teaching could have been the participant’s profession. Another possible explanation is that people with dementia learn the poems during their sessions with Gary. Evidence of the latter is that I observed an increase in the number of times when participants were capable of completing lines of famous poems during the course of my five-month observation. Examples of such lines are: “And then my heart with pleasure fills/And dances with the daffodils” from William Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” (1888) and “Poems are made by fools like me|But only God can make a tree” from Joyce Kilmer’s poem “Trees” (1914). Because Glazner stimulates participants to repeat certain poems up to 12 times by means of call and response, emphasizing the beat both in speech and gesture, his
approach encourages poetic lines to become part of the participants’ repertoire. The capability of recalling or learning them anew, however, is never a prerequisite for the poetry intervention to be successful. Call and response does not require the recollection of poetic lines other than the immediate repetition of the words delivered by the poet.

From the 1960s onwards, memorizing poetry lost ground in the educational system because it was regarded as an outdated pedagogical technique that killed the joy in the development of literacy (Robson, 2012). For this reason, today’s children (except for the ones participating in Poetry Out Loud) will not learn how to memorize poems to the same extent as previous generations. Glazner doesn’t believe, however, that we should be all too pessimistic about the disappearance of poetry memorization from learning programs (conversation 21 May 2014). He is convinced that young people today have better skills in improvisation thanks to, for instance, their familiarity with rap music routines. The question that remains is what the relative importance is of improvisation as opposed to memorization in the success of poetry interventions.

**Formulaic language in collaborative improvisations**

One of the assumptions behind cultural arts interventions is that they appeal to the creativity and imagination of people with dementia (cf. Basting, 2009; Lee & Adams, 2011). If we define creativity and imagination in terms of verbalizing unusual thoughts or new perspectives on the world, I have found little evidence to this claim in the poetry interventions. This becomes especially clear when looking into the technique behind the creation of group poems. During collaborative improvisations of poetry, participants describe procedures, situations, and moods rather than create storylines. Most inclusive are improvisations around practices and experiences that all audience members are probably familiar with, such as morning routines, preparing a Thanksgiving meal, the rules of baseball or popular children’s games, and how to court and declare love to someone. These topics invite people with dementia to fall back on experience to comply with the immediacy of response-based interaction without requiring a performance of self that relies on the recollection of a specific event in the past. Thinking out of the box, for instance by linking a general theme like love with a taste, smell, or sound, turns out to be much more challenging than reiterating the familiar or the everyday. Then again, this might not only be challenging for people with dementia but for any adult who is not used to participating in this kind of creative exercise. Collaborative improvisations are more demanding for people with dementia than poetry performances (cf. Furman, 2012, p. 176) because the poet’s open questions are meant to elicit novel language output instead of repetitions. To compensate for their diminished capacity to produce language, participants make frequent use of commonplaces and formulaic expressions that they have developed over a lifetime and that are anchored in cultural tradition. They often repeat the same answers as well as each other’s answers. This way, almost each person with dementia is capable of taking a conversational turn, a prerequisite for successful verbal interaction (cf. Wray, 2010, pp. 524–525).

I will now focus on a concrete example of a collaborative improvisation to take a closer look at the function of commonplaces and formulaic language. Glazner opens one of his interventions with the call and response of the poem “Bleezer’s Ice Cream” (1940) by Jack Prelutsky. In this poem, the lyrical “I” presents unusual ice cream flavors that he has stored in his freezer: “Cocoa mocha macaroni\Tapioca smoked baloney\Checkerberry cheddar chew/Chicken cherry honeydew etc.” The idea is to create a similar poem with the
audience based on their favorite ice cream that they then will turn into odd flavors. The participants have no problem naming their favorite ice cream. Vanilla and chocolate are the winners. Identifying which toppings they would choose also goes rather smoothly. Whipped cream, strawberries, cherries, banana, a waffle, and syrup are the toppings of choice. People increasingly start repeating each other’s answers so that they became sort of formulaic (cf. Wray, 2010, p. 523). Participant Norman quotes from a song: “I scream/You scream/We all scream for ice cream.” Quoting has become entirely formulaic for Norman (cf. Wray, 2010, p. 523) and is just one form of formulaic expression that helps him manifest his personhood. Each collaborative improvisation triggers one of his funny sayings, such as “They will put us on television so they can turn us off. I’ve been turned off before.” And: “I was a soda jerk (a term referring to jerking the draft arms on drugstore fountains) but my dad said: ‘You’re just a jerk.” These may be turns of phrase that he has used for many years. Especially the men in the back row of the group respond to Norman’s formulaic expressions with appreciative laughter and do not seem to mind that he sometimes repeats them up to 12 times.

When Glazner then tries to encourage the participants to create surprising ice cream flavors similar to the ones in Prelutsky’s poem, they are not capable of complying with the request:

1. G: what’s something unusual you might put on it [ice cream] something that’s different maybe an animal, what animal goes with vanilla ice cream?
2. A: ((silence))
3. N: I’ve no idea
4. G: what are some animals we wanna make a list of animals and we will pick one to put on our vanilla ice cream, so what are some animals?
5. P: ((with Italian roots)) la mangia de ice cream
6. G: you’re gonna mangia the ice cream with an animal heh heh heh that will drool on it. what do you think? what’s an animal what’s an animal that you like?
7. P: ((noise))
8. G: what’s it?
9. P: I wouldn’t know
10. G: anybody have a pet a favorite pet?
11. S: kittens
12. G: you have… a kitten so what about vanilla with kittens ((S makes a grimace and B raises her hands in disbelief, others shake their heads)) that could be good. vanilla kitten ice cream I think it’s a new Ben & Jerry’s flavor… what’s your favorite ice cream S?
13. S: chocolate
14. G: chocolate okay chocolate… so we’re creating unusual ice creams that’s the game so we’re gonna create an unusual ice cream, let’s try this
15. P: ((with Italian roots)) la limonata

In this transcribed audiotext enriched with details of body communication, formulaic language such as “I have no idea” and “I wouldn’t know” keeps the interaction going without delivering the anticipated input. It is clearly the performer who combines the ice cream flavor with the pet of an audience member. Some participants make use of facial expression and gestures to show that they are rather reluctant to contribute to the game. When the performer continues and asks for vegetables instead of animals to combine with
the usual ice cream flavors, the Italian participant loses her temper and keeps repeating: “limone e cioccolato, that’s it, basta!” In doing so, she clearly indicates her desire to stick to what’s customary. The day before, Glazner did the same exercise with participants without apparent memory problems in the Park Slope Senior Center, which makes it possible to compare the two interventions. It turned out that it was much easier for the cognitively stronger people to combine their favorite ice cream flavors with animals, which resulted for instance in “strawberry ice cream with sparrow sprinkles” and “magnolia scum with possum.”

The tendency to revert to routines and commonplaces does not imply the interventions with the people with dementia are less successful. My point is that Glazner capitalizes on this inclination of the participants by turning the formulaic and repetitive answers into lengthy and creative call and response sessions. He uses the words of the participants verbatim and thereby honors their unique individual expressions. But he also relies on his own talent as a poet-performer to play with language and turn these expressions into rhythmic and occasionally even rhyming unities. For example, Glazner turns the inventory of favorite ice cream flavors and toppings into “And cherries/And syrup/Sounds great/Sounds better/Than vanilla with kittens” and “Chocolate/With cherries/And whipped cream/Do you know what I mean/Jellybean”? The quote “I scream/You scream/We all scream for ice cream” develops into “We all smile for ice cream” and is accompanied with orchestrated bursts of laughter. Glazner ends the performance of the group poem though call and response with: “That was our ice cream poem brought to you by Ben & Jerry’s.” Thus, the bits and pieces of language that are delivered by the people with dementia become oral poetry by the interference of the poet. Glazner’s panache is an important part of bringing the lyrical into the everyday. For aspirant poetry performers who are not professional artists, his imaginative and often whimsical synthesis will be the most challenging part of the intervention to match.

Conclusion: “Take What You Have and Use It Again and Again”

It has become clear that answers to the question of how poetry works in the setting of person-centered dementia care need to be sought in the characteristics of the poetry intervention as a specific live participatory event. The significance of the poetry intervention in terms of generating exchange between the performer and the people with dementia is to be found in the sensation of the communal performance of poetic language as a turn in dialog through call and response, thereby capitalizing on the expressive potential of the body. In addition, the positive impact of the poetry intervention can be ascribed to the room it offers for the input of formulaic language, commonalities, and other vocal input by people with dementia, which develop into new, pulsing and rhyming sessions thanks to the creative talent of the poet. Hence, it would be imprecise to look at these newly created performed poems as representations of the participants’ experience of the disease or as evidence of the poetic quality of “dementia language.” During one of Glazner’s interventions, the performer experienced a lack of inspiration. He asked the audience rhetorically: “What should we do next?” One of the participants replied firmly: “Take what you have and use it again and again!” There is no better way to express the significance of repetition for the many ways dialog is established in the poetry intervention. As long as there are poems, words, sounds, and gestures to share, there seems no limit to the endless variations of performed poems.

Apart from getting a better understanding of the poetry intervention as a specific cultural arts intervention, this research should help formulate guidelines for aspirant performers so that they can expand their toolkit for the enhancement of communication with people with
dementia. It has become clear that regarding the selection of poems suitable for performance, a performer should not be afraid to make famous poems his or her own by simplifying words and augmenting regular rhythmic and rhyming patterns. Having memorized the poems by heart earlier in life is subordinate to the impact of the repetition of verses in the here and now of the event. Several means to stimulate the involvement of people with dementia in the event are characteristic of Glazner’s method and are easy to learn, such as the implementation of the call and response technique, the invitation to suggest illustrators to emphasize the meaning of the words and incorporation of these gestures into the performances, the use of motoric gestures to accentuate the rhythm of the spoken words, and the movement between speech and song. While communicating with the participants, it is important to talk the audience continuously through the procedure, making use of deictic gestures, as well as to validate and echo all contributions. In addition, there is always the opportunity to move around the room, initiating physical contact with the participants and letting the poem’s fictional addressee and speaker overlap with its actual audience and speaker. People who have witnessed Glazner’s collaboration with people with dementia are likely to feel that they will never be able to meet the quality of his performance, his stage presence, and the originality of his artistic spirit. In my opinion, it is certainly true that anyone can take the lead in a poetry intervention, but that doesn’t turn it into a jolly “poetry party,” to use Glazner’s own words (NCCA conference 13 June 2014). Glazner’s talent as a live poet cannot entirely be imitated, but it might inspire other people who have a gift for lyricism and language play to rely on their own creativity and make the APP method their own.

This article started with the poem “Just as to a Sick Daughter You Say,” in which poetry is put in the tradition of healing through words. Novak’s communication model of live poetry has been instrumental in my understanding of the healing power of poetry interventions. It is in the ongoing exchange between performer and audience who simultaneously produce and consume poetry that comfort is found not only for the people with dementia but the poet-performer as well. Further research could compare poetry interventions in a cross-cultural setting. As the APP method has been implemented in Germany and Poland, it would be interesting to see whether this transposition has influenced the techniques that stimulate the exchange with people with dementia through poetry. In addition, research into the differences and similarities between the poetry intervention and other cultural arts interventions (e.g. comparing APP as a lyrical method with the storytelling or narrative method behind Timeslips cf. Basting, 2001) would further improve our understanding of the arts and creativity in dementia care. As Foley writes, “Oral poetry is a people’s poetry” (2002, p. 28). Poetry interventions offer people with and without dementia an opportunity to connect and deserve to be researched and implemented on a larger scale.

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**Notes**

1. I realize that choosing the word “intervention” to refer to artistic approaches to dementia care is controversial (cf. the debate on the arts in dementia care research; Broderick, 2011; De Medeiros & Basting, 2014; Dupuis et al., 2012; Roche, Napier, Maguire, & McCann, 2008). Yet, alternatives such as “practice,” “approach,” “program,” or “workshop” tend to downplay the professionalism and expertise of the performers and may not raise the interest of the multidisciplinary readership that this piece hopes to invite. Performers specialized in the exchange with people with dementia through art hope to get more recognition for their work by aligning themselves with medical interventions and therapies. As such, the choice for the word “intervention” is part of this positioning practice.

2. I use the term dementia to refer to Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias. Just like the performer, I did not have access to medical files of individual participants. This allowed me to start my participatory observations at the daycare facility with an open mind as to who the participants were and what they were capable of.

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**Aagje MC Swinnen**, PhD, is Assistant Professor at the Center for Gender and Diversity, and the Department of Literature and Art of Maastricht University (NL), cofounder and current deputy chair of the European Network in Aging Studies as well as coeditor of the new journal *Age, Culture, Humanities*. She has published on representations of dementia in film in *The Gerontologist and Journal of Aging Studies* as well as co-edited the volume *Popularizing Dementia: Expressions and Representations of Forgetfulness* (Transcript, forthcoming). Swinnen is committed to research that brings perspectives on aging from the social sciences and the humanities together.