UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MACERATA

DIPARTIMENTO di STUDI UMANISTICI

CORSO DI DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN

Studi Linguistici, Filologici, Letterari

CICLO XXXII

TITOLO DELLA TESI

Performance Poetry
A Tactile-Kinesthetic *Poiesis*

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ANNO 2020/2021
(quello della discussione finale)

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Introduction

> Performers assert that the poem exists in multiple forms, that the reading of a poem is the thing itself just as the printed text is. If you've learned your poetry from hip hop and slams and television, it's obvious the book does not "contain" the poem –it transmits it. When you read a poem, just as when you read a play, the words begin their work on you. Unlike the dialogue in a play, the words in a poem are not spoken by characters […] the *words* are the characters […] Whether read silently to one's self or aloud to others, a poem is made as it connects the consciousness of poet and reader/listener. A poem isn't written until it is read and heard.
>
> (Bob Holman, *Burning Down the House*, 2000)

As Louis Armand aptly claims in the introduction to the volume *Contemporary Poetics*, "contemporary" and "poetics" are two terms that "taken separately or together, signify a field of discourse which remains today both problematic and highly contested within the disciplines of philology, applied poetics, and literary studies" (Armand 2007, xiii), as well as in those numerous fields where poetry may be found tangentially related to technology (i.e.: aesthetics, digital humanities, media studies, performance studies, cultural studies, and philosophy). In this relation between poetry, as both poetics and praxis, and the technological present, Armand refers to contemporary poetics as a way to both study and respond to the current technological "emplacement of language and the material basis of this emplacement as an 'object' of poetic investigation, practice, and above all *technique*" (Armand 2007, xiii). In this sense, the relationship between the contemporary and its many poetries and poetics does not imply the delineation of a specific historical and literary period but should rather be conceived in terms of a "condition of writing," of a "poetic enterprise" (Armand 2007, xiii). Thus, by extending the critical discourse beyond the current literary activity, Armand posits

that it is possible to investigate the limits of the poetic writing practice, while re-negotiating the terms of the old dichotomy between poetics and praxis, since the two are now deeply intertwined thanks to, or because of, digital and technological devices. Such an emphasis on the aesthetic and philosophical implications of the writing practice might be useful to problematize assertions of literary historicity, in order to serve as a starting point for an in-depth analysis of the increasing fragmentation of the current poetic scenario, which is one of the consequences of the digital revolution. In this light, talking about poetic form and aesthetic means to address problematic issues of both social and political nature (Oliver 1989; Sheppard 2016), since "poetry is never neutral and purely aesthetic, and it is never free from the society where it is produced and received."[1] Therefore, working with lines, white spaces, and signs of punctuation is not a mere choice of style but a historical and cultural act of (re)action, as Marjorie Perloff widely highlights in her account of the "so-called freedom of free verse" by historicizing the response to lineation:

> In a contemporary context of one-liners on the television screen and computer monitor as well as lineated ads, greeting cards, and catalog entries, the reader/viewer has become quite accustomed to reading "in lines." Indeed, surfing the Internet is largely a scanning process in which the line is rapidly replacing the paragraph as the unit to be accessed. (Perloff 1998, 145)

Looking at the recent history of this genre, from the advent of concrete poetry, the reemergence of popular poetry, and the many types of digital poems—kinetic poems, multimedia poems, interactive poems, e-poems, etc.— some of the consequences of that "epistemological transformation" (Gioia 2003, 3) brought about by the proliferation of electronic technology in "communication, storage, and retrieval of information" (Gioia 2003, 1) reveal a radical change in contemporary language production and reception, as well as in the narrative frameworks of today's literary discourse. The digital revolution has seriously challenged our conception of time, by de-structuring and re-framing "concepts of 'presence'

[1] Excerpt from Dorothy Wang's inaugural speech at the two-days conference *Poetry Studies Now*, April 26, 2019, Martin E. Segal Theatre, The Graduate Center (CUNY), NY.

and the 'present'" (Armand 2007, xvi), with the consequent shifting from literary media to communication media.[2] Such a "translation" is not only deeply affecting the literary device – due to the tendency to suppress temporal elements in the name of a continuous, uninterrupted, digital present– but it is also demanding new reading practices and a new idea of poetry as well. With reference to the blog-poem –a poem that often does not look like a poem, but it is more similar to an entry[3]– Tan Lin notes that the idea of a poem as a finished object, that stands on its own, has disappeared. A thought shared by Adalaide Morris when she comments:

> Unlike traditional print poetry, finally, new media poems are not often lineated or rhymed, do not necessarily maintain stable or consistent configurations, and seem by nature to bend—if not break—the founding constraints of the lyric as violently as hypermedia, computer games, and interactive fiction bend or break the constraints of narrative. (Morris 2006, 7)

In this hypertextual, multimodal, inter-connected framework, poems can exist in many different configurations and likewise live in numerous media at the same time. Whether readers become listeners, viewers, participants, or "users," "operators," "interactors," who cross, navigate, and/or reconfigure the electronic poetic text, poems break the constraints of form and genre, generating "new media compositions" (Morris 2006, 7). Indeed, the technological revolution has been intensifying poetry's qualities of plasticity and porosity, while it has been re-framing the experience of writing. In this complex and heterogeneous context, where both people and texts live inside and outside the digital world, two pillars of the poetic discourse seem to have been shaken: form and genre. If form and genre are not operative terms anymore, if they do not work in terms of model nor structure for poets' operative actions, then the poem turns into a medium. It becomes both a transmission mode and a research tool to investigate new concepts of writing. Poets explore new forms of

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[2] From Tan Lin's speech at the same conference, day one.

[3] *Ibidem*.

expression which question language and the very writing practice itself. And poetry becomes a field for artistic experimentation, that problematizes the *différance* of, in, and among the arts, while blurring and merging the new with the old, language with sculpture, sound with body, movement with image, silence with presence, etc. In this light, a dissertation on performance poetry becomes a field of literary, historical, and cultural inquiry. What does it mean to go back to the body, to the spoken word, in the digital age? Is performance a *praxis*, a poetics, both of them, or, what?

Moreover, previous studies on the influence of communications technologies on our cognitive abilities have shown how the digital devices are profoundly shaping our mental processing system in terms of construction of knowledge, elaboration of our subjectivity/subjectivities, definitions of behavioral patterns, and mechanisms of social interaction.[4] In his study of the modern mind, Merlin Donald claims that we are living a third cognitive evolution, in which we have become "symbol-using, networked creatures, unlike any that went before us" (Donald 1991, 382).

> Our minds function on several phylogenetically new representational planes, none of which are available to animals. We act in cognitive collectivities, in symbiosis with external memory systems. As we develop new external symbolic configurations and modalities, we reconfigure our own mental architecture in nontrivial ways. The third transition has led to one of the greatest reconfigurations of cognitive structure in mammalian history, without major genetic change. In principle, this process could continue, and we may not yet have seen the final modular configuration of the modern human mind. (Donald 1991, 382)

Thus, the pervasive presence of media –as "subjectivizing machines with more and more symbolic functions" (Morse 1998, 6)– not only reconfigures the complex "architecture" of the human mind, but also lays the groundwork for a future, and futuristic realization of an "'augmented reality,' an animistic, artificial world […] in which the material and virtual are distributed indeterminately in mixed environments and in which we interact with undecidably human and/or machine agents in what only appears to be 'real time,' and in

[4] See Havelock 1986, Kittler 1990, McLuhan 1994, Ong 2002, and Ulmer 2003.

which virtual space itself is a surveillance agent" (Morse 1998, 8). Such an entanglement, where the real intertwine with the virtual, sets the context in which performance participates in the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman 1967), problematizing the notion of the subject as "real," in face-to-face conversations. This is due to the fact that, there is a basic human need for recognition and self-expression, which are embedded in the "reciprocity and reversibility of 'I' and 'you' in discourse –seeing and being seen, recognizing others and being recognized, speaking, listening and being listened to" (Morse 1998, 10). However, because of Julien Greimas's "enunciative fallacy," subjectivity will never be real or complete and full, because it is based on a simulation where "'I' and 'you,' 'here' and 'now' are *not* the subjects, place and time of the act of enunciation" but "shifters," "simulacra" that, "*imitate* the act of enunciation within the utterance" (Morse 1998, 11). In such a linguistic, and social construction of reality, the performative utterance "enacts or produces that to which it refers" (Diamond 1996, 4). And in the "stylized repetition" of utterances and acts, performance creates our sense of reality: "it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler qtd in Diamond 1996, 4). Thus, performance contributes in "de-essentializing" categories like being, gender, and race and re-conceptualizing them "as fictional ontologies, modes of expression without true substance," so that:

> performance both *affirms and denies this evacuation of substance*. In the sense that the "I" has no interior secure ego or core identity, "I" must always enunciate itself: there is only performance of a self, not an external representation of an interior truth. But in the sense that I do my performance in public, for spectators that are interpreting and/or performing with me, there are real effects, meaning solicited or imposed that produce relations in the real. […] The point is, as soon as performativity comes to the rest on *a* performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable. (Diamond 1996, 5)

And embodiment is one of the key elements of this theoretical conceptualization of performance poetry. Drawing on performance studies, sociology, and the recent discoveries in "the sciences of life," the body will be recovered in all its complexity and multiplicity to

partake in the poetic praxis, not as a mere medium, but as an autonomous and self-aware protagonist.

To put the body at the center of the poetic discourse implies both an inter-and transdisciplinary approach to the subject, that might realize thanks to the collaboration between different practices and discourses, which sometimes are in stark opposition to one another. The difficulties of such a complex methodological approach discourages many scholars, who still hold a remarkable skepticism against this practice,[5] mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, the current academic context does not offer a fertile ground for interdisciplinary collaborations, since working across disciplines before tenure "poses a threat to one's career" (Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche 2007, 12). On the other hand, the skeptical attitude is grounded on the belief that inter-and transdisciplinary discourses do not provide "an effective and authentic critique" (Fish 1989, 242), insofar as to articulate useful interdisciplinary discourses and/or theories requires a considerable formation, since "to bring two or more disciplines into significant interaction with one another requires considerable mastery of the subtleties and particularities of each, together with sufficient imagination and tact, ingenuity and persuasiveness, to convince others of the utility of their linkage" (Gunn qtd. in Hutcheon 2001, 1372). Roland Barthes already warned on the complexities of interdisciplinarity. Whether interdisciplinarity is narrow or broad, this practice determines the re-organization of one of the disciplines involved (if not all of them), opening the discourse to intermedia practice too: "interdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security; it begins effectively […] when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down […] in the interests of a new object and a new language neither of which has a place in the field of the sciences" (Barthes 1977, 155). Interdisciplinarity, indeed, challenges the disciplines involved:

[5] See Fish 1989, Hutcheon 2001, and Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche 2007.

> Interdisciplinary work . . . is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let go). To do something interdisciplinary, it is not enough to use a "subject" (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists of creating a "new" object that belongs to no one. (Barthes, qtd. in Clifford and Marcus 1990, 1)

On a more individualistic perspective, Gilles Deleuze read interdisciplinarity as the missed encounter between two disciplines, "when one discipline realizes that it has to resolve, for itself and by its own means, a problem similar to one confronted by the other" (Deleuze 2000, 367). With regard to such a skeptical attitude, Linda Hutcheon avoids the interdisciplinary approach to adopt a "less dangerous" attitude of "conversing across disciplinary lines": interdiscursivity.[6] However, as Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche notice, the "recent debates in both bioethics and cultural studies make the strong case that answers to crucial and urgent problems and questions evolving around matters of the body require an exchange across disciplinary lines" (Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche 2007, 13). This is the signal of a reality that is getting more and more complex, but it is also attests an increasing awareness and a more subtle sensitivity. Specific analyses are too partial and reductive. For complex problems is needed a more inclusive and holistic perspective that transcends, whilst being informed by, the different disciplines at stake.[7] This is especially true in relation to the challenge that scientific studies have posed to literature and cultural studies *in primis*. What Joan W. Scott describes as "the increasing prominence of neurobiology, microbiology and information technology, the excitement about the Human Genome Project, and the search for genetic explanations for all physical and social conditions" (Scott qtd. in Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche 2007, 14). Along with constructivism, notions of materiality and physicality must to be

[6] "Interdiscursive might be a more accurate term to describe people who remain, inevitably, disciplinary trained but borrow from other disciplines […]. Not a form of disciplinary tourism, interdiscursivity would nevertheless be more modest in its claims than interdisciplinarity. It would not be a question of formation –that is, of learning the ways of thinking, seeing, and therefore interpreting the worlds we experience as well as the worlds we make. Formation takes time and work; it may even take talent and inclination" (Hutcheon 2001, 1371).

[7] Structuralism, feminism, visual studies, and systems theory are all examples of attempts to build inclusive and holistic theoretical frameworks that could offers insights on many levels and on multiple disciplines, from humanities to natural and social sciences, starting from the main commonalities.

reconsidered since “after having evolved utopias—or dystopias—of a bodiless subject, literary and cultural studies, gender and American studies now experience the return of a body that […] ‘cannot be understood entirely in terms of social construction’” (Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche 2007, 15). Thus, when the debate within and between disciplines involves very distant approaches and systems as the literary and scientific fields are, a transdisciplinary thinking might offer “a third level of discourse onto which we could translate our respective ways of thinking,” to say, conceptual systems and/or metaphors “which allow us to bridge the gap” (Reichardt 2007, 19). Especially for distant disciplines, Ulfries Richardt claims that a common ground can “only be achieved on a rather abstract level, and only when a more comprehensive discourse or a meta-language can be found” (Reichardt 2007, 19). Renegotiation and rethinking have to be done on two levels which are deeply interwoven: “first, on the level of discourses and descriptive languages, and secondly, on the level of the objects of study themselves” (Reichardt 2007, 19). And embracing this invitation to complexity, this dissertation investigates performance poetry from a multiple perspective: can performance poetry be an aesthetic practice, an artistic strategy, and a critical tool to enable a new discourse on the current social and political situation? Can it raise an active response at the level of both personal and collective agency? And, finally, the question from which all the others have sprung: how does performance poetry change our understanding of what is a poem? How does it challenge the current paradigms of poetic and literary criticism?

Moving from these questions, the following dissertation opens with a brief account of the actually marginal position of performance poetry in the twenty-first century literary debate on poetry. Giving credits to the few studies that have tried to seriously investigate performance poetry, in the attempt to grant it academic dignity and recognition, this dissertation aims at contributing to the new emerging critical discourse by focusing on the centrality and inevitability of an inter- and transdisciplinary approach for a poetic practice

that, since the late 1980s, has transcended the literary boundaries of the poetic canon, to intersect with theatre and performance studies, sociology, media and digital studies, ethnography, etc.

Going back to complex terms like “hybridity,” “borders,” “contact zone,” “mediality,” and “mediatization,” performance poetry is analyzed in its fourth-dimensional nature (the page, the stage, the web, the cross-media interaction among the three of them), to be described as a form of poetic decolonization, or, paraphrasing Dipesh Chakrabarthy (2000), a process of “provincializing” the western poetic canon.

Chapter I
Performance Poetry and the Contemporary "Humming Sphere"

Poem? Drawing? Score?
The poem seems to embody the uncertainty of the throw of dice.
It is a genre of genres.
Un coup de dés that combines and generates genres.
(Octavio Armand, *Refractions*, 1994)

1. Historical-literary background

In her introduction to *American Poets in the 21st Century*, Lisa Sewell remarks how "[T]he task of delineating, naming, and defining either the important movements in twenty-first-century American poetry or its central figures is nearly impossible" (Sewell 2007, 2). Such a radical statement evokes the 2004 essay, *The People's Poetry*, where Hank Lazer comments that the field is "atomized, decentralized, and multifaceted, and the range of a poetics "that both responds to and seeks to account for the particularly contemporary (and consequently technological) emplacement of poetries and audiences is too varied to capture in a compact or singular history" (Lazer 2004, 1). These premises cast light on the particular historical and cultural moment in which contemporary American poetry has been developing since the turn to the new millennium. In *Disappearing Ink* (2003), considering the American poetic practice of the last two decades of the twentieth century, Dana Gioia posits that there have been many significant trends —like Language poetry, New Formalism, Critical Theory, Multiculturalism, New Narrative, and Identity Poetics— but "none has been especially surprising—and all of

these movements have been confined largely to the academic subculture" (Gioia 2003, 4). Given the fact that such a multifaceted scenario cannot be represented in terms of movements, schools of thought, manifestos, and celebrity-poets anymore, Richard Silberg uses the image of the sphere to give reason of the many contemporary poetic "sub species". in *Reading the Sphere* (2002), Silberg traces the origins of such sub-differentiation back to the Modernists, "with T.S. Eliot's call for a 'difficult' language to communicate the growing complexities of the twentieth-century society" (Silberg 2002, 3). A challenge that, according to Silberg, was triggered by the works of authors like T.S. Eliot himself, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein (just to cite some of the most relevant), who "did not simply do away with the comforts of rhyme and meter, thereby opening the way for literally any piece of language to be called a 'poem,' but some of their works began to seem bizarre, and often incomprehensible, to various readers" (Silberg 2002, 3). This process particularly increased in the last three decades of the twentieth century, producing a great number of schools and groupings, as well as "so many individual poets, each quite different from the others, so many who fit no group at all, shining in their space between, each poet a sphere of his or her own" (Silberg 2002, 7). To ideally represent the two extremes of the polymorphic contemporary poetic scene, Silberg refers to Language poetry and spoken word poetry. On one side, Language poetry, that "developed more or less simultaneously with the 'linguistic turn,' spearheaded by the French philosopher-critic Jacques Derrida" (Silberg 2002, 4), represents a form of elitist hyper-literate avant-garde poetry. On the opposite side, spoken word poetry, which bloomed in the late eighties thanks to the competitive form of slam poetry, is considered a popular "ego-based" form of poetic writing, which "foregrounds, not 'the materiality of language,' but the voice and presence of the writer, with the emphasis very much on performance rather than language on the page" (Silberg 2002, 5). And in the middle,

between these two poles, different poetic styles, genres, and schools, which find their audience(s) in a great variety of active poetic communities:

> academically sponsored readings and presses, urban and community arts centers and reading series, small presses all over the country, therapy-based groups, and identity-based readings and publications (including those based on ethnicity, sexuality, region, age, psychological history, and other group identities that are linked to poetic expression) (Lazer 2004, 1).

Highlighting the post-World War II polarization between mainstream and avant-garde poetry, Nerys Williams (2011), Lisa Sewell (2007), and Hank Lazer (2004) introduce a wide set of problems and issues, which revolve around the notions of "new," "crisis," and "authorship," and whose implications map old literary and philosophical frictions, which began in the previous century and still persist to this day. Illustrative of this polarization is the clash between different schools of writing, "with publications of mutually exclusive anthologies, public letter exchanges, controversial award decisions, etc." (Gwiazda 2014, 13). Between the 1960s and the 1970s, poetry underwent a radical transformation which produced several broad trends:

> the post confessional, mainstream voice-centered lyric of introspection and revelation, which continues to be widely published in literary journals and by academic presses; the identity-based feminist and multicultural poetries that are also voiced-centered but rely on the representational qualities of language to convey difference, claiming subjectivity as well as social and political authority for the marginalized and ignored; and the experimental work of Language-oriented writing, which is theoretically informed, Language-focused, and formally innovative with an eye toward critiquing and resisting social convention and ideology at the level of language—in many ways revisiting the radical materialist experimentation of early Modernism. (Sewell 2007, 2)

As a number of critics have documented, [8] it is during the 1990s, that these tendencies turned into open conflicts, with the turf war between Lyric poetry and Language writing. In *Lyric Shame: The Lyric Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (2014), Gillian White goes back to the New Critical theories that, in the late thirties, "contributed to a view of lyric poems as expressive objects that 'speak' to the reader without, paradoxically, the reader's need to understand anything of the history of the work's production, reception, or circulation" (White

[8] See Lazer 1996, Rasula 1996 Beach 1997, and Perloff 2002.

2014, 2). The understanding of "lyric" as "a genre transcending time and history" (Hirsch 1999, 1), and of "lyric poem" as "a message in a bottle that speaks out of a solitude to a solitude" (Hirsch 1999, 6), was central to a groundbreaking work in New Critical thinking: to wit, *Understanding Poetry* (1938). In this sort of poetic-pedagogy manifesto, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren laid the basis for the making of the American lyric subject. The cluster of assumptions at the basis of their work —"natural connections between poetry, interpretive mastery, formal control, and a cure for existential dread" (White 2014, 3)— has come to define both the theoretical discourse of lyric and its counter-voice between the twentieth and early twenty-first-centuries. Indeed, these two opposite tensions both developed from the concept of "expressive lyric." In *Contemporary Poetry* (2011), Nerys Williams presents the expressive theory of the lyric poem in the following terms:

> The lyric or personal poem is often considered as expressive, and the "expressive" lyric posits the self as the primary organizing principle of the work. Central to this model is the articulation of the subject's feelings and desires, and a strongly marked division between subjectivity and its articulation as expression. (Williams 2011, 28)

In addition, such a focus on the expression of the self is frequently evoked in relation to the speaker's voice, in order to suggest a certain degree of "sincerity" and "authenticity" (Williams 2001, 28). For this reason, "[w]hat is most apparent in the expressive model of the lyric poem is the immanence of the self, its centrality within the composition as the subject of the writing, and the role of language as a transparent medium for communicating intense emotions" (Williams 2001, 28). In current academic criticism, the notion of expressive lyric (as an abstraction to be projected into some writing) as well as the production of a certain subjective voice (which developed in the nineteenth-century "lyric transparency")[9] have been articulated in forms of public shaming (White 2014, 4). The "lyric shame," according to Gillian White, is that "of poetry idealized as 'lyric,' or the lyric shamed—shame attributed to,

[9] For more on the topic, see: Hirsch, 1999; and Newman, 2007.

projected onto, and produced by readings that anthropomorphize poems as lyric'" (White 2014, 4). Without tracing the whole history of shame about lyric and lyric poetry, White mentions other two issues that the current debate has reasserted and historicized from the past centuries. Firstly, the sixteenth-century trope of poetry's marginality to public life, "as either a point of pride, a defense, shame, or a mix of these"; and secondly, late-eighteenth-century "Romantic lyric,"[10] which, "has been shaped by a 'lyric hegemony' evolved from the 1840s that flattens that era's idea of lyric into an image of a secure poetic infrastructure for a transcendent self of lyric solitude" (White 2014, 5). A fierce attack on lyric poetry came from the European avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century. As an example of such harsh rejection, Nerys Williams alludes to Eliot's 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where the poet highlights "poetry as work that is created and formed, as opposed to spontaneously expressed"; Williams claims that Eliot's distinction "between control, craft and the spontaneous expression of personality" (Williams 2011, 25) still informs current debates, as it did a century ago, drawing attention "to the articulation of the poet's voice, poetry as an expression of personal sentiment or the poem as the recollection of events" (Williams 2011, 25). Indeed, "[o]ne of the cardinal principles—perhaps *the* cardinal principle—of American Language poetics [...] has been the dismissal of 'voice' as the foundational principle of lyric poetry" (Perloff 2004, 129). Calling for artifice and intellect over nature and sentiment, Language poets "turned against the assumed naturalness of personal expression in a range of midcentury poetic modes: Beats, Confessionals, Deep Image, and New York School writing" (White 2014, 12). Thus, works like Ronald Silliman's *The New Sentence* (1987), Steve McCaffery's *North of Intention* (1986), and Charles Bernstein's *Content's Dream* (1986) are

[10] "Scholars such as Janowitz have worked in the past ten years to recast Romantic lyric as a "theatre of engagement for competing and alternate versions of personal, political, and cultural identity" and to complicate the potent, monolithic myth of a Greater Romantic lyric mode by showing the period's varied and complex researches into identity as a mix of social determination and voluntaristic individualism. Much of the modern and postmodern shame of lyric identification assumes the caricatured figure of the Romantic lyric that Janowitz and others seek to complicate, supposing 'lyric' to be defined by unmitigated individualistic subjectivism, self-absorption, leisured privilege, and ahistoricism" (White 2014, 5). For more on this matter, see Janowitz 1996.

pivotal for a critical discourse "to unmask Official Verse Culture, with its 'sanctification' of 'authenticity,' 'artlessness,' 'spontaneity,' and claim for *self-presence*" (Bernstein 1986, 41), that has to be understood "as part of the larger post-structuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject, a critique that became prominent in the late sixties and reached its height in the United States a decade or so later when the Language movement was coming into its own" (Perloff 2004, 130). In spite of its predominant position, nevertheless, language-oriented writing had its detractors:

> With its emphasis on the nonrepresentational, material aspects of language itself, its techniques of rupture and disjunction, and its interrogation of the subject as a construct in and of language, it was perceived as either too conceptual or too chaotic, far too opaque either to galvanize readers or to effect social change. (Sewell 2007, 2)

However, the division and antagonism between the supporters of Language writing and its detractors cannot be put in terms of a clear contrast between two opposite factions,[11] insofar as nowadays these distinctions are no longer drawn so clearly, with "writers on either side of the ostensible divide employ interruption, parataxis, narrative discontinuity, and alinearity to produce fragmentation and disjunction" (Sewell 2007, 3). To one degree or another, the poets seem to embrace what Mark Wallace has identified as a "free multiplicity of form" (Wallace 2003, 196); they deliberately and self-consciously engage with the lyric tradition by questioning that very tradition "through techniques of disruption, diversion, and resistance" (Sewell 2007, 3). The result is a "humming sphere with many different parallel poetries, relatively equal, blurring and fusing across their boundaries" (Silberg 2001, 40). "Different," "tangential," and "protean" are the common features of poetries which "claim a space for lyric interiority and 'emotive effect'," while they treat "the speaking subject as provisional, expressing doubts about a lyric poetry that dramatizes the self's fixed relationship to the world" (Sewell 2007, 3). The poem becomes the tool to investigate the discontinuous and

[11] See also Perloff 1999 and 2002, Bernstein 1986, Silliman 1986, and McCaffery 2001.

provisional lyric speaker, in the attempt to map the boundaries between awareness and action, between self-investigation and historical interrogation. It is the tension between two opposite actions —"tracing the dislocations inherent in subjectivity" and folding them into a wider public contest— to serve poetry as an escape from Charles Altieri's "scenic mode" (Sewell 2007, 4-5). Therefore, "while a poetics of utter sincerity and authenticity is less and less the standard, the lyric is by no means exhausted" (Sewell 2007, 3).

The controversy on the lyric subject opened the debate to other two issues. First, it questioned the role of authorship. In *Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject* (2004), Marjorie Perloff outlines the key points of a critical discourse that, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, questioned the role of the author and the artwork in relation, as well as in opposition to, both cultural and political institutions and society, highlighting a prominent place for the aesthetic in the American culture of the late 1990s. As a matter of fact, Language writing's motto "death to the self" inevitably evokes the famous work *The Death of the Author* (1968). In that essay, Roland Barthes formalized the obliteration of the "personal voice," since the author is "nothing other than the instance saying I" (Barthes 1977, 142); the "subject" in grammatical analysis; the instance of writing, which is erased in the very act of writing. As Barthes claims: "[w]riting is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (Barthes 1977, 145). With the vanishing of the "Author-God," the text becomes "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (Barthes 1977, 147), while the writer is turned into a mere organizer of pre-existent signs, since "[t]he writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" (Barthes, qtd. in Perloff 2004, 130). In addition, in his later work *S/Z*, Barthes identifies what he termed the "writerly text" (literally, "ourselves writing"), which represents Barthes's attempt to "make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (Barthes 2000, 4-5).

A year later, another philosopher continued the war to free writing from "the necessity of 'expression'" (Perloff 2004, 130). In *What Is an Author?* (1969), Michel Foucault replaced the author with the "author function," since in a text it does not matter who is speaking, but from where the text comes, how it circulates, and who controls it (Foucault 1977, 138). From Beckett to Foucault, Perloff argues, the question "what matters who's speaking" has come to influence the critical thinking in the late 1980s, thanks to the recharged and historicized interpretation of Fredric Jameson. In *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), instead of understanding the death of the author as the end of the authorial intentions as normative in the construction of a critical reading of a text, Jameson takes the death of the subject quite literally, as "one of the symptoms of the social transformations produced by late global capitalism" (Perloff 2004, 131). In this perspective, Jameson posits that "the very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside" (Jameson 1991, 77); and, as a consequence, Postmodernism no longer recognizes those "depth models"[12] that had informed the great artworks of Modernism (Perloff 2004, 131). Therefore, such fragmentation caused the displacement of the subject, whose "death" is the result of a process of alienation, which brought to "the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual" (Jameson 1991, 15). In the mid-1990s, this assumption foregrounded a controversial aesthetic issue: "[t]he demise of the transcendental ego, of the authentic self, of the poet as lonely genius, of a unique artistic style: these were taken as something of a given" (Perloff 2004, 132). Celebratory of such independence was the group manifesto *Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry* (1988), where, as Perloff reminds, writers Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten concurred with an annihilation of the self as the central and final term of their creative practice (Perloff 2004, 132).

[12] The opposing tension "inside-outside, essence-appearance, latent-manifest, authenticity-inauthenticity, signifier-signified, depth-surface" (Perloff 2004, 131).

As a consequence of such a revision of the author's role, there is a re-thinking of the relation between literature and agency, with a new emphasis on the reader's function/role, and presence/absence. In *Who Speaks* (1998), speculating on the implications of Roland Barthes's "ritual slaying of the author" (Silliman 1998, 364), Ron Silliman argues that, in the late 1990s, universities operated a crucial shift: to wit, "[t]he idealized, absent author of the New Critical canon has here been replaced by an equally idealized, absent reader" (Silliman 1998, 365). The consequence of such turn upside down is that the privilege Barthes accorded the reader has become a form of ventriloquism (Perloff 2004, 134). As Silliman remarks:

> Perhaps it should not be a surprise, that while postmodernism in the arts has been conducted largely, although not exclusively, outside of the academy, the postmodern debate has been largely conducted between different schools of professors who agree only that they too dislike it. […] Once incorporated into an institutional canon, the text becomes little more than a ventriloquist's dummy through which a babel of critical voices contend. (Silliman 1998, 365, 368)

It is precisely in this "babel of critical voices" that the role of the subject in poetry needs to be reconsidered, depending on a new perspective on how poetry enables the relation between agency and identity. To look at this relationship means to re-shape the one between the poet, as person, and the reader (Perloff 2004, 134).

This set of literary and almost philosophical oppositions informs a wider framework of older as well as newer issues: the never-ending debate on the imminent/plausible, when not probable, death of poetry;[13] the criticism of poetry's marginal status is often blamed on "the prevalence of materialist values in American society, modern technology, and popular culture" (Gwiazda 2014, 13), and it is also used to confirm the inability of poetry to be

[13] At the turn of the twentieth century poetry underwent a huge crisis with the entry into the Modernist era. For an extensive report on those years (1890-1910) see John Timberman Newcomb 2004. At the end of the century, poetry suffered another important crisis, and Joseph Epstein's archetypal article "Who Killed Poetry?" opened the discussion in 1988. Then, a series of essays and books were published in response to Epstein's provocative evaluation of the state of the art. The most famous are Donald Hall's *Death to the Death of Poetry* (1989) and Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* (1991). For more information on this, see Shetley 1993, Somers-Willett 2009, and Newcomb 2012.

representative of the American culture;[14] and finally, with the more and more frequent merging of academic appointments with poetic/artistic activities, there is the controversial response to those many poets criticized for "shaping their literary careers in conjunction with their academic careers" (Gwiazda 2014, 15). So, detractors blame the proliferation of creative writing programs[15] in colleges and universities all over the United States for the "growing homogeneity of style, the rise of networking and careerism, and the relegation of poetry to a subculture status despite (or precisely because of) the seeming overproduction of poems and poets" (Gwiazda 2014, 15). Christopher Beach, commenting on such programs, notices that, given the fact that since the fifties intellectuals have been migrating to academia, they seem to represent the "most significant demographic phenomenon in America poetry since World War II" (Beach 1999, 37). This is a trend quite disapproved at Marjorie Perloff's recounting of the many "theorypo" or "poessays" (Perloff 1994), which try to mix poetry with literary theory, and cultural criticism, producing "the bizarre phenomenon of the poets trying to emulate the very scholars who have tended to ignore their presence by jumping on the theory bandwagon operative across the hall" (Perloff 2004, 264). However, as Alan Golding maintains, universities are still the place where poetry is read the most (Golding 1995), considering that the "contemporary poets' primary audience (or at least individuals with whom they regularly interact in their specific professional capacity as poets) consists of large, ever-growing numbers of *students*" (Gwiazda 2014, 17; emphasis in the original). And these students, coming from different social, cultural, national, and linguistic backgrounds, have different knowledges and experiences of what poetry is and does. Precisely because of, or thanks to, this heterogeneous and vibrant *milieu*, poets look at the academic venues, not only

[14] For an historical and aesthetic framework see Rukeyser 1949, Lazer 1987, Vendler 1988 and 2009, Bernstein 2001, and Fink and Halden-Sullivan 2014.

[15] For an historical account of the "creative writing program phenomenon," from its origins to the first years of the twentieth century, see Hunley 2007.

as the possibility of a guaranteed income, but also as "a site of creative, intellectual, and in some cases political activity" (Gwiazda 2014, 16). For this reason, poets find that the creative and professional efforts do not contrast with the pedagogical one; on the contrary, the two different enterprises help the poets to survive in the literary market, while aspiring "to the position of the Foucaldian 'specific' intellectuals working within the system many of them also attempt to reform" (Gwiazda 2014, 16).

2. Performance Poetry: Cartographies of a Work in Progress

The task of defining what is and what is not performance poetry, especially in relation to other kinds of contemporary poetries, is a challenge, since the distinctions among the different poetic practices are very blurry and permeable.[16] Moreover, considering the contemporary postmodern practice of hybridization, as a "grand mixage généralisé de tout ce qu'il est possible de faire" (Puff, qtd. in Penot-Lacassagne 2018, 12), there will be different labels according to what parameters are considered constitutive of each poetic configuration at a certain moment. Therefore, "[o]n parlera —c'est dans l'air du temps— de poème augmenté, de post-poésie, de transformisme poétique, de *poésie.com*, d'*entertainment poetry*… À chaque époque ces '250 mg de modernité'" (Penot-Lacassagne 2018, 12). This provocative and sarcastic statement introduces a critical discourse on media-hybridization, which deeply affects the poetic praxis, its ontological assumptions, as well as the critical discourse around it. The inter-connections between poetry and performance generate a plurality of inter-disciplinary, multi-modal outcomes that, coexisting at the same time in different forms, configurations, and media, complicate the process of investigation, insofar as they enlarge the

[16] See Bauridl 2013, Puff 2015, Cabot 2017, and Penot-Lacassagne 2018.

spectrum of criticism. Therefore, the theoretical framework has to deal with the many complexities of the poetic dispositive; different approaches to literary writing; a re-thinking of the notion of poetic text, with the consequent re-framing of its function, distribution, reception, interpretation. In addition, the poetic dimension needs also to be investigated in terms of agency, response, and repercussions on social, educational, ethic, and political levels (Cabot 2017, 11). In the processing of such a complex ensemble, the theoretical discourse on poetry inevitably intersects and problematizes "l'extension du domaine de la performance" (Penot-Lacassagne 2018, 12), questioning the limits and practice of performativity too.

Few attempts have been made to elaborate methodological approaches and critically study performance poetry. In *Contemporary English Performance Poetry in Canada and South Africa: A Comparative Study of the Main Motifs and Poetics Techniques* (1997), Pamela Dube investigates performance poetry as an inclusive form of art that embraces music, song, dance, and visual media. Although she does not mention the American scene, and neither does she provide a methodological system of research, her comparative study points to performance poetry as a poetic form in its own right, addressing issues like audience response, communal setting, notions of text, and the relation between performance and its representation by visual media (Dube 1997, 45). Moreover, Pamela Dube points to five main kinds of poetic performance—dub poem, praise poem, narrative poem, sound poem, and the poetry reading —as forms of political counter-literary practice, which dismantle the colonial discourse by carrying out "an active struggle against diverse forms of institutional and ideological domination" (Dube 1997, 200). However, it was *Close Listening* (1998) which really opened the debate on a topic so scorned by literary criticism. In this collection of essays, Charles Bernstein lamented the general tendency among critics and scholars to consider neither the performed text or the poetry reading "as a medium in its own right," notwithstanding "the crucial importance of performance to the practice of the poetry of this century" (Bernstein

1998, 22, 3). Insisting on the fact that "the performance of poetry is as old as poetry itself," Bernstein blamed such a lack of critical attention to it on the absence of an historical elaboration of the modern history of poetry into a "more general history of performance art and philosophical and linguistic approaches to the acoustic dimension of language" (Bernstein 1998, 3, 5). According to him, the consequence of this missed historical awareness has had the effect "of eliding the significance of the modernist poetry traditions for postwar performance art" (Bernstein 1998, 5).

Since this groundbreaking work, others have followed in the attempt to seriously define a poetic art which is so hard to be inscribed within old conventional parameters.[17] From a more holistic perspective, in *How to Read an Oral Poem* (2002), John Miles Foley embraces performance theory, anthropology, and ethno-poetics, to investigate oral poetry as a worldwide phenomenon. In this broad spectrum approach to orality that, in the author's intentions, should have been "important for poets who do draw on oral traditions and who have been confronted with the prejudice that poetry needs to be written in order to allow for silent contemplation and lyricism" (Gräbner and Casas 2011, 12), Foley briefly refers only to a particular kind of performance poetry, slam, which belongs to one of the four categories of oral poetry he identifies as oral performance, voiced text, voices from the past, and written oral poems.

In *Sounds of Poetry: Contemporary American Performance Poets* (2003), Martina Pfeiler investigates contemporary American performance poetry in the light of the ancestral opposition between orality and literacy, with an in-depth survey on the use of sound and voice in poetry. She also attempts to outline a "performance chart" (Pfeiler 2003, 105-106),

[17] See Morris 1998, Brown 1999, Perloff 2004, Middleton 2005a and 2005b, Sherwood 2006, Olson 2007, Wheeler 2008, Minarelli 2008, Perloff and Dworkin 2009, Jones 2011, Wade 2011, Allison 2014, Denker-Bercoff et al. 2015, Baetens 2016, Cabot 2017, Johnson 2017, Penot-Lacassagne 2018. These contributions have more or less directly worked on performance poetry and/or on some of its constitutive elements, including slam poetry, that is the competitive form of performance poetry.

distinguishing four categories of performance poets, according to the degree of performativity of their works as well as to what kind of relation there is between the poem and the page. She differentiates between "the pagers"; "the page-stagers"; "the stagers"; and "the on-stagers."

In 2009, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America,* by Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, was the first academic study completely devoted to slam poetry, written by someone who has also been a slam poet.[18] Although the work does not focus on theoretical issues or methodology, it is important for the in-depth analysis it provides of the social and political features of this phenomenon, highlighting the strong debt of the slam to African American literature —especially, blackface minstrelsy, the Beat generation, the Black Arts Movement, and hip hop— while it shifts the discourse from orality to performance, identity formation, community setting, and representation.

In *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (2011), Tyler Hoffman traces the origins of this poetic practice back to one of the most important poets in American literature: Walt Whitman. Hoffman dwells on one of Whitman's most known prose pieces, "Ventures, on an Old Theme" (1882), and, more precisely, on the final epigram of this work,[19] where Whitman declares: "To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too" (Whitman 1982, 1058). This line, Hoffman comments, "increasingly is deployed in discussions about poetry in performance off the page, framing tensions between page and stage —that is, between textuality and orality— that shape so many of the discussions around poetry performance in the modern period and debates surrounding the merits of publicness"

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[18] Other books on slam poetry and on spoken word poetry in general have been published outside the academic publishing system. In a period of almost total lack of interest for this phenomenon by scholars, these works helped to build an historical framework of what happened in those years. Often written by the protagonists of this "poetic revolution," in the forms of anthologies, manuals, and accounts, they cover a span of time that goes from the early 1990's to the early 2000's. See Algarín and Holman 1994, Eleveld 2003, 2007, Smith and Kraynak 2004, Aptowicz 2007, Smith 2009a, 2009b. A rich bibliography on this topic can be found in Bauridl 2013, ch. 1.

[19] For some examples of the animated discussions about the cultural dynamic of popularity in relation to poetry, see Pound 1914, Monroe 1914, Brown [1930] 1996, Simpson 1962, and Shapiro 1962. For an historical account of the many discussions about this epigrammatic sentence, which have contributed in feeding the prejudice and bias against any form of poetry in performance, see Sanders 1996, Redding 2010, Barnat 2014, and Hoffman 2011, ch. 1.

(Hoffman 2011, 3). Moreover, Hoffman draws on the idea of performance as a contested space (Diamond, 1996) to represent the roots of American participatory poetics through the Bakhtinian concept of second culture: “an alternative to the dominant culture from whose values the poets largely dissent” (Hoffman 2011, 14-15).

In *Performing Poetry: Body, Place and Rhythm in the Poetry Performace* (2011), Cornelia Gräbner and Arturo Casas examine “the triangular relationship among performed poem, author or performer, and the audience” (Gräbner and Casas 2011, 9), through an interdisciplinary and transnational reading of the recurring categories of place, sex, and race. By focusing on “the contingency of form and content” (Gräbner and Casas 2011, 18) the two authors distinguish between the performance of poetry as a practice and performance poetry as a genre. Moreover, considering performance poetry as a hub for “theatrical, visual, sonic, and spatial interventions” (Gräbner and Casas 2011, 10), this collection of essays develops an analytical framework along three key concepts (body, place, and rhythm), addressing four main theoretical issues: the performance of authorship and its reception; the genealogy of performance poetry; the mediatic and cultural hybridity of performance poetry; and the poets’ use of place and space to manifest social and political commitment.

In *Contemporary Poetry* (2011), a comparative study of contemporary poetry written in English, Nerys Williams opens with a general definition of the phenomenon:

> The term “performance poetry” is now commonly used to describe a presentation that may never be transcribed into volume or a book. “Performance” in this context indicates the interaction of poetry with its audience; the event may often be ephemeral and experiential, such as a slam poem or improvised talk. (Williams 2011, 98)

Williams also underlines the importance of the impression of spontaneity in oral performances, particularly “as a political or countercultural response” (Williams 2011, 128). Drawing on Judith Butler’s formulation of performative, Williams analyzes three different ways in which a poem may perform both on and off the page. The poem can work as “a score

for the voice" (Williams 2011, 98). When poetry is associated with cultural movements and protest writing, the performative aspect of the poem lies in its power to engage the audience, inciting change. On the page, a textual performance can be realized "through experimental typography"; otherwise, the performance may happen at a linguistic level, enabling a "performance writing" (Williams 2011, 98). At this level, the text-based work is only one aspect of a more complex relationship the poem "entertains when developed in conjunction with other media and discourses," that actually are outside the page, such as speech plays, vocalizations, dramatizations, and television (Bergvall, qtd. in Williams 2011, 125).

In *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (2011), Julia L. Novak elaborates a response to the general "lack of a 'critical language for performance-based critique'" (Novak 2011, 17), conceiving the first critical approach to poetry in performance. Although her works concerns British performance poetry, Novak elaborates an "analytical 'toolkit,' with which to address the distinctive characteristic of *live* poetry" (Novak 2011, 11; emphasis in the original). Novak's model of analysis conceives oral performance "as a basic realization mode of the art of poetry, which is a parallel to, rather than a mere derivative 'version' of, the written mode" (Novak 2011, 12). At the core of Novak's critical theory there is the notion of Live poetry, that is: "a specific manifestation of poetry's oral mode of realization that is characterized by the direct encounter of the poet with a live audience" (Novak 2011, 12). And it embraces a very wide range of poetic forms, for it goes from contemporary popular forms to more traditional poetry readings.

Birgit M. Bauridl's study *Betwixt, Between, or Beyond? Negotiating Transformations from the Liminal Sphere of Contemporary Black Performance Poetry* (2013) looks at contemporary black performance poetry in the United States from a transnational perspective. By introducing a personal ethnographical account of a first-hand experience of performance poetry "to figure out what performance poetry is, what it wants, what it can do,"

Birgit M. Bauridl uses the term contemporary performance poetry more “as an approach than a designation or definition” to address “a fuzzy bunch of poetry that relentlessly resist[s] formal categorization” (Bauridl 2013, 4, 6 and 5). It works as a temporal connotation to embrace a wide range of poetic practices—— live, audio, visual, digital as well as written poetry—— which are characterized by aspects of performance and performativity.

And finally, in *Killing Poetry: Performing Blackness, Poetry Slams and the Making of Spoken Word Communities* (2018), a critical study of African American spoken word poetry with a detailed analysis of slam poetry, which is introduced as the competitive art of spoken word poetry, into which all mode of genres, forms, and styles conflate and coexist, Javon L. Johnson examines the many complicated issues that comprise performance poetry, like race, gender, sexual assault, politics, and identity (just to cite the best known). Observing the phenomenon from the double perspective of someone who is both a poet and a researcher, Johnson highlights the open and democratic nature of progressive spaces like the slam venue, where poetry is accessible also to people who might not access it otherwise. However, he also remarks how sometimes this progressive quality may turn into a *façade*, especially in those poems which deal with identity discourse of self and communal representation. Often language becomes formulaic, as well as the image of the identity portrayed, and thus the poets run the risk of replicating the same issues against which they are speaking.[20]

What emerges from these works is the difficulty in mapping the object of study, given the many different variables to be considered as well as the numerous interpretative trajectories opened by a poetic phenomenon, which developed as a social practice, a communication media, an art form, an aesthetics discourse, and a literary work. Each study, thus, provides a tile of the mosaic, also bringing into light a highly controversial discussion about the topic, especially when the debate focuses on its origins and genealogy. On this hot issue there are

[20] I especially refer to ch. II, where Johnson presents an in-depth analysis of “Black Manhood” in Los Angeles slam and the African American spoken word scene in general.

two main lines of interpretation. On one side, upholders of a new critical reading of Western literary tradition, who "identify continuities with older, marginalized or oppressed poetic traditions," on the other side, those who "see a counter-cultural rupture with the establishment" (Gräbner and Casas 2011, 10). A definition of old and oppressed marginalized poetic traditions might be construed through the many works that, from the second half of the twentieth century, have traced poetry back to its oral roots.[21] These studies have opened a new perspective on the configuration of the relationship between the oral and/or aural features of literature and its written tradition, proving that, not only literature "is old as first communal societies," but it "is still indebted to a large oral heritage" (Pfeiler 2002, 13). Given the fact that, despite the digital revolution, we live in a society which is still strongly dominated by the written word, it is easy to forget that "written literature is an outgrowth of oral literature" (Janko in Pfeiler 2001, 14), or to consider the oral and the written two kinds of literary forms (Parry 1971, 377), two "prototypes, or opposite end points on a continuum" (Bakker 1997, 9). Thus, stressing the fact that "relevant aspects of what is understood as oral art, or *wordpower*, preceded our concept of literature by thousands of years" (Pfeiler 2003, 151) is instrumental in highlighting the oral heritage of the western culture, and it also enables a balance in the relations of power between these two complementary aspects of the same conceptual framework of communication and knowledge building. Another way to trace a sort of legacy from a certain literary tradition is by reading the phenomenon of the resurgence of spoken word poetry and performance poetry in relation to modernism—or postmodernism— and the avant-gardes.[22] According to Gioia, to see poetry "as a series of texts placed in an historical or thematic framework of other printed texts" (Gioia 2003, 4) is

[21] There is an extensive bibliography on this topic. Here I refer to some of the most known works, which have investigated the topic from an anthropological, historical, and literary perspective. See Lord 1960, Parry 1971, Finnegan 1977, Zumthor 1990, Edwards and Sienkewicz 1991, Zolbrod 1995, Nagy 1996, Bakker 1997, Foley 1999, 2002, Ong 2002, and Middleton 2005.

[22] See Schwartz 1941, 1951, Huyssen 1986, Tuma 1989, Murphy 2004, Savran 2005, Billitteri 2009, Perloff 1981, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2010, Quatermain 2013, Bayot 2015, and Gelpi 2015.

symbolic of a defensive attitude toward the incoming "new," a common reaction to something unknown and potentially dangerous. This tendency to enter "backwards" into the future, while looking at the present through a "rear-view mirror" (McLuhan and Fiore 2005), lies at the basis of a conventional perspective that interprets what is most innovative in contemporary poetry through old frameworks and assumptions, especially when it comes to poetry (Gioia 2003, 4). Nevertheless, for some authors this "rear-view mirror" reading practice is a useful way to re-discover the "already known" through a different perspective. And a new insight into the past promotes different interpretations of the present as well. Thus, when Paul Hoover states that "recent postmodern aesthetics like performance poetry and language poetry" are the "avant-garde poetry of our time," he is not simply referring to a certain variety of experimental poetic practice, "that ranges from the oral poetics of Beat and performance poetries to the more 'writerly' work of the New York School and language poetry" (Hoover 1994, xxv), but he is also pointing to the transformative and reactionary force that avant-garde poetry put into play to resist mainstream ideology. According to Hoover, contemporary experimental poetry is characterized by that same breakthrough energy and, again, it meets with the refusal of the same reluctant, and hostile-to-change "centrist practice," with which the avant-garde movement dealt in its time. Thus, Hoover notices, this succession of phases of refusal and acceptance is part of the literary canon formation, insomuch as what is considered "normal" in the present has first been shocking, innovative, and new. Moreover, when the avant-garde practice merges aesthetic discourse with the social and political,[23] challenging "the separation of art from the material sphere," the outcome is a "writing that pushes at the limits of experience as well as at the limits of conventional form" (Damon 1993, ix). Given the fact that the modern American scene differs

[23] See Sollers 1983, Bürger 1984, Russell 1985, and Damon 1993, 2011.

from the early twentieth-century Europe and Russia,[24] and that there is not a clearly defined American historical avant-garde (Damon 1993, viii), the looser label "vanguard"—applied to current forms of experimental poetry— acquires a double meaning. First, it marks these poetics as forms of "(op)position," stressing the distance from mainstream poetry, while looking at vanguard experimentation in terms of defamiliarization, disorientation, and "de-territorialized," "antidiscursive" poetics (Damon 1993, x and vii). And secondly, it problematizes terms widely used in the critical discourse about this kind of experimental practice, such as: resistance, margins/edges/borders, minority, and originality.[25]

3. Beyond the "Great Divide"

Parallel to these critical approaches, a large group of critics and scholars has investigated the American counter-cultural scene as the ideal point of origin of performance poetry, tracing its multiple roots back to the African oral tradition,[26] Blues,[27] the Harlem Renaissance,[28] Jazz poetry,[29] the Beat Generation,[30] the Black Arts Movement,[31] Hip Hop music,[32] and all those "cultural street forms of rap music, breakdancing, graffiti and MCing" (Sparks & Grochowski 2002, 4-5). The importance of the African American literary, oral, and

[24] See Stuart 1997, Perloff 2002, Murphy 2004, Maconie 2012, and Schechner 2015.
[25] On the meaning and practice of "originality" in contemporary poetry, with an analysis of the strategies implemented by poets to satisfy the Poundian rallying cry "Make It New" (1934) in the digital age, see Perloff 2010.
[26] Brown 1999, Smethurst 2002, Clarke 2004, and Na'Allah 2018.

[27] Wallenstein 1980, Thomas 1998, and Brown 1999.

[28] Fisher 2003, Aptowicz 2007, and Somers-Willett 2009.

[29] Brown 1999, Edwards 2002, Jones 2002, and Fisher 2003.

[30] Damon 2002, Somers-Willett 2009, and Allison 2014.

[31] Henderson 1973, Thomas 1992, Brown 1999, Smethurst 2002, Clarke 2005.

[32] Stapleton 1998, Jones 2003, Somers-Willett 2009, Aptowicz 2007, and Jonson 2017.

aural tradition serves not only as a constitutive element of both performance poetry and its methodological system, but, more important, it helps in re-balancing a critical discourse on the juxtaposition of orality and literacy. As Aldon L. Nielsen (1997, 2014), Kimberly W. Benston (2000), and Kathleen Crown (2003) have demonstrated, there is a whole range of critical assumptions in African American literary criticism that tend "to privilege a speech-based poetics, while excluding from consideration 'more writerly texts'" (Mullen, qtd. in Crown 2003, 224). In addition, the relative recent increasing of discussions about "sound matters" has introduced new perspectives and critical concepts in the study of poetry, in the attempt to re-frame old notions of poetic voice, and poetics of sound, while looking for all those aural elements that, together with language, contribute to the creation of the poem, and influence its reception as well.[33] In this light, Douglas Kahn's provocative action of "listening" to the history of art, in order to overcome the "mute visuality" within it, becomes a counter-critical voice to give relevance to those many issues that "have not been addressed precisely because they have not been heard" (Kahn 1999, 2). Translating Kahn's critical approach to the investigation of the many prejudices that exist in poetry, when it comes to oral expression and performance, the western bias against the oral mode will be read as a form of theoretical deafness, that has contributed to the formation and diffusion of a certain adverse attitude towards any form of spoken word poetry and performance poetry, in particular.

In the prologue to *How to Read an Oral Poem*, observing the wide range of disciplines from which studies in oral poetry draw, John Miles Foley comments:

> It's simply impossible to overstate the importance of oral poetry across the disciplinary spectrum, primarily because on available evidence it appears to be a universal human enterprise. Because oral poetry dwarfs written literature in size and variety, it should be everyone's concern. (Foley 2002, xii)

Nonetheless, the subaltern position of orality towards literacy is so predominant in western culture to have influenced language itself. As Egbert J. Bakker argues, our use of the term

[33] Morris 1998, Dayan 2011, Kahan 1999, 2012, Halliday 2013, Street 2017, 2019, Lingold, Mueller, and Trettien 2018.

"oral" is never neutral, because, even when it simply designates a modality of expression (spoken instead of written), it conceptually designates "the mental habits of persons who do not participate, or who do not participate fully, in literate culture as we know it" (Bakker 1997, 8). This kind of differentiation tends to be applied to societies other than the western ones, or that have preceded them. The negative connotation of the word is revealed when the adjective "oral" is applied to texts, because, Bakker posits, it implies "that a given piece of writing does not display the features that are normal and expected in a writing culture" (Bakker 1997, 8). Considering the cultural and historical status of the conceptual meaning of written language as "normative," it thus appears that the "oral" has begun to "denote the absence of characteristics of written language, whether a discourse is spoken or written" (Bakker 1997, 8). Given the overlapping of this construction of the conceptual sense of both oral and orality with their operative use both inside and outside the literary discourse, Bakker highlights how "[o]ral poetry and orality, in short, are abstractions derived from the property of *not writing or being written*, and as such they are literate constructs: they define speech as the construction of a writing culture that uses its own absence to define its opposite" (Bakker 1997, 7; emphasis in the original). Looking at the historical and philosophical roots of the western bias against the oral mode, Julia Novak highlights how the primacy of the written text has a millennial tradition. Starting from Aristotelian thought, the written word has been long considered the most artificial, advanced, cultured, reliable, and refined means of communication. Such an assumption has also achieved resounding success in contemporary literary criticism, as Novak shows pointing to the New Critical idea of "the literary text as a stable, tangible object that can be scrutinized independently of its maker and the context of its composition, very much like a visual artifact" (Novak 2011, 25). But what contributed in decreeing the written text as the quintessential form of textuality has been a radical philosophical movement of criticism against western metaphysics (Mordenti 2011, 4). The

most fervent representative of this criticism has been Jacques Derrida, who questioned the founding assumptions of "subject" and "language," completely rejecting the conception of language as an instrument for the speaker to communicate. On the contrary, Derrida claims, it is the language that "speak[s] us," and through us, delimits the field of our experience of the world (Vattimo 1982, 121). In this light, the writing, or *gramma*, becomes the experience of language itself (Mordenti 2011, 5). It is the hint, the lasting sign, the "marker," whose presence allows language to signify, to be experienced.[34] Following Foucault's postulation of the oxymoron of the historical a priori (Foucault 1980), coupled with his rejection of the Cartesian self (Foucault 1986), Roland Barthes points to the technology of the book as a cage, that enchains the infinite plurality of meanings, references, and links, which constitute the open activity of interpretation (Mordenti 2011, 9). His well-known essay, "The Death of the Author," with his theorization of the literary work as a "tissue of quotations which has no other origin than language itself" (Barthes 1977, 146), celebrates the finitude of the text as an object of art, whose artistic value is universal and independent from the author who produced it.[35] This centenary line of critical thought devalues any form of spoken word poetry as well as any other form of poetry that does not conform to the criteria applied to the written text. And it is so rooted in western culture to have been interiorized not only by scholars and critics, but also by the poets themselves, who often reject, or simply feel uncomfortable with, the label "spoken word," "slam," and "performer," for they fear not to be recognized and validated as "real" poets.[36] In this light, poetry has become a synonym for written poetry, delegitimizing all the other poetic practices, included those that lie in-between the written and the oral mode.

[34] On interpretative readings of Derrida's deconstruction critique of the *phonè*, see Vattimo 1982, and Petrosino 1989.

[35] For a historical presentation of the main positions in this philosophical debate, see Mordenti 2011.

[36] On the "devaluation" of the poetry that is not exclusively written see Bernstein 1998 (introduction), Novak, 2011, ch. 2, and Bauridl 2013, ch. 1.

Given these premises, this dissertation works to deconstruct and invalidate such theoretical and cultural paradigms in order to overcome the ancestral divide between literacy and orality, advocating for a "third-way-solution," where orality and literacy are not in a stark opposition anymore but, on the contrary, in a relation of mutual co-operation. For this reason, a new way to conceive the relationship between poetry and the text (not always, non-necessarily, and non-pre-eminently written) is needed, as well as a re-thinking of what a text is. The general idea of text is strongly related to the written form for historical reasons, since it is during the Middle Ages that the pair "text-writing" has been pivotal to the conservation and transmission of knowledge (Rizzo 1984). Moreover, with the more and more frequent use of the word *textus* to connote different utterances,[37] the concept of written text began to overlap with a more general idea of text as the universal form of textuality. In *L'altra critica* (2007), Raul Mordenti points to the complexity of the concept of text, that the Gutenberg age has inherited from the chirographic tradition as a dense, ambiguous, and composite conception, in which the physical-material aspect coexists intertwined with another one purely ideal, to say: the stability of the sign and its semantic potentiality.[38] In *Il testo e la tradizione. A proposito del testo informatico* (2011), an essay built in apodictic form, Mordenti investigates the historical debate on the philological and philosophical nature of the text through a semiotic reading of those utterances that, in the process of writing and reading, make it possible for a text to be (re)produced. His aim is twofold. First, he proves how the characteristics of mobility and fluidity, typical of the digital text, mark the end of textuality as it has been conceived in the Gutenberg age. Then, he builds a new theoretical paradigm to show the similarities between the chirographic and the digital text, arguing that the relational

[37] The latin word *textus* could be used to distinguish the content of a work from its glosses and comments; it stood for the Gospel as quintessential form of text; it also referred to the numerous material features of the book; and it was also later used as synonym for codex (Mordenti 2007, 134).

[38] "Il concetto di testo che la tradizione chirografica consegna (con meno modifiche di quanto potrebbe sembrare) all'era gutemberghiana è dunque un concetto non solo denso ma anche *ambiguo*; è un concetto *composito*, in cui convivono, strettamente intrecciati, un aspetto fisico-materiale e uno puramente ideale, per meglio dire: una stabilità segnica e una potenzialità semantica" (Mordenti 2007, 135).

dimension of the text lies at the core of its ability to signify in different epochs and traditions. Indeed, it is the mobility of the form that allows the transmission of the content in its integrity and completeness (Mordenti 2007, 56-57). Although Mordenti's study concerns the digital text, the theoretical outcomes he achieves can be applied to a new reading of performance poetry, especially in its formulation of text as a mediator, a bridge, between the self and the other, the individual and the collectivity, knowledge and illiteracy, thought and reality (Mordenti 2007, 55). In this interpretation of the text, that favors the centrality of signification as an inter-human process, the text remains in a continuous tension between the material and the immaterial, in that configuration that Cesare Segre calls "concetto-limite" (concept-limit).[39] Drawing on this operative definition, the poetic text needs to be investigated in its double nature, both material and immaterial, opening the theoretical discourse to a post-literary perspective (Damon 2011), where the poem, existing in different states at the same time (as intellectual activity, poetic experience, social practice, and aesthetic discourse), ceases to be exclusively a self-contained object and it becomes also a *process.*[40]

In this way, spoken word and performance poetries may be read as samples of "micropoetries," which "train the conventionally literate in new ways of hearing, reading, seeing, experiencing" (Damon 2011, 110). In the continuous re-framing, re-negotiation, and re-actuation of the inter-human signification, the poem enables a synesthetic experience for both the audience and the poet.

[39] "la natura del testo è condizionata dai modi della sua produzione e riproduzione, che insomma il testo non è una realtà fisica ma un concetto-limite" (Segre 1981, 270). See also Segre 1999, 2001.

[40] Here I borrow Katherine N. Hayles's description of the characteristics of the digital poem. Given some similarities, I re-adapt her definition to my purpose. Here, the original sentence: "the poem ceases to exist as a self-contained object and instead becomes a *process*" (Hayles 2006, 181). See also Hayles 2008.

Chapter II
Performance: A “Dark Horse”?

In sum, performance is about doing, and it is about seeing; it is about image, embodiment, space, collectivity, and/or orality; it makes community and it breaks community; it repeats endlessly and it never repeats; it is intentional and unintentional, innovative and derivative, more fake and more real.
(Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance*, 2004)

1. Performance: A Semantic Paradox

Performance “is an essentially contested concept” (Strine qtd. in Carlson 2018, 13), a “mediumless genre” that is “too heterogeneous to be captured by ‘essential definitions’” (Shepherd & Wallis 2004, 82). More precisely, performance and performativity are “crucial critical tropes” (Diamond 1996, 4), keywords “whose meanings are ‘inextricably bound up with the problems [they are] being used to discuss’” (Williams qtd. in States 2003, 108). As keywords, performance and performativity are two-edged terms located in-between ideology and methodology: to wit, “they are at once an attitude and a tool” (States 2003, 108). This very double nature causes a semantic problem of definition, that Bert States addresses as the philosophical limit-problem of “the inquirer [who] turns out to be part of the problem” (State 2003, 108). As he points out, “no observer (subject) can fully observe or confront the self or the world because we can never stand outside what it is that we are trying to encompass and understand. In the broadest sense, the limit-problem of performance is that we are all, in a manner of speaking, performers” (States 2003, 108). Therefore, States claims, “even the attempt to investigate the nature of

performance turns out to be something of a performance, in at least one definition of the word" (States 2003, 109). In addition to the philosophical limit-problem, States highlights the commonly mistaken metaphorical uses of the word that contribute to the semantic impossibility to postulate a definition of the term. On the one hand, referring to Searle's notion of metaphor as "a one-way street," States notices the general habit in using the word performance as it was "a two-way street," inducing an easy confusion between the vehicle and the tenor (State 2003, 109).

On the other hand, such deliberate use of the metaphorical analogy produces what Umberto Eco defined as "illusory transitivity," to say, "a family resemblance" between elements very different from one another (Eco 1995, 5). The illusory transitivity happens when the vehicle, not specifying the intended meaning and applications, refers more broadly to different manifestations of the same phenomenon, which, apparently, seem similar. This process of switching from one manifestation to the other increases to such an extent to include a wider series of decreasing similarities. As a result, the vehicle ends in referring to a number of manifestations which "gradually become more different than they are alike" (States 2003, 109). This is particularly evident in performance theory, for, as States argues, "quite often something is called a performance for one reason (it is intentional behavior or it draws a crowd) and something else for another (the unintentional playing of a role, as on *Candid Camera*), and so on through all the qualities of the phenomenon" (States 2003, 109). The consequence is the progressive loosing of "the common denominator" that binds all these different manifestations together into what might be called "Performance, with a Platonic capital P".[41] In this light, States'

[41] Metaphorization, according to States, is a lurking problem when it comes to define performance in a phenomenal sense, to say: in order to define what a performance *is*, it is necessary to define what *is not* a performance. And this practice also determines to what extent it is possible to talk about "performance". In States' words: "If you 'deconstruct' performance at what precise point does it disappear? What is the

semiotic impossibility becomes what Elin Diamond considers “a contested space, where meanings and desires are generated, occluded, and of course multiply interpreted” (Diamond 1996, 4). Considering that the theoretical background of performance emerges from the post-structuralist decentering of the subject from language as well as from his/her unconscious desires, combined with the postmodern rejection of foundational discourses, performance, thus, could be seen as the discipline/art of the “un-complete forms” (Diamond 1996, 4). The performance itself, in Diamond’s terms, seems to be an un-complete form, in that it lies in a liminal status among materiality and immateriality, stillness and movement. As Diamond asserts:

> performance is always a doing and a thing done. On the one hand, performance describes certain embodied acts, in specific sites, witnessed by others (and/or the watching self). On the other hand, it is the thing done, the completed event framed in time and space and remembered, misremembered, interpreted, and passionately revisited across a pre-existing discursive field. (Diamond 1996, 1)

As a matter of fact, the reasons for such a complex and debated definition of performance are historical and cultural. In its original meaning, the term referred to something accomplished, fulfilled, carried into effect, and its relations to play and theatre began to appear only in the early seventeenth century.[42] However, it is from the second half of the twentieth century, in concomitance with the blossoming of new forms of experimentalism both in the fine arts and theatre, together with the rising of the discipline of Performance studies, that performance gained particular relevance. In a span of ten years, from 1966 to 1976, Richard Schechner elaborated the principles of the new discipline, shifting “from theatre to performance and from aesthetics to the social sciences” (Schechner 2013, ix). Strongly influenced by Erving Goffman’s groundbreaking

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without-which-not of performance? Or, […] if you ‘reconstruct’ or manipulate reality at what point, under what conditions, does it appear as performance? Or is there no such point? Perhaps performance is unquantifiable.” (States 2003, 118)

[42] From the items “performance” and “perform” in the *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

work[43] as well as by Victor Turner's study on social drama,[44] Schechner moved from theatre studies to cultural anthropology, sociology, and ethnography in order to study "the actual lived behavior of people performatively" (Schechner 2013, ix). With an approach deeply rooted in "the aesthetic of repetition" (States 2004, 119), Schechner defined performances as "'restored behaviors,' 'twice-behaved behaviors,' performed actions that people train for and rehearse" to make art as well as to train themselves for everyday life since each person is expected to learn to "appropriate culturally-specific bits of behavior," and/or to adjust and perform "one's life roles in relation to social and personal circumstances" (Schechner 2013, 28, 29). Art and life, which are entangled in a "dynamic braid" (Schechner 2013, 87), represent the two poles of a spectrum: "an ongoing and never-ending process whereby social dramas affect aesthetic drama and vice versa" (Schechner 2013, 76). Whether social dynamics of interactions are "informed, shaped, and guided by aesthetic principle and performance/rhetorical devices," aesthetic practices are informed, shaped, and guided by the processes of social drama alike (Schechner 2013, 76). Inscribed inside such a system of reciprocity, Schechner developed the notion of a strip of restored behaviors, which derives from a re-elaboration of Goffman's concept of "key" and "keying."[45] The strip of recurrent

[43] Erving Goffman was interested in how individuals structured their experience in everyday life. He defined performance as the conglomerate of "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman 1959, 15). Whereas acknowledging Goffman's influential contribution in "the mimetic view of performance in the social science," Dwight Conquergood also stresses the limits of his "dramaturgical theory," insofar as it reproduces "the Platonic dichotomy between reality and appearance, and thus reinforce an antiperformance prejudice" (Conquergood 1995, 31).

[44] The concept was initially defined in his study on the Ndembu people, and later developed in his work on social rituals (Turner 1982). Victor Turner adopted the organizational structure of dramas to analyze a larger body of manifestations. Strongly influenced by Arnold van Gennep's study of the rites of passage, Turner focused his investigation on the in-between nature of performance, which enables the transition from one state to another or multiple ones (Carlson 2018, 22-23).

[45] These two concepts, coupled with "frame" and the consequent "frameworks," are crucial both in performance studies and sociology. For their original theorization, see Goffman 1974. For insights on current theorizations, see Craib 1978, Cerulo 2006, Fine and Manning 2008, and Ytreberg 2010.

behaviors is independent from the causal system that has generated it, and it is also distant from its original source, which "may be lost, ignored, unknown, or contradicted—even while that truth or source is being honored" (Schechner 1985, 34), because "[h]ow the strips of behavior were made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition" (Schechner 1985, 34). Restored behaviors are present in a great variety of human activities, "from ritual to aesthetic dance and theatre, from initiation rites to social dramas, from psychoanalysis to psychodrama" (Schechner 1985, 35). They exist "on a different plane from 'everyday' existence" (Carlson 2018, 44) since they are independent of who is performing them. This means that restored behaviors "have a life of their own," in that they "can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed" independently from the agent who enacts them (Schechner 1985, 35, 36); and in so doing, they give rise to new performances, new processes in a perpetual flux (Schechner 1985, 36-37). Furthermore, such a distance from the performers also explains the difference "of degree, not kind" (Schechner 1985, 37) between Schechner's twice-behaved behaviors and Goffman's "presentations of self in everyday life" (Carlson 2018, 44). As Schechner posits, "[p]ut in personal terms, restored behavior is 'me behaving as if I am someone else' or 'as if I am *beside myself*, or *not myself*,' as when in trance. But this 'someone else' may also be 'me in another state of feeling/being,' as if there were multiple 'me's' in each person" (Schechner 1985, 37; italics mine). Therefore, performance is not only the mechanism that enables the restored behavior, but "it is behavior itself" that exists "only as actions, interactions, and relationships" (Schechner 2013, 51, 30). Furthermore, considering its main characteristics —originality,[46] immediacy, ephemerality, interactivity,[47] and efficacy[48]—

[46] "Performances are made from bits of restored behavior, but every performance is different from every other. First, fixed bits of behavior can be recombined in endless variations. Second, no event can exactly

performance may be conceived as the tool, the action, and the site where transformation takes place. Performance can be conceived as a liminoid space (Turner 1974), a passageway, that, while producing change, it also creates other "betwixt and between" spaces[49] where transgression and reaction are possible. In this way, performance serves as the process that leads to, engages with, and accomplishes, such a metamorphosis, while providing its own meta-discourse. It is the epitome of the state of in-betweenness, since "a performance comes into being only during its course [...] from the interaction of performers and spectators" (Fisher-Lichte 2009, 391). For all these reasons, when performance emerged from, and in contrast to, theatre studies, it was provocatively introduced as a paradigm shift.[50] In this crucial passage, when the term began to acquire

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copy another event. Not only the behavior itself—nuances of mood, tone of voice, body language, and so on, but also the specific occasion and context make each instance unique" (Schechner 2003, 30).

[47] "The uniqueness of an event does not depend on its materiality solely but also on its interactivity —and the interactivity is always in flux. [...] Performance isn't 'in' anything, but 'between'" (Schechner 2003, 30). To explain this last passage, Schechner introduces the example of a mother who teaches her baby daughter how to eat cereals with a spoon. In this case, the performance "is the action of lifting the spoon, bringing it to mother's mouth, and then to baby's mouth. The baby is at first the spectator of its mother's performance. At some point, the baby becomes a co-performer as she takes the spoon and tries the same action" (Schechner 2003, 30). Moreover, Schechner adds, interaction produces even other kinds of possible relations in time and space. Indeed, going back to the example just mentioned, if the scene of mother and daughter would have been filmed, the viewing of the video, later in time, would become another performance "existing in the complex relation between the original event, the video of the event, the memory of parents now old or maybe dead, and the present moment" (Schechner 2003, 30).

[48] "Instead of construing performance as *transcendence*, a higher plane that one breaks into, I prefer to think of it as *transgression*, that force which crashes and breaks through sedimented meanings and normative traditions and plunges us back into the vortices of political struggle —in the language of bell hooks as 'movement beyond boundaries'" (Conquergood 1995, 32).

[49] "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the position assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions" (Turner 2008, 95).

[50] "The cultural crisis signaled by multiculturalism and interculturalism can be creatively met by radically changing theatre departments' goals and curricula. Most theatre departments should get out of the professional training business and rejoin —and reform— the humanities in a big way. A new paradigm for the field needs to be developed and deployed. Professional training for the orthodox theatre—a very small slice of the performance pie—is neither economically enough nor academically acceptable. The new paradigm is 'performance,' not theatre. Theatre departments should become 'performance departments'" (Schechner 1992, 9).

pivotal relevance in the dialectic between the two departments,[51] from being a semantic problem the definition of its meaning(s), spectrum of pertinence, limits, and characteristics, from being a semantic problem it became institutional. Philip Auslander (2007) outlines such diversity in methodological terms. Theatre Studies is an *object-driven* discipline: "there is an object (or set of objects, if you prefer) called theatre, and the purpose of theatre studies is to study that object using a variety of tools (some historical, for example, some critical or analytical)" (Auslander 2007, 2). Performance Studies, on the contrary, is a *paradigm-driven* discipline: "There is no object (or set of objects) called performance(s) the study of which performance studies takes as its purpose. Rather, there is an idea, performance, that serves as the paradigm starting point for any inquiry that occurs within the disciplinary realm" (Auslander 2007, 2-3). Schechner remarks:

> Performance is an inclusive term. Theater is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life—greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on —through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude. (Schechner 2013, xvii)

In this light, the field tends to continuous expansion and, for dimension, typology, and structure, it resembles the rhizomatic net of the World Wide Web.[52]

Moreover, the two fundamentals of performance studies, indeterminacy[53] and non-specificity,[54] have boosted the incredible growth of this field that, through the

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[51] For an historical recount of the debate, with in-depth analysis of the crucial points of dissent between the two disciplines, see Schechner 1992, 2003 and 2013, Conquergood 1995, 2002, Auslander 1997, 2007, Carlson 2001, 2018, Bottoms 2003, Shepherd and Wallis 2004, Lehmann 2006, and Fischer-Lichte 2014.

[52] "The web is the same system seen more dynamically. Instead of being spread out along a continuum, each node interacts with the others" (Schechner 2013, xvii).

[53] "The primary fundamental of performance studies is that there is no fixed canon of works, ideas, practices, or anything else that defines or limits the field. [...] Whatever today's convergences, these cannot be retained once and for all. Performance studies is *fundamentally* relational, dynamic, and processual. Such rigorous indeterminacy and openness make many uncomfortable about PS" (Schechner 2002, x; italics in the original).

intersection with other disciplines,[55] have expanded to such an extent to be provocatively defined "a curious monster,"[56] and an "antidiscipline" (Roach in Carlson 2001, 142). In a well-known account, Marvin Carlson recalls when in the mid-1990s, he was asked to write a report on the emergent performance studies. One of his reviewers complained about the vagueness and ambivalence of his position: it was not clear whether he "considered performance studies a new discipline or an interdisciplinary field" (Carlson 2001, 142). The complaint pushed him to turn the question to the two leading figures in the field at that time: the anthropologist and ethnographer Dwight Conquergood, and the theatre and cultural historian Joseph Roach. With Carlson's surprise, despite the difference in background and approach, the two answers were almost identical:

> performance studies was, in fact, neither a discipline nor an interdisciplinary field. Roach instead called it an "antidiscipline," devoted at a fundamental level not only to breaking down the boundaries between existing disciplines, but to challenging the very idea of disciplinary boundaries, structures, and ways of thinking. (Carlson 2001, 142)

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[54] "The second fundamental is that performance studies enthusiastically borrow from other disciplines. There is nothing that inherently 'really belongs to' or 'really does not belong to' performance studies" (Schechner 2002, x).

[55] In addition to sociology, anthropology, and ethnography —in a sort of updated list of "the disciplines of the moment," since performance poetry is in continuous transformation and expansion— Richard Schechner also mentions: "feminist studies, gender studies, history, psychoanalysis, queer theory, semiotics, ethology, cybernetics, area studies, media and popular culture theory, and cultural studies" (Schechner 2002, x). Furthermore, starting from Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, going through Louis Althusser, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, to end with Edward W. Said, Hayden White, and Slavoj ŽiŽek (among others), Philip Auslander considers in a broader perspective the tangential relations between performance studies and several thinkers who, although not directly related to the field, still present in their theoretical approach many points of contact with the discipline, and/or introduce relevant elements in the current debate on performance and performativity. (Auslander 2007).

[56] "The curious monster of performance studies, of course, *wants* to cross boundaries and consider the Western dramatic tradition not simply in solipsistic terms, but in the context of world culture, popular performance, mass-media spectacle, and the performative rituals of contemporary life"(Bell 2003, 6 ; italics in the original).

This functional "non-definition" of performance studies, describing what performance studies do, and not what they are, paves the way to a great variety of theoretical issues. In this context, only the two more relevant definitions for the study of the object in question, performance poetry, will be taken into account. The first one, with which the paragraph opens, concerns the apparent "semantic impossibility" to define performance, due to its dual nature of both object and critical tool. As previously mentioned, such a "non-discipline" (paraphrasing Roach's "antidiscipline") works in absence of canons, ideas, and practices, in a constantly transformative flux. This seems to suggest that, not only should performance be regarded and treated as a "non-object," but that every attempt at defining it would just serve as "a window opened to the world": to wit, it shows one or more aspects of such a composite reality, but it cannot contemplate the whole. For this reason, any definition of performance tends to be more the account of an analytical process, the presentation of a specific perspective on a certain phenomenon (or set of phenomena), rather than its descriptive ontological representation. Thus, on the one hand, the functional "non-definition" of performance as a "non-object" challenges the very process of defining, at least in the terms, the extents, and the ways in which we are used to conceive what a definition is and what it does; while, on the other hand, it casts light on the very agents of the investigation, who, by means of their own analysis, become "non-objects" of another performance: their own. Thus, in an attempt to define performance, they produce a meta-discourse of their own performance as well. Accordingly, Peggy Phelan's definition of performance,[57] which is predominately characterized by an "aesthetic of the presence," turns to reveal the "political commentary

[57] "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. […] Performance's being […] becomes itself through disappearance" (Phelan 1993, 146).

[that] the work is making on its own medium" (States 2004, 119, 117). Bert States elaborates a definition that, underlining the importance of "the human desire to participate in performative transformations," is able to mediate between the two realms of arts and science.[58] And, in doing so, he confutes Schechner's idea of "twice-behaved," since it emerges from an "artistic" understanding of the term "behavior."[59] Or again, Erika Fischer-Lichte, who moves from Max Herrmann's definition of performance,[60] considers performance studies as the "natural extension of an already well established field" (Carlson 2008, 4), where performance works as a "laboratory" for the investigation of the influence of aesthetics and politics both in cultural diversity and cultural identity formation on a global scale (Fischer-Lichte 2009 and 2010).

These three examples lead to the second point in case: performance studies as a discipline. At the conclusion of a brief list of reasons that brought performance studies in the academic limelight, Carlson comments: "performance studies seemed positioned to provide just the sort of neutral ground for interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary work that many academic researchers were seeking as the twentieth century drew to a close" (Carlson 2001, 141). In reality, this field is not neutral at all. As a matter of fact, whether on the one side, the plasticity and dynamicity of performance offer a great variety of possibilities to research, since it perfectly adapts to and "fits in" the heterogeneous space of contemporary hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin 1999), on the other hand, for the

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[58] "So we may say that art (in which I include science) is its own reward, whatever other things it may achieve. Here is what we might call the kernel or gene of performativity from which all divided forms of artistic performance spring: the collapse of means and ends into each other, the simultaneity of producing something and responding to it in the same behavioral act" (States 2004, 130-131).

[59] "I realize that the term behavior is not the same in and out of art and that twice-behaved, in Schechner's meaning, implies a conscious and deliberate artistic control and choice of behavior. But what is this control/choice process if not one of perfecting something 'already understood' that has not yet passed into the frame of art?" (States 2004, 125).

[60] "[performance is] a game in which everyone, actors and spectators, participates" (Herrmann qtd. in Fischer-Lichte 2014, 18).

same reasons mentioned at the beginning, performance is a "tricky" tool. While serving the analytical investigation of the object in question, it also questions the methodological and ontological basis of the field of study to which performance is applied, as it happens in the case here presented of performance poetry.

2. Performance and Theatre: Historical Background

From the 1970s the term "performance" has grown in popularity, moving out of the arts into almost every "branch of the human sciences —sociology, anthropology, ethnography, psychology, linguistics" (Carlson 2018, 6). Along with the other two complex terms, performativity and theatricality, performance has been widely used both as a metaphor and analytical tool to investigate any sort of human and non-human activity (Carlson 2018, 5).

The seventies were a decade deeply marked by historical, cultural, and social transformations.[61] In this period, many of the technological advancements and innovations that had begun in the previous decade were improved and made accessible for a larger market. Although in the early sixties, developments in electronic media made possible a new art form based on computer-generated imagery, while electronic systems began to appear in theater, dance, and performance, it is only in the seventies that video started to be more present in live performances, facilitating the spread of multi-media

[61] See Freeman and Johnson 1999, and Hall 2008.

performances.[62] Yet, together with a general optimism for technological progress and innovation,[63] the sixties spilled over into the seventies and eighties a wave of public discontent which took form in more or less organized protests, marches, and sits-in. The late 1960s, in fact, were also a season of intense socio-political turmoil with the blossoming of numerous movements — the women's liberation movement, the gay movement, the counter-cultural youth movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war movements, the welfare rights movement, etc.—which called for recognition, equal rights, a radical change of social and juridical conditions, and a re-distribution of the welfare state too (Freeman and Johnson 1999, ix). This had a strong echo and "a momentous impact on the arts, humanities, and humanistic social sciences in the West" (Davis 2008, 1), which responded, reflected, embodied, and participated in the ongoing change by producing a great variety of "turns" —linguistic, cultural, and performative—which were interrelated and executed "in league with […] the related activist-academic fields of gender studies, queer studies, and cultural studies" (Davis 2008, 1). It is during this intense period that drama and theatre went through profound transformations, while performance arose both as an art form and a discipline.

From the late 1960s, the rapid emergence of experimental, postmodern, and postdramatic[64] forms of theatre witnessed "the breakdown of dramatic conventions"

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[62] This was possible thanks to more affordable video-editing equipment for artists, who could use a semi-professional three-quarter-inch tape-editing system instead of relying on the expensive equipment of professional companies (Dixon 2007, 88).

[63] Especially the second half of the decade was characterized more by a sense of cultural and ideological change rather than real "technological leaps" or the emergence of computer art (Dixon 2007, 87-88). Two events, different in nature but with an equally powerful effect on the collective consciousness, contributed to nourish a general sense of technological empowerment. In 1965, the introduction of portable camera systems, most notably the Sony Portapack, boosted a feeling of accessibility and democratization of video technology —even if the real artistic and technological innovation happened in the 1990s when computer technologies became accessible to the mass market; and the landing of the first human being on the Moon in 1969 (Dixon 2007, 88).

[64] The paradigm of postdramatic theatre refers to a "multiform kind of theatrical discourse" (Lehmann 2006, 22) that, rejecting the Aristotelian conceptual framework based on the *mimesis* of action on stage,

(Jürs-Munby 2006, 1) and a redefinition of theatre aesthetics.[65] In 1968, Peter Brook's concept of "the empty space"[66] and Jerzy Grotowski's "Theatre Laboratory"[67] inaugurated a series of radical transformations that attempted to renovate theatrical practice through experimentations with space, body, and media, while incentivizing the audience's active participation during performances (Dixon 2007, 88-89). Such a desire for novelty produced numerous "no longer dramatic theatre" forms, like Off-Broadway, Open Theatre, Living Theater, Fluxus, political theater, etc… which broadened the role of avant-garde art.[68] With new and demanding agendas, inspired by the historical and social context, these counter-cultural forms of theatre "broke through barriers between high, middle and low forms of art and entertainment creating a new sensibility, new tastes and an openness to the unconventional" (King 2016, 3). At the same time, they privileged the "natural immediacy" of the action over the representation of a written dramatic text.[69] In this way, "the transitional nature of theatre" (Worthen 2010, xi) was

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analyses contemporary performances not as text-based representations, but as multimedia events, where the centrality of the text has been "dethroned" by the newly recognized importance of other elements like body, time, space, sound, and action. As Hans Lehman posits: "postdramatic theatre is *not simply a new kind of text of staging* […] but rather a type of sign usage in theatre that […] becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information" (Lehmann 2006, 85; italics in the original).

[65] See Fuchs 1996, Shepherd & Wallis 2004, Schmidt 2005, Saddik 2007, and King 2016.

[66] "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (Brook 1996, 7).

[67] "In the first place, we are trying to avoid eclecticism, trying to resist thinking of theatre as a composite of disciplines. […] Secondly, our productions are detailed investigations of the actor-audience relationship. That is, **we consider the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art**" (Grotowski 2002, 15; bold in the original).

[68] For a criticism on the limits of avant-garde theatre innovations see Lehmann 2006, and Kershaw 2013.

[69] On the problematic and elusive intersection-rejection between dramatic writing and dramatic performance, see Shepherd and Wallis 2004 (ch. 2), Lehmann 2006, Worthen 2010, Kershaw 2013, and Schmidt 2016 (ch. 3).

emphasized by the sharpening of the “perpetual conflict between text and scene” (Lehmann 2006, 145).

In the early seventies, in the midst of such a theatrical revolution, the word “performance” came into vogue inside the American artistic scene, to address those kinds of arts which traditionally belong to the sphere of popular culture and folklore, like: pageants, parades, pantomime, monologues, stand-up comedy, magic shows, clowns, puppets, etc….[70] Soon, the word acquired characteristics of ubiquity, popularity and ambiguity as well, for it became an umbrella term to generally refer to the development of an action, more or less improvised, in the presence of an audience, whose participation is strongly encouraged, inside whatever conventional or unconventional space (Carlson 2018, 96). As Sally Banes remarks, performance:

> is a vague term, used indiscriminately to refer to a wide variety of events and incorporating a range of styles, intentions, methods, activities, and scales of production—from the matter-of-fact and banal to the baroque; from the solo to the crowd; from the autobiographical to the fantastical; from improvisation and chance procedures to the precisely set; from the political to the apolitical and antipolitical; from the serious to the comic; from the violent to the serene; from the technologically primitive to high-tech; from pure actor’s theater to multimedia. (Banes 1998, 2)

In the attempt to organize such an oddly aggregate, Noël Carroll (1986) elaborates a general distinction on the basis of the two “dominant sources,” out of which performance emerged both as a praxis and aesthetics (Shepherd & Wallis 2004, 83). From the field of fine arts and visual arts, “art performance” developed as a form of “anti-essentialist resistance to formalism”; while, out of the avant-garde theatre practices, “performance art” emerged as a practice of “essentialist resistance” to the dominant theatrical representationalism (Carroll qtd. in Shepherd & Wallis 2004, 84). Despite these

[70] See Banes 1998, and Carlson 2018.

differences, the two artistic movements inherited from the sixties the same urgency to break down distinctions between arts, forms, styles, rules, and boundaries —especially between performing and non-performing arts.[71] In the fine arts, as a reaction against the essentialism and formalism of certain gallery aesthetics, artists started collaborations and alliances with other performers, in particular musicians and dancers, creating myriads of environments, happenings, live and conceptual art events.[72] Especially at the beginning, performance was close to popular experimental forms like conceptual art and body art (Carlson 2018, 93-94). Performance works could range from the research for the experience of the aesthetic through form and process, to the exploration and celebration of the physicality of the body with its ordinary and unusual manifestations (Carlson 2018, 119, 94). If performance events borrowed from different art forms, they also contributed to revitalizing them, thanks to a strong component of dissent which was rooted in Italian Futurism, Russian Constructivism, Surrealism and Dada, the Cabaret Voltaire, and the Bauhaus.[73] This is particularly evident in the case of performance art that, together with some avant-garde theatre movements, rejected "the established bourgeois literary theatre" of the 1950s and 1960s (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 8). On the basis of the Artaudian vision of an "anti-literary theatre"[74]—more "nerves and heart," visceral, even cruel, rather than "a servile copy of reality" (Artaud 1958, 84, 86) —performance art

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[71] See Goldberg 1988, and Banes 1998.

[72] See Banes & Carroll 2005, and Carlson 2018.

[73] See Goldberg 1988, and Champagne 2016.

[74] With reference to one famous play of the Theatre of the Absurd, Ionesco's *The New Tenant*, where the sense of the play lies in the incessant arrival of pieces of furniture, that literally submerge the occupant of the room, Martin Esslin synthetizes the concept of "anti-literariness" as follows: "In the Theatre of the Absurd, therefore, the real content of the play lies in the action. Language may be discarded altogether […]. Here the movement of objects alone carries the dramatic action, the language has become purely incidental […] In this, the Theatre of the Absurd also reveals its anti-literary character, its endeavor to link up with the pre-literary strata of stage history: the circus, the performances of itinerant jugglers and mountebanks, the music-hall, fairground barkers, acrobats, and also the robust world of the silent film" (Esslin 1960, 12). See also Hayman 1979 (ch.VIII).

understood theatrical representation "as an autonomous art rather than a medium for bringing the art of literature to an audience" (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 8). This brought to a revaluation of a more presentational, participatory, image-oriented, and kinesthetic theatre (Banes & Carroll 2005), where artists, often without being experts or professionals in the disciplines with which they experimented, approached the different forms of art with "a naïve vitality and directness" (Champagne 2016, 178). Thanks to a renewed emphasis on authenticity and immediacy, as the main aspects of performance, actors sought to dissolve the distance between spectator and performer (Shepherd & Wallis 2004, 84). Whether a performer wanted to address personal, political, or aesthetic issues, the main concern was to bring real events on stage, in order to "close the gap between art and life" (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 8). In opposition to the practice of representation/embodiment of a character, the actor, now turned into a performer, began to adopt a new perspective on his/her own body and on the physicality of the performance space too (Banes & Carroll 2005). This preoccupation with the real and the presentation —especially in opposition to representation— was part of a dynamic that, from the late 1960s to all the 1980s, marked a shift "from discourses of authenticity to those of simulation and disjunction," which informed "the popular metaphysics" of western culture (Carroll qtd. in Shepherd & Wallis 2004, 84). Furthermore, as Sally Banes remarks, considering the "perennially high volume of two-way traffic between mass or popular culture and avant-garde performance —beginning at least with Filippo Marinetti's 1913 Futurist manifesto 'The Variety Theatre'" (Banes 1998, 9), during the 1980s, such volume reached its apex with the popularity of performance art. It was so widely known "that it no longer needed to be defined" (Banes 1998, 9). Those were years of intense activity for artists that more and more crossed over mainstream entertainment and television (Auslander 1989), marking a cultural shift from "The

Golden Years" of the 1970s (Goldberg 2010) to "the media generation" of the 1980s (Goldberg 1988, 190), which was "more concerned with the word than the body" (Auslander 1989, 119).

The 1980s, thus, began with a substantial return to "the bourgeois fold [that] had as much to do with an overwhelmingly conservative political era as it did with the coming of age of the media generation" (Goldberg 1988, 190). With an almost blanket rejection of anti-establishment idealism of the two previous decades, performance artists turned to a "different mood of pragmatism, entrepreneurship and professionalism" (Goldberg 1988, 190). Whether on the one hand, artists tried to break down the barriers between arts and the media, on the other hand, they accentuated the friction between high and low art, by experiencing the ambivalence to combine entertainment, spectacle, and celebrity[75] with aesthetic experimentation and "artistic integrity" (Goldberg 1988, 190, 194). Considering the impressive variety of performances that developed during this period, Marvin Carlson distinguishes two general trends that, during the eighties, began to conflate. On the one hand, the one-person performances were generally hosted in conventional artistic venues, where the artist works on his/her own body —displaying physical skills, or experimenting with the limits of the body, even by way of actions that inflict pain— psychological introspection, and accounts or considerations about autobiographical elements.[76] Two kinds of performances specifically belong to this

[75] "The artist-as-celebrity of the eighties came close to replacing the rock star of the seventies, although the artist's mystique as cultural messenger suggested a more establishment role than the rock star had played" (Goldberg 1988, 190).

[76] Famous artists, who were able to call the attention of media and mass audience, were Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Marina Abramović, and Laurie Anderson, whose *United States* (1980) brought to the heed of mainstream culture performance arts (King 2016; Carlson 2018).

group: persona performance and walkabouts.[77] Drawing on the vaudevillian and clown traditions, these are costumed performances, where the artists dress up to embody a certain type of person, historical or coeval, “in order to make some social or satirical point” (Carlson 2018, 102). Sometimes, as in the case of Eleanor Antin, performers improvise on aspects of their own personality, playing with multiple-personae-characters that are built and developed during the show. By the mid-1970s, these performances become more and more centered on autobiographical aspects of the artists, who heavily turned to monologues to explore their many “selves” in front of an audience.[78] On the other hand, more image-oriented spectacles elaborated performances involving technology and mix-media to experiment on sound and visual images (Carlson 2018, 96). From Richard Kostelanetz’s “The Theatre of Mixed Means” and Bonnie Marranca’s “Theatre of Images” to outdoor, site-specific, or environmental performances, these spectacles could involve huge casts and crews, and re-produce large-scale environments, like movie sets, or simply adapt to the specific building or natural location (Carlson 2018, 97-98). This kind of performance symbolizes a major shift in performance art because of its dominant “anti-theatre orientation” (Carlson 2018, 99). If during the seventies, performance art was “a time-based visual art form in which text was at the service of image” by the early eighties, it became a “movement-based work, with the performance artist as choreographer” (Apple qtd. in Carlson 2018, 105). Performances, indeed, required more and more collaboration among numerous and different kinds of artists, due to the expectations of diversion and enjoyment to which the audience had

[77] A British label to define especially European performances where “costumed performers improvise interactions with the general public […] seeking to stimulate amused confusion” (Carlson 2018, 103).

[78] Well-known monologue artists were Whoopi Goldberg, Eric Bogosian, and Anna Deveare Smith.

been getting used through TV and other forms of popular entertainment, like the "new circus" and the "new vaudevillians" (Carlson 2018, 105).

3. Performance and Poetry

As discussed in the previous chapter, since the origins of performance poetry might be traced back to the African oral tradition, in time, several poets have combined performance with their poetic craft for the pleasure of an audience. From the elocutionists of the nineteenth century,[79] to Vachel Lindsey, Langston Hughes, Melvin Tolson, and Allen Ginsberg, the practice of reading poetry aloud was done to different extents and for distinct purposes. However, only at the end of the twentieth century, poetry and performance began to "formally" combine in a more conscious way, and independently from the personalities of poets "who had a flair for the stage" (Eleveld 2003, 63). Indeed, if the late sixties and early seventies marked extensive changes in the arts, they also prepared the field for poetry and performance to join together. The first to conceive poetry as a form of spectacle and entertainment was John Giorno.[80] He was the creator of the Electronic Sensory Poetry Environments (ESPEs) and the Giorno Poetry Systems' record, "founder of a pirate radio station broadcast from the bell tower of St. Mark's Church, [and] organizer of LSD-fueled poetry-performance parties at the Poetry Project" (Kane 2017, 145). John Giorno was perhaps "the preeminent figure in the

[79] Concerning the relationship between public readings and poetry, with historical in-depth analysis of poetry as social form from the nineteenth century to nowadays, see: Harrington 2002; Wheeler 2008; Franke 2010; and Wolosky 2010.

[80] See Eleveld 2003, Kane 2003 and 2017, and Hennessey 2011.

downtown scene determined to reconfigure poetry as populist outlaw happening" (Kane 2017, 145). His innovative poetic effort was directed to help poetry overcome its popular as well as technological gap with all the other forms of art.[81] Whereas, as above mentioned, the mid-1960s witnessed "a major cultural renaissance" in electronic music, pop art, dance, theatre, fine arts, and performance (Boon 2008, xiii), poetry seemed not to be touched by this wind of change, since it "was 75 years behind painting and sculpture, dance and music" (Giorno in Hennessey 2011, 77). As Giorno claims: "In 1965, the only venues for poetry were the book and the magazine, nothing else. Multimedia and performance didn't exist" (Giorno in Hennessey 2011, 76). Moreover, at the poetry readings there was no use of any sound system to support the poet's voice, making it hard for the audience, especially for those who did not seat in the front rows, to hear anything but the echo of the poet's voice (Hennessey 2011, 77). Furthermore, in addition to this reticence and resistance to innovation, the poetic scene, especially the New York School, had become monotonous, "bloated, rigid, self-important, and, crucially, *boring*" (Kane 2017, 146; italic in the original). During an interview, John Giorno recalled when, on a hot night in June 1963, he went to a gallery with Andy Warhol to listen to his friends John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and Kenneth Koch give a reading. Since the place was crowded, they sat in the back without hearing a word for the lack of any PA system. Thus, Giorno recounts:

> **There was no thought given to presentation —it didn't exist**. There we were, standing around with hundreds of people, and we couldn't hear a thing. Andy started whispering to me, "O John, it's so boring, why is it so boring?" Those words of Andy's, "Why is it so boring, *why* is it so boring," became one of those treasures that propelled me. I didn't know it at the time, but **poetry readings didn't have to be boring— people were just making it boring**. (Giorno qtd. in Kane 2003, 267; italic in the original, bolds are mine)

[81] See Boon 2008, and Hennessey 2011.

In contrast to the boredom and general lack of interest in the audience, John Giorno promoted “poetry-based performances that tended toward highly theatrical, technologically innovative controlled chaos” (Kane 2003, 183). His main goal was to find innovative ways to connect people to the poems, using “all the entertainments of ordinary life” (Giorno 1994, 182). For this reason, he developed a “more immediately accessible performance poetry style characterized by insistent repetitions that owed more to the pop lyric than to poetry proper” (Kane 2017, 146). As a matter of fact, if John Giorno may be considered the founding father of performance poetry —since he worked consciously and systematically to create and develop such a poetic practice— its “putative mother” would appear only a few years later, in the late 1970s, on the back of a renewed interest in performance arts for cross-media practice and popular forms of entertainment. In those years, the expression “performance poetry” was coined by poet and spoken word artist Hedwig Gorski, to differentiate her spoken word verse drama from visual-based spoken word performances, as well as from Laurie Anderson’s experimental theatrical work in-between music and poetry (Gorski 2006).

At that time, following the enormous success of spoken word performances, spoken word poetry came into vogue too (Somers-Willett 2009, 97). Even if at the beginning it connoted “several different kinds of work —beat poetry, hip-hop lyrics, coffeehouse musings, avant-garde performance literature” (Somers-Willett 2009, 99), it did not take long before spoken word poetry became associated with performance poetry. There are three reasons. First and foremost, the two poetic forms favor oral and performative aspects of the poem over its written form —which may, or maybe not, be present. Secondly, these all-inclusive terms have “strong associations with commercial media” (Somers-Willett 2009, 100). As the history of the term in the recording industry suggests

(Samuels 1991), "*spoken word* has, unbeknownst to many of its practitioners and consumers, commercial origins" (Somers-Willett 2009, 100; italics in the original). And finally, both spoken word poetry and performance poetry are "highly dependent on context" (Somers-Willett 2009, 99), since they rely on the power of spoken language to open spaces for new possibilities of representation and communication.[82] This tension between commercial and artistic interests, which is often played out through performances and/or texts on identity representation,[83] highlights the strong connection that both spoken word and performance poetry have with African American popular music, and hip-hop in particular.[84] Despite the differences, indeed, hip hop, rap and, above all, gangsta rap might be conceived as the "commercial precursors" of spoken word and performance poetry, serving as models for how these two poetic forms could be consumed as mainstream commodities (Somers-Willett 2009, 101). African American rappers opened the way for African American spoken word poets —and subsequently for all the others— in the mainstream market (Somers-Willett 2009, 104). In return, by combining poetic structures with hip hop language as a tool for the expression of cultural authenticity, poets uplifted the image of rappers (Somers-Willett 2009, 104-105). Since the 1990s, the similarities between hip hop singers and spoken word poets, which had been increased by the extensive usage of performance, have marked a strong connection between the two forms of art, that were understood as almost equivalent by the audience. As Susan Somers-Willett notes, "American audiences also frequently use the term today to indicate a hip-hop-infused lyric, and, although not all spoken word poetry reflects these aesthetics, in some cases spoken word poetry is indistinguishable from

[82] See Decker 1994, Dimitriadis 2001, Sparks and Grochowski 2002, and Furniss 2004.

[83] See Rose 1994, Lubiano 1996, and Watkins 2005.

[84] See Samuels 1991, Howard 2003, and Quickley 2003.

hip-hop save for its attention to political messages" (Somers-Willett 2009, 99). In the late 1990s, with the rapid spread of slam poetry on a national and international level, thanks to the interest of several different media in the phenomenon —like theatre, film, print, television, internet, sound recordings, etc.[85] —hip hop catalyzed much of the public attention on performance poetry thanks to poets like Beau Sia, "MuMS tha' Schema, Jessica Care Moore, and most notably Saul Williams" (Quickley 2003, 40). With their complex verbiage, articulated rhyme schemes, and dynamic pace, these performers introduced "an exciting and fledgling style that had the possibility to reconfigure the ways in which Spoken Word resonated and connected with people" (Quickley 2003, 41). Moreover, they gave proof of the high level of technical competence that is required to work in-between these two artistic forms. As Jerry Quickley maintains:

> If you effectively manifest hip hop poetry styles, it means that you have the ability to use both straight up hip hop and straight up poetry (free verse, haiku, sonnets, whatever). Being a poet using hip hop styles does not mean that you throw in some timely ghetto colloquialism and vaguely clever but ultimately overtly self-conscious end rhymes. It means that you can choose to bend styles to your will both within your written work and within your performances, all the while keeping your uniqueness and tone intact. (Quickley 2003, 41-42)

While slam contests and hip-hop-based poems strongly contributed to the general revival of poetry in the American scene, they still represent only one part —perhaps the most visible and mediatic one, but still a segment— of a wider movement of poetry resurgence, that moved "mostly from the communities and populations normally not considered poetic, such as the homeless, gang members, midwives, prisoners, carpenters, etc." (Rodriguez 2003, 210). The reception of the phenomenon in the late 1990s was ambivalent. Luis J. Rodriguez describes it with the image of "a pendulum swing":

[85] See Somers-Willett 2009, Bauridl 2013, and Johnson 2017.

> There is a pendulum swing when it comes to discussing performance in poetry: it's either the best thing to happen to poetry or the worst. The gist of most critiques of the concept of poetry performance seems to say "good" poetry is linked to the academy, and thus to the page, while "bad" poetry is rooted in the inarticulate, illiterate masses (and often relegated to the stage). (Rodriguez 2003, 209)

Such a dichotomy between "good" and "bad" poetry characterized the almost absent critical debate of the time. With few exceptions, the prevalent attitude "swang" from indifference or derision, to harsh elitist criticism.[86] Several reasons contributed to such a negative reception: cultural clichés, aesthetics prejudices, narcissistic self-referentiality of the literary discipline, and a certain degree of myopia. Indeed, considering the wide range of typologies of performance poetry —from traditional poetry readings to more competitive slams— to the critics' eye, the oral mode would have highlighted the "bivalent mediality" of poetry, thus complicating even more the notoriously difficult task of delimiting such a complex genre (Novak 2011, 62, 50). Moreover, the focus on the performative aspects of the poem —whether previously written or improvised at the moment— arose a "problem of medium" (Novak 2011, 16), that would have shaken the very foundations of literature as an academic discipline, for, historically, literary studies have developed as the "science" of written texts.[87] In this light, the stout defense of the holiness[88] of the written word might be read as the epistemological defense of a

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[86] See Bernstein 1998, Novak 2011, and Johnson 2017.

[87] "The literary scholar's prioritization of the book as his/her central focus of interest originates in the pre-eminence of scripture and print when literary studies established itself as an academic discipline" (Hiebler qtd. in Novak 2011, 16).

[88] The reference to the sacredness of the written text does not only function as a mere metaphor of the literary and cultural prestige of writing, but it is a direct reference to a pivotal moment in history, that contributed to the passage from an oral culture to a written one. When the "holy Verb" was written, it acquired the status and religious authority of what became known as the "scripture," to say, the Bible (see Schniedewind 2004; Lardinois, Blok, Van Der Poel 2011; Palmer 2014). Moreover, considering the relationship between orality and literacy in a religious context like the Jewish one, the two textual realities have equal importance. In writing, the "ancient story attempts to transcend time and distance" (Palmer 2014, 513), whilst collective participation "within the seder and ritual readings assures the continuation of the people for all time" (Palmer 2014, 513).

paradigm that has informed almost a millennium of history of western culture and thought. Since, considering Walter Ong's detailed analysis —on thousands of spoken languages, only 106 are written, and among three-thousands language spoken today, only 78 have produced what we consider being "literature" (Ong 2002, 7)— maybe, the relationship literacy-orality, with the second element charged with a negative component in contrast to the first one, should be thoroughly revised, insofar as there is a high probability that "when writing is applied to otherwise unwritten narratives, something is more or less lost of the original text" (Tedlock in Palmer 2014, 513). This would explain the reason why, even if, from the second half of the twentieth century, new currents of critical thinking —gender studies, post-colonialism, psychoanalysis, feminism, postmodernism, etc.— have questioned the mythical representation of the text as a stable, tangible, finished, reliable, and timeless artifact,[89] nevertheless, the cognitive principles that shape and inform Western culture have remained deeply rooted in visual-based (a.k.a. "written") discourse (Boenisch 2006, 106-107). And thus also casts light on the causes of such academic disdain for a kind of poetry that "evolved largely from the model of the academic lecture rather than, say, the recital or exhibition" (Wheeler 2008, 128).

Charles Bernstein evaluates the hostile attitude towards any kind of spoken word and/or performance poetry as the effect of a certain difficulty, if not reluctance and prudery, to accept the change in paradigm. If studies in folklore and orality had already

[89] With reference to Jerome McGann's several works of textual criticism, where he repeatedly states that often there is no one original written version of the poem, Charles Bernstein (1998) insists: "Even leaving aside the status of the manuscript, there often exist various and discrepant printings —I should like to say textual performances— in magazines and books, with changes in wording but also in spacing, font, paper, and, moreover, contexts of readership; making for a plurality of versions, none of which can claim sole authority. I would call these multifoliate versions *performances* of the poem; and I would add the poet's own performance of the work in a poetry reading, or readings, to the list of variants that together, plurally, constitute and reconstitute the work" (Bernstein 1998, 8).

outlined a new tendency in conceiving the text in terms of fluidity and plurality, discarding the notion of originality as the ideal textual model to seek,[90] literary critics had a hard time in understanding the poem "as a performative event and not merely as a textual entity," that has "a fundamentally plural existence" (Bernstein 1998, 9). In addition, the popularity of the phenomenon, coupled with its mediatic outgrowths, reawakened the historical and philosophical deprecation for popular mass art.[91] Paraphrasing Noël Carroll, the poets were caught in the dichotomy of "it is not really poetry [art]" or "it is bad poetry [art]" (Carroll 1998, 4). Given the commercial origins of the phenomenon, critics worried that poets, driven by the desire to please the "madding crowd," could "unconsciously take aesthetic shortcuts" that, in the end, would have damaged the literary and aesthetic quality of their work rather than improve it; or, even worse, "lazy poets" could have been tempted, and some were, to use performance as a strategy to hide the weaknesses in their writing (Groff 2005). Furthermore, as Leslie Wheeler stresses, such an emphasis on a plurality of alternative approaches to poetry in performance, even if it "influenced university programming," did not affect much how professor-poets read in academic contexts —and this was a counter tendency typical of the eighties and nineties, given the fact that "oral poetics of the fifties, sixties, and seventies [had] encouraged academic poets to read differently" (Wheeler 2008, 135). Thus, if in the late 1990s, spoken word and performance poetry received a great boost especially from the media coverage of slam poetry,[92] the "textualist high-modernist poetics maintained its influence in English departments [...] and not only among poetry critics" (Harrington 2002, 160). They opposed the increasing popularity of poetry as a

[90] See Lord 1960, Tedlock 1983, and Nagy 1996.

[91] See Mamiya 1992, and Carroll 1997 and 1998.

[92] See Aptowicz 2007, Somers-Willett 2009, Hoffman 2011, Bauridl 2013, and Johnson 2017.

social and commercial phenomenon, by perpetuating "the historical essentializing of poetry as the least 'social,' most 'transcendent' of genres, treating it by default as a private aesthetic space untouched by the material and historical determinants shaping literary production in other genres": the idea of poetry as pure form, "whose 'essence is simply the representation of timelessness'" (Gallagher, qtd. in Harrington 2002, 160, 161) was used since the rising of the novel, to underline the privileged status of poetry as a form of hyper-literature, "a domain of pure aesthetic value" detached from any historical influence, in contrast with fiction, that "provides a privileged access to 'the social'" (Harrington 2002, 162, 164). Alan Golding (1995), Catherine Gallagher (2000), and Joseph Harrington (1996, 2002) claim that this elitist concept of poetry, which derived from Kant and the romantics, is at the origin of the hypostatization of poetry. Indeed, at the beginning of the 1950s, three phenomena concurred in the exclusion of poetry from the critical discourse which started to identify the emerging field of American literature with prose and narrative (Harrington 2002, 164). First, the "institutionalization of the materialist poetics," that conceived the poem as "the object of judgement," to say, "a preserve of 'unchangeable forms' that appeals only to an elite — and, to be sure, the 'elite' poetry of the canonized modernist avant-garde" (Harrington 2002, 163). Second, the concomitant modernist aspirations to become a cosmopolitan movement, that clashed with the creation of a distinct national brand of American poetry.[93] And third, the harsh criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin and the British Marxist critics against "lyric poetry as the object of analysis influenced cultural studies in the United States" (Harrington 2002, 164) to the extent that they rejected poetry because they considered it "unrecoverable" for its high cultural status (Damon 1997, 38). This is a paradox, according to Maria Damon,

[93] See Golding 1995, and Harrington 1996 and 2002.

> Irony of ironies, because, far more than narrative written genres poetry —ritually charged incantation— has been central to the cultural traditions of many subordinate peoples in the United States. Nonetheless, because of a perception that poetry belongs to an elite, as well as "poetry anxiety" even on the part of professional literati, the standoff between cultural studies and contemporary American poetry continues. (Damon 1997, 38-39)

Elitism and "poetry anxiety" also nourished much of the critical bias against spoken word and performance poetry, because of their challenge to the cultural and aesthetic foundations of poetry as the hyper-genre of literature, to turn it into a privileged tool for the investigation of the social and historical. Thus, with few serious critical attempts to analyze the evolving situation,[94] the beginning of the new millennium opened in the same way as the previous one had closed: with poets and critics still entrapped in the split "page vs. stage" debate on poetry.[95]

The twenty-first century marks spoken word and performance poetry as mainstream and multimedia arts that exist, at the same time, in live, recorded, print and digital forms. They both survived the wave of harsh criticisms against poetry following the aftermaths of the events of September 11, 2001. The tragedy "occasioned a tremendous outpouring of poetry" (Metres 2011), in response to events that had "left everyone speechless."[96] Suddenly poetry became relevant and useful in the recovery process of shaping and naming feelings, in the elaboration of trauma, and in the response

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[94] In a long line of debate, that ideally starts with Epstine's editorial (1988), among the many, here I especially refer to the following works: Golding 1995, Harrington 1996, 2002, Damon 1993, 1997, Morris 1997, Bernstein 1998, Perloff 1998, 2004, Gallagher 2000, Middleton 2005, and Sherwood 2006.

[95] On the diverging positions between supporters and detractors of this poetic form, with a particular consideration for those "liminal" and ambivalent positions that played on both sides according to the situation and convenience, see Lazer 1990, Howard 1996, Bloom 2000, Hall 2001, 2004, Murr 2004, Groff 2005, and McDaniel 2006.

[96] "But the events of 9/11 left everyone speechless. No one knew what to do, what to say, how to react. Being poets, many of us retreated to our rooms, took out a pen and paper and tried to make sense of it" (Aptowicz 2008, 249).

to the need for sharing and bonding[97]; but the public significance of poetry was questioned the public significance of poetry (Franke 2010, 5). The resounding rallying cry of Adorno, "to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," sharpened the straining tension between the poet as ideal Romantic bard and the poet as Classical public spokesperson.[98] Nevertheless, once poetry, in all its forms, had been stripped of its elitist aura, it served the community in such a delicate phase, where spoken word and performance poets became particularly apt at bridging the gap between private and the public. Following the success of the late 1990s, spoken word and performance poetry catalyzed wider media attention: "documentary and feature films, cable television, Broadway, the White House, and the Opening Ceremonies of the 2010 Winter Olympics," together with parodies and references, especially to poetry slams, in television programs, became the mainstream façade of this poetic phenomenon (Somers-Willett 2014, 1). A crucial point in the transformation of performance poetry from niche to mainstream was the intervention of producers Stan Lathan and Russell Simmons, who, favorably impressed by the vibrant and multifaceted spoken word reality in southern California, brought it to television and theatre (Johnson 2017, 32-33). The "*Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam* debuted in 2002 as both a Broadway show and an HBO series," that lasted for six seasons until 2007 (Johnson 2017, 6). As a media phenomenon, it attracted a more diversified youth audience and practitioners in terms of ethnicity, gender, and social class, while promoting the creation of social and professional networks among performers all over the United States. Through the media of television

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[97] "people in New York taped poems on windows, wheat-pasted them on posts, and shared them by hand. [...] Outside the immediate radius of what became known as 'ground zero,' aided by emails, listservers, websites, and, later, blogs, thousands of people also shared poems they loved, and poems they had written. By February 2002, over 25,000 poems written in response to 9/11 had been published on poems.com alone. Three years later, the number of poems there had more than doubled" (Metres 2011).

[98] See Wesling 1981, and Franke 2010.

and Internet, the stage of the *Def Poetry* series created "discursive spaces where poets and audiences c[a]me together to celebrate difference, marginalized identities, and engage[d] in critique of dominant culture through the performance of poetry in ways similar to the slam" (Somers-Willett 2014, 3). All elements that, according to Johnson, contest the vision of certain critics, like Jill Dolan, who regarded the slam community in terms of "utopic, alchemic, and democratic possibilities" (Johnson 2017, 7). Such utopic possibilities or, in Dolan's terms, "utopian performatives,"[99] were "marked and marred by racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and a host of other troubling community practices" (Johnson 2017, 81). However, *Def Poetry* is still a controversial media project where commercialization of slam poetry and counter-public discourse coexist (Somers-Willett 2014, 12-17). A consequence of such duplicity is the crucial importance of ethnicity in the selection of the poets for the show,[100] of the audience, "a hip, youth, multicultural studio audience" (Somers-Willett 2014, 13), and of the stars of the entertainment industry, music, and literature called to perform their own poetry.[101] The enormous success of the series brought immediate fame to the poets too. An appearance on the show for the poets represented a shortcut to "establish their reputations via TV," and to "flood" the editorial market with their books (Aptowicz 2008, 262). But *Def Poetry*

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[99] Applying J. L. Austin's concept of the performative, as a "performance [that] itself becomes a 'doing,' to the main qualities of any kind of performance, to say, disappearance and ephemerality (Dolan 2005, 5, 20), Jill Dolan states that utopian performatives are those "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (Dolan 2005, 5). Moreover, she continues, this "effective vision of how the world might be better" produces in the spectator a feeling of melancholy combined with cheerfulness, "because for however brief a moment, we felt something of what redemption might be like, of what humanism could really mean, of how powerful might be a world in which our commonalities would hail us over our differences" (Dolan 2005, 6, 8).

[100] See Aptowicz 2008, and Somers-Willett 20014.

[101] Each half-hour episode featured, "[m]ixed among the up-and-coming poets, […] TV stars (such as Jamie Foxx, Cedric the Entertainer, and David Chappelle), recording artists (such as Common, Kanye West, Talib Kweli, Alicia Keys, and Jill Scott) and established poets (such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Sharon Olds, and Yusef Komunyakaa) performing poetry of their own" (Somers-Willett 2014, 13).

was also the "finally consummated" marriage between hip-hop and spoken word (Aptowicz 2008, 261-262). Because of this fusion, "[i]t was no longer unusual for poets to perform with a strong hip-hop influence, and conversely for rappers to call themselves poets" (Aptowicz 2008, 262). However, the mediated and spectacular resonance of the show produced, as a counter-effect, a flat, homologized picture of what national slams and spoken word poetry communities were, creating the idea of a primarily black reality of public contestation, instead of depicting a whole complexity in terms of political and religious believes/positions, race, class, gender, sex, and education.[102] Moreover, the TV show engendered in the audience a certain kind of expectation about the type of poetry delivered in slam and/or spoken word contests: namely, hip-hop poetry, or, at least, "hip-hop friendly" poems (Aptowicz 2008, 262) —an element in sharp contrast with the inclusive politics of the slam, where any poetic form is welcomed. In spite of the wide appeal of television with the general public, the web is the current stage for poetry.

Javon Johnson highlights the importance of web multimodal platforms and digital archives for spoken word poetry, since, in the twenty-first century, the main poetic challenge is digital. Johnson's analysis of Button Poetry's successful web platform to post videos of performance poetry online (Johnson 2017, 92), is indicative of the current trend for many poets to divide their work time inside and outside the web. Founded in 2011 by Sam Cook and Sierra DeMulder "as a way to distribute, promote, and fundraise for performance poetry" (Johnson 2017, 92), Button Poetry has created a digital archive with "an ever-growing list of viral poems, successful book competitions, a Twitter following of more than 20,000 people; fruitful relationships with *Upworthy*, the *Huffington Post*, *National Public Radio*, and other major media outlets; as well as a

[102] Besides, the organizations that rule slam contests, Psi and the National Poetry Slam, have always been composed prevalently by white people (Johnson 2017, 81-82).

YouTube channel with a half-million subscribers and more than 100 million views" (Johnson 2017, 92). Although the distinctive characteristic of this specific digital archive is "its focus on quality, close-ups, centralizing videos onto one channel, [and] curating," it is the symbol of the ambivalent nature of such devices as well (Johnson 2017, 92). These kinds of system, indeed, offer a high level of visibility but they also "appropriate" the poets' work and image. They are double-edged tools: to wit, "simultaneously problematic and potentially transformative" (Janae Johnson qtd. in Johnson 2017, 103). On the one hand, poets find help for their self-promotion and self-publishing, while, on the other hand, their work has to respect the rules of the apparatus —based on "unequal user knowledge, production, and consumption" (Hargittai 2002)— to fit in the very performance of the archive (Johnson 2017, 95-96). Thus, the virtual space of digital platforms like Button Poetry, although not controlled nor ruled by the poets themselves, nevertheless, allows poets to connect with other artists, and expand their audience. It also "provides new means of witnessing [poetry], establishes a robust archive, creates new opportunities, and continues the important work of institution building" (Johnson 2017, 113). Despite the double nature of such structures, digital platforms have always been important arenas for those marginalized poets, who began to use the web as a substitute for institutional channels of production and distribution, usually difficult to access for them. The importance of the control of one's image and work became of crucial importance in the hyper-visible world of the Internet. And this is an awareness that poets belonging to minority ethnic groups have particularly developed since they "have become increasingly focused on producing, building, and owning a lasting digital presence on their own terms" (Johnson 2017, 107). So far, "only [a] few have cultivated a large online following" outside of complex systems like Button Poetry (Johnson 2017, 107).

Nowadays poetry is going through a new blossoming. In spite of a poor editorial market, poetry proliferates in live and digital venues as well. And precisely this ceaseless shifting between the real and virtual worlds makes poetry mainstream, fashionable, and also popular. Besides official websites of poets, organizations, institutions, and digital archives, there is a whole world gravitating towards poetry. There is an increasing number of apps for poetry writing; guidelines to use those apps, rate them, upload and/or promote one's own poem on Instagram, or any other social media. Just googling "app to write poetry," 97,900,000 results appear with solutions for all genres, forms, media, and tastes.

Considering the importance of digital technologies in the production and promotion of poetry, the next paragraph investigates previous theoretical insights on performance poetry, casting light on a few crucial issues for the creation of a more holistic and inclusive framework for the analysis of this complex form in-between art, poetry, and communication.

4. Performance Poetry: Theoretical Issues

The unresolved dialectic between theatre and performance inevitably affects performance poetry that, to a certain extent, finds itself in the thick of the events. Indeed, whether it inherits from performance studies the "aversion" for theatre —whilst adopting performative strategies of representation with a strong theatrical

component[103]— performance poetry also addresses the same “powerful questions posed by theatre representation” which involve, when they are not directly embedded in, “the bodies and acts of performers.”[104] Thus, the first common approach to this slippery topic has been to adopt a “contrastive” method of inquiry: to determine what performance poetry *is not* and what it *does differently* in relation to another artistic field, theatre — that is similar for certain characteristics, and dynamics— in order to deduce what qualities define spoken word/slam/performance poetry and its field of pertinence as well.[105] While drawing on the previous works of investigation, this analysis highlights the differences between performance, both inside and outside theatre, and poetry, as points of contact which problematize the opposing tension between these art forms. In this light, the strain between the two, which is generally represented by the hyphen in-between the words “poet” and “performer,” becomes a form of enhancement and empowerment, where the diversities as well as the similarities between poetry and performance pave the way to a complex relation of cooperation, or better, of “cooperative friction.”

The starting point of the investigation is Peter Middleton’s assumption that poetry readings and, by extension, any form of performance poetry, are events. Performance, Middleton claims, “is necessarily an embodiment of the poem in time and space” (Middleton 1998, 265). Consequently, the unique and unrepeatable combination of time,

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[103] “It is the range of performative aspects of a poem—vocal dynamics, physical dynamics, appearance, setting, hoots and hollers from the audience itself —that influences one’s experience of slam poem. Slams are theatrical events, not listening booths” (Somers-Willett 2009, 16). Again, although the reference is to one aspect of poetry in performance, to say, slam, nevertheless what compels audiences is “that such events performatively embody verse and its author” (Somers-Willett 2009, 16).

[104] “questions of subjectivity (who is speaking/acting?), location (in what sites/spaces?), audience (who is watching?), commodification (who is in control?), conventionality (how are meanings produced?), politics (what ideological or social positions are being reinforced or contested?)” (Diamond 1996, 6). Even if Elin Diamond is referring to the wide range of performances, these questions inform performance poetry too.

[105] See Novak 2011, and Bauridl 2013.

space, and interaction between poet and audience is the paramount condition for the poem to signify in performance. In this composite situation, performance develops as "a constructive, constitutive act, over and above its representation of previously determined plans" (Benson, qtd. in Middleton 1998, 265), allowing poetry to "assume a much wider significance for the participants than the actual texts might indicate" (Middleton 1998, 265). This means that not only "there is much more semantic activity in a poetry reading than the dogmas of literary theory would allow," but that such resistance and prejudices, in part, arise "from an uneasy relation to a long history of verse speaking that promoted itself as a reconciliation of art and science" (Middleton 1998, 265-266). The reference here is to what Middleton considers the "apparent failure of the elocution movement," since contemporary performance poetry brings back up a similar ambition: the "reunification of art, politics, and knowledge" (Middleton 1998, 266). Such a premise, concerning previous historical and cultural backgrounds, outlines the general framework in which those liminal areas where performance and poetry converge and/or distance themselves from one another are situated, creating a sort of "cooperative tension."

The theoretical approach to this understanding of an "opposing collaboration" between poetry and performance moves from two strictly connected paradigms. The first one refers to the relatively recent "recognition that the arts and media should not be studied in their historical developments and with their own rules and specifications, but rather in the broader context of their differences and co-relations" (Kattenbelt 2008, 20). This more holistic view is one of the consequences of the contemporary media culture, given the fact that in the current hyper-media environment, "live performance is the category of cultural production most directly affected by the dominance of media" (Auslander 1999, 2). The second instance is the increasing interdisciplinarity of

contemporary artistic practices. As Chiel Kattenbelt claims, "artists who are working in different disciplines are today working with each other —particularly in the domain of theatre— their creative work is 'finding each other'— not only metaphorically but also literally on the performance space of the stage" (Kattenbelt 2008, 20). And performance poetry is direct evidence of this phenomenon too

4.1. The Transitional Spaces of Performativity and Textuality

The opposing relationship between the bodily experience and the abstract intellectual linguistic expression of the poetic form is the vital tension that informs performance poetry, and the first resounding difference between the two arts as well, which mainly distance themselves in the intention that leads the action: "to represent," in theatre, and "to present," in performance poetry (Novak 2011, 58). This means that, since theatre is the quintessential "art of the performer" (Kattenbelt 2008, 20), performance participates in theatrical creation that "provides the reality of illusion" (Kattenbelt 2006, 37) through an exhibition and over-exposure of the body. On the contrary, poetry, working outside the realm of aesthetic illusion (Wolf, qtd. in Novak 2011, 58), lives the body as an uneasy, uncomfortable presence, which seems to be out of place, and even clashes against, the pursuit of an ideal pure aesthetic form of linguistic expression. Thus, although all poetry —even those forms that are "not generically geared towards performance"— presents a certain degree of "performability"[106] in its written

[106] In spite of the current debate on the differences between poetry and performance, in ancient times, the connections with the theatrical aspects of the performative practice of poetry were strong, as it is attested by "a kind of poetry previously ignored," namely, dramatic poetry (Kennedy 1995, xli).Dramatic poetry describes "any verse written for the stage," since it "presents the voice of an imaginary character (or

mode, such a characteristic is disregarded and put aside in performance poetry as well, for "the verbal element is not simply a component of several: it is at the very core of the art form" (Novak 2011, 59). For this reason, performance is acceptable until it does not "get in the way of the words," for what matters and makes poetry the literary genre that it is, is the strict relationship between verbal and semantic density (Novak 2011, 60, 61). Indeed, the relative brevity of a poem, together with the reduction of utterances such as subject matter, setting, and "inherent communicative functions (speaker and addressee)" enhance a high level of artificiality that is typical of this literary genre (Novak 2011, 61). It is due to this artificiality that the poem is crafted as a semantic structure: "a network of internal correlations of structure, sound and sense, [...] in which every word carries its weight towards the meaning-making process" (Müller-Zettelmann, qtd. in Novak 2011, 61). This linguistic artificiality, not only differentiates poetry from prose and ordinary speech but it also "leads to the genre's aesthetic self-referentiality as poetry draws attention to its own form rather than rendering its discourse transparent for an aesthetic illusion" (Müller-Zettelmann, qtd. in Novak 2011, 61). This emphasis on genre discourse "is not restricted to the level of text but also manifests itself in the *reader's expectations* of a text, and consequently in the attention brought to the reception process" (Müller-Zettelmann, qtd. in Novak 2011, 61). This sort of rivalry between body and language, that characterizes a large part of theatre history, has often turned into an open "perpetual conflict between text and scene" (Lehmann 2006, 145). And this conflictual relationship is

characters) speaking directly, without any additional narration by the author" (Kennedy 1995, 593). In the origins, dramatic poetry "existed before plays as part of the rites, which gives some insight into the development of drama" (Pfeiler 2003, 44). Moreover, although it refers to any form of written verse for the stage, "the term most often refers to the dramatic monologue, a poem written as a speech made by a character (other than the author)" (Kennedy 1995, 593).

characterized by "an alternation of phases of oppression and of compromise" (Dort, qtd. in Lehmann 2006, 145). According to Edward L. Schieffelin, the conflict is inevitable given the very nature of performance, since, Schieffelin maintains, "'performance' deals with actions more than text: with habits of the body more than structures of symbols, with illocutionary rather than propositional force, with the social construction of reality rather than its representation" (Schieffelin 2003, 199). The contrast is even sharpened by a long tradition of thinking about theatre —that, in part, also affects performance— "as a secondary, or 'composite' art as opposed to a primary, or 'autonomous' art like literature, visual arts and music" (Kattenbelt 2006, 29). This position has been strengthened during the philosophical debate that in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century systematized "the different expressions of the creative faculties of the human being" (Kattenbelt 2006, 29). And in that debate, Kant's open positioning in support of poetry was crucial, for he considered poetry the highest among the arts because it allows "'the free play of imagination' (*Einbildungskraft*), which constitutes the synthesis of thoughts and intuitions" (Kattenbelt 2006, 29), the two ideal expressions of the human experience. Thus, although later philosophical positions[107] contested Kant's assumption, since Kant was arguing in favor of the transcendental pureness of the poetic genre, nevertheless the prejudice remained.

Within a more conciliatory perspective, W. B. Worthen sees "the interface between poetry and performance" as the expression of the dual nature of drama (Worthen 2010, xii). Page and stage become two operative processes where experience can be "played" inside a transitional space. The page "opens a

[107] Hegel, for example, was the first to put on the foreground "the direct contact and mutual influence between the human bodies of the performers and spectators," looking at drama as the quintessential synthesis of subjectivity (the lyric) and objectivity (the epic) (Kattenbelt 2006, 29).

transitional space, which we enter as the words enter us" (Worthen 2010, xii). And, in the very action of us playing them, words are allowed "the time to do their thing, enriching, clarifying, and complicating our experience with them" and of them (Worthen 2010, xii). However, if the page creates spaces for experience, according to Worthen, theatre does not simply allow their existence; theatre *is* the transitional space, "not where we suspend disbelief, but where we are a visible and lively part of an event" that "actually takes place, and takes time too" (Worthen 2010, xi). Again, the verb "to play" is crucial for the "materialization of drama" and for the "wittingly and unwittingly" involvement of the participants in the enactment of what Worthen defines as "the visible execution of culture in our bodies" (Worthen 2010, xi). It is in the very act of "playing the play" that a transformative, experiential space is open. And for it to be realized, "the words await the instigation of doing" (Worthen 2010, xi).

In performance poetry, the moments in-between the delivery of the poem and the actual performance "epitomizes the interpretative dissonance posed by all poetic writing, perhaps by writing itself" (Worthen 2010, xiii). The process of writing deals with the text as a "fix[ed] verbal object" (Worthen 2010, xiv). With all its specificities, the text "appears as a single fabric, [...] a kind of organic wholeness" (Worthen 2010, xiii). Yet, in performance, the poem's fixity collapses while its capacity of signifying is altered in different subtle ways. And exactly at this stage, when fixity becomes flux, the two opposites of the spectrum, poem and performance, negotiate their balance. The performance opens a transitional space for language, challenging "writing to create something beyond words: action" (Worthen 2010, xiv). Worthen's idea of drama as a transformative space echoes back to the postdramatic attempt in avant-garde theatre, and concept theatre, in

particular, to "conceptualize art in the sense that it offers not a representation but an intentionally unmediated experience of the real (time, space, body)" (Lehmann 2006, 134). This is what performance strives to achieve, since "the immediacy of a shared experience between artist and audience is at the heart of Performance Art" (Lehmann 2006, 134). Thus, what performance poetry inherits from postdramatic theatre and performance art is the ability to open spaces for transition, transformation, which happen in the space and time of a shared experience, that is shaped into the model of "face-to-face communication" (Kattenbelt 2006) that "cannot be replaced by even the most advanced interface mediated communication processes": at the core of performance aesthetics, there is "the right to posit through a performative act a reality without the justification of something 'real' being represented" (Lehmann 2006, 135-136). According to Hans Lehmann, by this aesthetic principle, the "criteria of 'work' are no longer applicable" in performance (Lehmann 2006, 135). Reference to an "'objectively' appraisable work" belongs to the realm of representation, whereas the process of creating an artistic value during the interaction between audience and performer depends on the very experience of the participants, and the experience is characterized as highly subjective, situational, contingent, and ephemeral "compared to the permanently fixed 'work'" (Lehmann 2006, 136). Moreover, Lehmann adds, given the fact that what defines a performance as such is anything other than the artist's self-conception, since "performance is that which is announced as such by those who do it," the performative qualities of an event — or its positioning (*Setzung*) in Lehmann terms— "cannot be measured by previously determined criteria but above all by its *communicative success*" (Lehmann 2006, 136). And for the communication to be successful, the audience

must be engaged and participative. Therefore, performance turns into a communicative exchange, where the focus shifts from the pre-text to the reception (Lehmann 2006, 137). The communicative structure of the event makes performance short-lived, temporary, and transient. It is at the very moment of the exchange that performance turns the poem into a poetic event, in opposition to the logic of the "work of representation, a reified product (even if it was composed as a process)" (Lehmann 2006, 137).

4.2. "Presentness" and the Experience of the Real

All these features —performance poetry as transitional space, shared experience, and face-to-face communication— reveal the prominent position of the dimension of time. Utterances of duration, momentariness, simultaneity, and unrepeatability "become experiences of time in a form of art that no longer restricts itself to presenting the outcome of its secret creative process but instead valorizes the temporal process of [its] becoming" (Lehmann 2006, 134). In this context, the poet-performer offers his/her physical presence for the poem to be, and to manifest itself, thanks to what Michael Kirby defines as the processes of "not-acting"[108] and "simple acting."[109] As the poet-performer's counterpart, the audience is expected to

[108] "the performer does nothing to feign, simulate, impersonate, and so forth" (Kirby 1987, 3). Not-acting, Michael Kirby maintains, concerns with "those performers who do not do anything to reinforce the information or identification. When the performers [...] are merely conveyed by their costumes themselves and not embedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place, and time, they can be referred to as being 'nonmatrixed'" (Kirby 1987, 4).

[109] A simple form of acting that exists "in the smallest and simplest action that involves pretense" (Kirby 1987, 7). Without any implied judgment, Michael Kirby maintains: "Acting is acting whether or not it is done 'well' or accurately. Thus a person who, as in the game of charades, pretends to put on a jacket that does not exist or feigns being ill is acting" (Kirby 1987, 7). This kind of simple acting exists also in emotional terms, like when "in real life we meet people who we feel are acting" (Kirby 1987, 7). This does

mobilize “their own ability to react and experience in order to realize their participation in the process that is offered to them” (Lehmann 2006, 135). The combination of the poet’s and the audience’s activities is essential for the event to be considered live (Lehmann 2006, 135). Thus, the importance of the interaction between poet and audience becomes fundamental since performance, in its wider sense, is the “integrative aesthetic of the live” (Barck, qtd. in Lehmann 2006, 135), a procedure that is totally devoted to “something that anthropologists have always found hard to characterize theoretically: the creation of presence” (Schieffelin 2003, 199).

Performance poetry can be included among those forms of art that inherited and developed the experience-oriented “dialectical play between presence and absence,” that, in the late 1960s, conceptual and performance art had adopted in opposition to the formalist notion of art as an immanent object (Sayre 1989, 1). Such a turn in perspective, characterized by the focus on the medium “as a mode of ‘presentation’” (Sayre 1989, 2), overcame the idea that the “aesthetic experience is never absent; it is always dynamically present before us, endlessly recoverable in the work of art itself” (Sayre 1989, 1). This shift, from artwork as product to artwork as activity, drastically changed the “collective attitude about the nature of art”: to wit, “art is no longer that thing in which full-fledged aesthetic experience is held perpetually present; art no longer transcends history; instead, it admits its

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not mean that they are lying or dishonest, but that “they seem to be aware of an audience —to be ‘on stage’— and that they react to this situation by energetically projecting ideas, emotions, and elements of their personality, underlining and theatricalizing it for the sake of the audience” (Kirby 1987, 7). This happens especially in public speaking, “whether it is extemporaneous or makes use of script, [it] may involve emotion, but it does not necessarily involve acting” (Kirby 1987, 7-8). In public speaking and performance poetry alike, it may happen that some performers/speakers, “while retaining their own characters and remaining sincere, seem to be acting. […] This does not mean that the speakers [and performers] are false or do not believe what they are saying. It merely means that they are selecting and projecting an element of character —emotion— to the audience” (Kirby 1987, 8).

historicity, its implication in time" (Sayre 1989, 4). Specifically, two implications of this artistic and cultural change are embedded in performance poetry. First, the audience plays a crucial role in the redefinition of the paradigm of a new aesthetic of presence. Far from the enactment of a "pseudo-presence" (Sontag 2005), which is generally constitutive of photography as well as of much art, where the real presence of the audience's experience of the artwork both masks and depends on the absence of the artist,[110] in performance poetry, it is the co-presence of both audience and poet-performer that generates, informs, and reveals the aesthetic and social experience of the poem, which is, at the same time, personal and collective. The second utterance is given by the avant-gardist lesson that art "is never 'complete'" (Sayre 1989, 7). As Henry Sayre comments:

> Determined, as it is, by the local and topical, the events of history itself, and by such things as the forms and operations of mechanical reproduction, from photography to television, that record this history, the art of the avant-garde is always in process, always engaged. […] Its meanings are explosive, ricocheting and fragmenting throughout its audience. The work becomes a situation, full of suggestive potentialities, rather than a self-contained whole, determined and final. (Sayre 1989, 7)

Therefore, each performance enables, develops, and reveals just one realization of the many "suggestive potentialities" of the poem. And that realization is shaped and defined by the co-presence and joint participation of that particular audience with that precise poet-performer in a specific place, at a certain time —both chronological and historical. The consequence of the fact that each performance is situationally co-created is a high level of specificity, that characterizes every single poetic performance, as well as every single performed poem. This extreme

[110] "The audience has the privilege of ignoring the artwork's contingent status as a kind of documentary evidence; in fact, the audience knows first that it *is experiencing* art (it has come to the museum in order to do so) […] Even the documentary status of the photograph can be altered by the audience" (Sayre 1989, 4).

specificity gives the reason for the uniqueness and unrepeatability of each event. Moreover, these three characteristics of unicity, unrepeatability, and situatedness inform the ontology of performance as a nonreproductive relation that, existing exclusively in the present, manifests its reality through its disappearance (Phelan 1993). For this reason, Peggy Phelan claims: "Performance's only life is in the present" (Phelan 1993, 146). And she continues:

> The pressures brought to bear on performance to succumb to the law of the reproductive economy are enormous. For only rarely in this culture is the "now" to which performance addresses its deepest questions valued. (This is why the now is supplemented and buttressed by the documenting camera, the video archive.) Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as "different." The document of performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present. (Phelan 1993, 146)

Setting aside the confutations of Phelan's idea of non-reproducibility in performance (States 2004; Auslander 2008), what is addressed here is her highlighting the complexity of the performative present. Thereupon, Elin Diamond posits that the main characteristic of performance is to "drift" common sense temporal separations between "present and past," "doing and done," "presence and absence," "consciousness and memory" (Diamond 1996, 1). Far from the postulation of a metaphysics of the present, as stated in the declared intentions of the author, Diamond maintains that the performative embodiment of the here and now is tangled with "the cultural stories, traditions, and political contestations that comprise our sense of history" (Diamond 1996, 1). Drawing on Herbert Blau's idea of "immanence of seeming,"[111] Diamond highlights how performance both encloses

[111] "as there is a performance to be referred to *as such* it occurs within a circumference of representation with its tangential, ecliptic, and encyclical lines of power. What blurs in the immanence of seeming are the features of that power, which needs to be taken into account in the current speculation on the state of performance in art and culture. It is not so much a matter of formalist experiment or behavioral innovation

and develops a constant connection between past and present, to the extent that the performative present embeds historical memory.

> Every performance, if it is intelligible as such, embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions —political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged. […] each performance marks out a unique temporal space that nevertheless contains traces of other now-absent performances, other now-disappeared scenes. (Diamond 1996, 1)

In this assumption that the real is always "mediated, traced, and retraced" by what its presence seems to exclude (Diamond 1996, 1), performance, as an ensemble of "different ways of knowing and doing" (Diamond 1996, 1), produces new experiences while re-inhabiting the "already been" and the "already done" in the very same moment. Thanks to a precise set of actions —embodying, configuring, inscribing, and signifying— the new is accomplished in the performative present (Diamond 1996, 2). However, while enacting the "new," through those very actions, performance is also able to repeat and recreate previous experiences. This means that thanks to a process of re-embodiment, re-inscription, re-configuration, and re-signification of what is pre-existent and pre-existed, performance may produce new experiences which, at least in part, are both informed and interpreted by the old ones (Diamond 1996, 2). In this light, every single performance of a poem has to be interpreted as the unique presentation of one of the many possibilities for that poem to be in that determined spatial and temporal context, thanks to, or in spite of, the copresence of that poet with that audience. Besides, since the specific performance is also connected to all the previous ones, it produces a palimpsestic layering of the many meanings, interpretations, and possibilities-to-be for that

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or ethnological renewal—all of which is taking place— but a breaking down of the structure of belonging which is, at the same time, inscribed in the becoming of representations which are, through the acceleration of cultural exchange, accumulating in a repertoire which is worldwide" (Blau 1987, 168).

specific poem. In other words, during the performance, poet and audience experience only a specific manifestation of the poem that, includes all the previous ones, is charged with numerous other interpretations and meanings, that poet and audience unconsciously experience together with the new one. Therefore, every time we refer to the performance of a poem, this has to be understood as the performance/presentation of one manifestation of that specific poem, which is inscribed in the historical recording of all its manifestations.

4.3. Poet-Performer: Author, Character, and Lyric I

The focus on the "presentness" of the performative poetic event, as the experience of the real that is manifested through the communicative act, shifts the emphasis of the approach to performance poetry from a text-centered to a performative conception of verbal art (Bauman 2009). This means that, while keeping its relevance inside the economy of the poetic event, language has to be considered a part of the framing[112] which allows the poem to be "accomplished through the employment of culturally conventionalized metacommunication" (Bauman 2009, 295). Therefore, since the act of performance is a situated behavior, "situated within and rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts" (Bauman 2009, 298), each element composing that context also concurs in the meaning and interpretation of the action. In these terms, place, setting, light, ethnic composition of the audience, their age, gender, social status, cultural background, and the

[112] Among the communicative means normally present in every kind of performance, Richard Bauman lists: special linguistic codes employed inside a specific community or during a certain kind of performance; formulae that marks the different moments of the performance; the use of figurative language, formal stylistic devices, special prosodic and/or paralinguistic patterns; the disclaimer of performance, etc. (Bauman 2009, 295). But performance too is a type of frame.

performer's ethnicity, gender, age, social status, gestures, clothing, etc. —all contributes to the performance of the poem. However, in Bauman's terms, the poem is a frame too. Hence, together with all the other frames, the poem participates in the structure of the performance. The poem is what is performed, the reason for the performance, but also one of the constitutive elements of the poetic event: something more than the simple performance of a poem. Moreover, this understanding of performance as "a mode of language use," "a way of speaking," and a constitutive element of the "domain of verbal art as spoken communication" (Bauman 2009, 293), calls for the participation and responsibility of the two protagonists in the poetic performance. The audience takes responsibility "for a display of communicative competence," to say, "the ability to speak in socially appropriate ways" (Bauman 2009, 293). The poet-performer, on the contrary, makes "an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content" (Bauman 2009, 293). According to Bauman, this implied consent on the division of roles between audience and performance is preserved during the performance, and it also informs the two different perspectives on the event. As Richard Bauman maintains:

> From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence. Additionally, it is marked as available for the enhancement of experience, through the present enjoyment of the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself. Performance thus calls forth special attention to, and heightened awareness of the act of expression, and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity. (Bauman 2009, 293)

In spite of the communicative competence, the linguistic ability, and the intensity of the participation in the event, the dynamics informing a performance are not

always so clear, neither is the division of roles. This is especially evident in performance poetry, where any possible mediation between author and "character" is annihilated because the voice of the poet, together with his/her physical presence, conflates the voice of the lyrical I with those of the performer and the author of the poem. Therefore, there is no visible distance among performer, author, and "character." For this reason, "the poet on stage still will be seen as a poet, not as a character in a play, even if the content of the poem may lend itself to present a particular character" (Pfeiler 2003, 44), as in the case of "persona poems," where the poet "clearly stages the story of another character [...] by employing the first person" (Bauridl 2013, 77). Brigit Bauridl remarks that the mediation becomes invisible due to a series of elements which prevent the audience to discriminate among the three personae, unless the poet makes this possible.[113] Furthermore, this invisible mediation turns the poet-performer into one of the "most controversial semantic layers of a performance poem" (Bauridl 2013, 75).

This proximity between author and lyrical "I" is emphasized by the "deliberate use" of the physical qualities of the poet's own body (Bauridl 2013, 75), which accounts for the fact that "authorial presence is literal and guaranteed."[114] The

[113] The reference is to Patricia Smith's poem "Skinhead". The poet, an African American woman, embodies a white male skinhead. The power of the performance, as well as the meaning of the poem, are strengthened by the contrast between the physical presence of a black woman that embodies the absent corporeality of the white man. Besides, it is through the black woman's voice that the white man has to speak. These two aspects coupled with the powerful performance of Patricia Smith and the text of the poem prove how, especially in persona poems, the connection between poet and poem is so strong that it is quite hard for another poet to perform other poets' work. Evidence of this is given by the attempt by a white male poet, Taylor Mali, to perform this poem by Patricia Smith, "resulting in a completely different *Aufführung* compared to Smith" (Bauridl 2013, 77).

[114] "by the stringent rules of slam, a competing piece must have been composed by its performer, and a group piece must have been composed by at least one member of the team. Of course, many poems that seem deeply personal could be partly or entirely fictive" (Wheeler 2008, 150). This aspect has been adopted in spoken word and performance poetry too, even if in a less stringent way. For more on the topic,

strong presence of the "I" brings to mind the 1950s-1960s discarded practice of confessionalism (Wheeler 2008, 149). According to Wheeler, confessionalism and spoken word poetry have in common the concern with hot topics like childhood, family, trauma, abuse, addiction, violence, etc.; they both encourage "audiences to identify the speaker with the poet" by depending "centrally on the performance of authenticity —the manipulation of textual and/or physical conventions that suggest sincerity, factual accuracy, and expressiveness" (Wheeler 2008, 149). However, the literary illusion, that in confessional poetry is created through meter, diction, syntax, and punctuation (Wheeler 2008, 150), in performance acquires aural and visual density. A certain tone of the voice at a certain time, the emphasis of a word, a silence, together with an "anti-corporate hair and dress," and the venue of the performance —everything concurs in adding a major sense of authenticity to the words pronounced, and, in doing so, to convey an "understanding of poetry as a deeply personal expression of inner conflict" (Wheeler 2008, 150). As Wheeler notices especially in slam contests:

> When gesture, pitch, and timing convey grief, rage, and other strong emotions, the words seem more authentic. Slam poets are more obscene in diction than confessional poetry because words like "fuck," "shit," and "asshole," when uttered with intensity, are easily recognizable codes for unaffected, uncensored feeling. When uttered casually, the same words signify frankness, even intimacy, which resonates with the anti-pretentiousness of slam. (Wheeler 2008, 150)

Two other elements concur in blurring the borders among these three figures: the use of autobiographical elements and the total involvement of the audience in the performance. The over-exposure of the "I," or what Somers-Willett calls the "hyperawareness of the first-person speaker" (Somers-Willett 2009, 20) and the

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see also: Glazner 2000, Kraynak and Smith 2004, 2009a and 2009b, Aptowicz 2007, Somers-Willett 2009, and Bauridl 2013.

continuous emphasis on authenticity are amplified by the poet's use of autobiographical elements. They work as topics of a poem, as a "starting point for more general issues" (Bauridl 2013, 78), or details to enrich the introduction to a reading and/or a performance, where biographical references serve as a *captatio benevolentiae* while providing additional information about the poem or its creation. This practice is very common in modern performance arts. As Marvin Carlson posits, the concern of the artist with his/her own body, biography, and experiences, is what distinguishes performance from modern theatre:

> Its [modern performance art] practitioners, almost by definition, do not base their work upon characters previously created by other artists, but upon their own bodies, their own autobiographies, their own specific experiences in a culture or in the world, made performative by their consciousness of them and the process of displaying them for audiences. Since the emphasis is upon the performance, and on how the body or self is articulated through performance, the individual body remains at the center of such presentations. Typical performance art is solo art, and the typical performance artist uses little of the elaborate scenic surrounding of the traditional stage, but at most a few props, a bit of furniture, and whatever costume (sometimes even nudity) is most suitable to the performance situation. (Carlson 2018, 16)

In addition to this, "the spatial and temporal simultaneity of production and reception successfully tempts the audience to forget the performed-ness, the pre-mediated and planned staging, and any fictional character of the poem" (Bauridl 2013, 78). In this way, each element in performance concurs to erase any possibility of mediation between author and performer, who are perceived by the audience as the same person. As a matter of fact, the brevity and immediacy of the performance (more or less the length of a pop song), the impossibility for the audience to gain critical distance from the event in which they are involved, together with the fact that "the body and voice we perceive become in their materiality conflated with the voice of the poem" (Bauridl 2013, 77), concur to

incorporate the three distinct personae into one, with the result that the audience, without distinguishing between author and performer, "is curious to 'discover' more about the author" (Bauridl 2013, 79).

The high-visibility aspect of performance, according to Carlson, is representative of "a world that is highly self-conscious, reflexive, obsessed with simulations and theatricalizations in every aspect of its social awareness" (Carlson 2018, 16). In this light, the audience's belief that poet and character are one, not only generates the spectator's "desire and demand to be presented with the author's life" (Bauridl 2013, 79); it is also encouraged by the poets themselves, who, thanks to an integrated system of information —interviews, social media, personal web-sites, pod-cast, e-journals, conventional print, readings, conferences, book launches, written autobiographies, appearances in shows, blogs, video-logs etc.— consciously "foster a notion of personal relationship and intimacy between themselves and the audience" (Bauridl 2013, 79). The para-text of a poem, thus, expands immeasurably. Every image, statement, detail, even if not directly related to the specific poem, but still produced by the poet who created that poem, "become potential semantic layers of the poem" itself (Bauridl 2013, 80), while participating in the construction of the poet-performer's image as author, performer, and even character. It is what happens in the absence of a traditional character impersonation: the performer enacts a self-presentation, which is built through the "close relationship between the 'self' of the performance artist and the 'self' being presented" (Carlson 2018, 46). Thus, if on the one hand, poets "are expected to be talking about their 'real' lives, and if not, to own up to the fictional nature of the work" (Beach 1999, 131) —otherwise the breaking of the "illusion" is considered a violation of the rules (Bauridl 2013, 79)— on the other hand, create spaces of

action for their craft to develop in-between the audience's expectation[115] and a certain "sense of the performer's responsibility" (Taylor 2007, 45). Moreover, as Peter Middleton affirms, if "the presence of the author inevitably means the presence of the body" (Middleton 2005, 35), the poet-performer not only claims his/her authorial presence through the concrete, material manifestation of the body, but also asserts "to be the originating subject from which poetry is issuing, right in front of your eyes" (Middleton 1998, 268). Thus, by the revendication of his/her corporeal dimension, the poet not only reacts against the postmodern reduction of the author to a mere "function," but also reveals a peculiar relationship with the text. On the one hand, the poet becomes "an inherent and necessary part of the performed poem" (Somers-Willett 2009, 35) thanks to the use of his/her own voice and body, and, by using these particular "tools of the trade,"[116] during every performance "rises" from the text (Middleton 1998, 268), again and again, each time differently. On the other hand, in the exact moment and space of the performance, the poet does not simply embody, deliver, present, or perform the poem: "The poet is the poem" (Holman 2003, 66). Therefore, some poets are extremely aware of the importance of performance, since the extra-lexical elements of a poem participate in the crafting and meaning-making process of the poem itself. As poet Nacirfa highlights: "It's your whole, from what you're wearing to how you get on that stage, to who you look at […] [to] the way you talk" (Nacirfa in

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[115] Henry Taylor presents a range of expectations that goes from the "hope to add something to their experience of poetry and the poet's work," a something that could echo "in the inner ear, and future silent encounters with a poet's work […] in the reader's mind" (Taylor 2007, 45), to the simple expectation of being entertained (46) and the desire to "discover" the author (46).

[116] I use this hackneyed phrase to refer to a vast array of both vocal and physical dynamics, like rhythm, pitch, volume, pace, pauses, as well as appearance, clothing, gestures, facial expressions, etc. However, as Wheeler stresses, "[A] performer's craft involves not only the control of breath, voice, and body, but also technical expertise such as how to manipulate a microphone" (Wheeler 2008, 148). See: Dube 1997, Somers-Willett 2009, Novak 2011, Bauridl 2013.

Bauridl 2013, 75). Such an awareness of the performability and performativity of the poem "is the product of consideration and practice" (Taylor 2007, 50). Poets are thus moving along a double path where poetry and performance, keeping their own properties and singularities, work together, and in doing so, demand the poet to take responsibility of his/her own writing as well as of his/her own performance in whatever form. Whether the poem is born to be written or performed, or whatever other status in-between, the performance becomes pivotal for the audio-text[117] of the poem to gain the aural visibility denied, or just perceived in a limited way, in its flat visual-written form. And this observation goes beyond the mere opposition writing-performing. It deals with a more fluid concept of how a poem can exist, demanding artistic and academic dignity as well for all its possible forms and manifestations. The poem in performance delivers a 4-D experience of the poetic genre, and sound poetry is an exemplification of this possibility. Accordingly, Patricia Smith's persona poems, where she "collapses the distinction between the historical and the personal, news and lived experience, drawing on her experience as a performance poet" and her formation as a journalist (Pfeiler 2002, 145), show how poetry, "by its nature, slices away the unnecessary" to "capture the essence of a life" (Smith 2007, 180). As she remarks,

> Most riveting and memorable are the pieces in which a poet passes his own power to the subject of the poem. In persona poems, the writer eliminates the neutral voice and steps unflinchingly into the stanzas. Writing in persona can be flat and cringe-inducing when it fails, when the poet hefts the device like a hammer and swings without vision or direction. But when the poet savors his role as backdrop and the subject becomes both the story and the means of telling it, the result is startlingly effective. (Smith 2007, 180)

[117] See: Morris 1998, Bernstein 1998, and Novak 2011.

While talking in favor of persona poems, Patricia Smith is also revealing how important is for a poet to master, or at least “swings” with vision and direction, the poetic device. And performance is a component of such a device. This is the reason why, nowadays, poets need a certain degree of awareness of their ability as performers. The poet is not only a writer anymore. The role requires for the aspirants to develop certain skills. Even those who feel to be distant from the performative practice, because they define and think of themselves as page-based poets, are required an update of their profession. For, regardless of the kind of poetry, in the precise moment a poet is delivering/reading/presenting his/her work to an audience, whether he/she likes it or not, the poet is performing. At that very moment, poets are also performers. And this aspect leads to what has been previously defined as the performer’s responsibility to an audience who expects good performances.

Chapter III
Body, Performativity, and Poetry

"We think too much and feel too little."
(Charlie Chaplin, "Look Up, Hannah!", in *The Great Dictator*, 1940)

"I cant say who I am
unless you agree I'm real
I cant be anything I'm not
except these words pretend
to life not yet explained,
so here's some feeling for you
see how you like it, what it
reveals, and that's Me."
(Amiri Baraka, "Numbers, Letters," 1965)

1. The "Return of the Body"[118]

In this theoretical journey towards a new dimension and conception of poetry's textuality, in which the "inter-human signification" of the poetic text takes place inside and through the performative nature of language, social dynamics, and cultural frameworks, a third element must be taken into account: the body.

Whereas performance gives relevance to the body, since "the specific mediality of performance consists of the bodily co-presence of actors [performers] and spectators" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38), the return of the body into critical discourse has been possible mainly thanks to two cultural and historical phenomena: the crisis of the social sciences (anthropology and ethnography *in primis*) after the collapse of colonialism, and the

[118] This paragraph is named after Dwight Conquergood's "Return of the Body," the first element of analysis in his 1991 essay. See Conquergood 1991, pp. 180-183.

consequent fall of scientism and imperialism, which "induced deep epistemological, methodological, and ethical self-questioning" (Conquergood 1991, 179); and the strong influence of the performative turn in cultural studies and humanities, with the consequent radical shift in perspective: to wit, a move from the textual conceptualization of the world and knowledge, to a performative approach to the study of art and reality. More precisely, the adoption of a "kinetic" perspective in contrast to "the *rigor mortis* of writing" and of its distortions —"fixation, the freeze-frame of action, the pinning down of practice" (Conquergood 1998, 31)— foregrounds the revolutionary contribution of performance studies in opening spaces "between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice" (Conquergood 2002, 145). As a result, the dominant distanced perspective of research in the academy —"knowing that," "knowing about"— which describes "a view from the above of the object of inquiry: knowledge that is anchored in paradigm and secured in print," has been shadowed by a more active, participated, and ground-level way of knowing —"knowing how," "knowing who"— which "is anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community," even if ephemeral (Conquergood 2002, 145). Thus, in ethnography the return to the body, as the privileged site of knowing during a "participant-observation fieldwork" (Conquergood 1991, 180), implies the adoption of a "homely" and "vulnerable" standpoint that gives meaning, legibility and legitimation to the subaltern Other, whose "subjugated knowledges" remain illegible to "[d]ominant epistemologies that link knowing with seeing," and for this reason, they are not attuned to meanings expressed "forcefully through intonation, silence, body tension, arched eyebrows, blank stares, and other protective arts of disguise and secrecy" (Conquergood 2002, 146). In these terms, literacy becomes the form and the means thanks to which the two common practices of reading and writing have constituted, developed, and imposed the "internal law" of

modern white West, according to three pillars: the blank page,[119] the text,[120] and the scriptural enterprise.[121] Blind and deaf to any other model and system of knowledge, "scriptocentric knowledge"[122] has become the hallmark of Western imperialism, preferring "the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human" (Said 1979, 93). According to Edward Said, the affirmation and development of "textual attitude" is twofold. First, the general idea that "people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes" (Said 1979, 93). Secondly, a text not only contains and transmits knowledge —and for this reason "[e]xpertise is attributed to it"— but, in addition, texts "can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe," producing that tradition/discourse, "whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really

[119] "a space of its own delimits a place of production for the subject. It is a place where the ambiguities of the world have been exorcised. It assumes the withdrawal and the distance of a subject in relation to an area of activities. […] This is the Cartesian move of making a distinction that initiates, along with a place of writing, the mastery (and isolation) of a subject confronted by an object. In front of his blank page, every child is already put in the position of the industrialist, the urban planner, or the Cartesian philosopher—the position of having to manage a space that is his own and distinct from all others and in which he can exercise his own will" (de Certeau 2002, 140).

[120] "Linguistic fragments or materials are treated (factory-processed, one might say) in this space [the blank page] according to methods that can be made explicit and in such a way as to produce an order. A series of articulated operations (gestural or mental) —that is what writing literally is— traces on the page the trajectories that sketch out words, sentences, and finally a system. In other terms, on the blank page, an itinerant, progressive, and regulated practice —a 'walk'— composes the artefact of another 'world' that is not received but rather made" (de Certeau 2002, 140).

[121] "The island of the page is a transitional place in which an industrial inversion is made: what comes in is some-thing 'received,' what comes out is a 'product.' The things that go in are the indexes of a certain 'passivity' of the subject with respect to a tradition; those that come out, the marks of his power of fabricating objects. The scriptural enterprise transforms or retains within itself what it receives from its outside and creates internally the instruments for an appropriation of the external space. It stocks up what it sifts out and gives itself the means to expand. Combining the power of accumulating the past and that of making the alterity of the universe conform to its models, it is capitalist and conquering" (de Certeau 2002, 141).

[122] The domination of a textual-centered hermeneutics makes it difficult to rethink literature, performance, and the wide array of different hybrid forms of expression in non-eurocentric ways. For this reason, Conquergood looks at performance as a sort of "oppositional force" that decenters textualism as the dominant regime of knowledge (Conquergood 1998, 25-26).

responsible for the texts produced out of it" (Said 1979, 94; italics in the original). For this reason, re-visiting the hegemony of textualism reveals the fallacy of a system which has produced what de Certeau called "the elocutionary experience of a fugitive communication" (de Certeau qtd. in Conquergood 2002, 146), while questioning the modernist ideology that conceives text and textuality "as a mode of communicative practice which provides a model for all other forms of cognitive exchange and social interaction" (Gilroy 1993, 77). A notion that has been pushed even further by post-structuralist understanding of an all-encompassing textuality, that "expands and merges with totality," becoming "a means to evacuate the problem of human agency," thanks to the "fragmentation" of the subject, while "enthron[ing] the literary critic as mistress or master of the domain of creative human communication" (Gilroy 1993, 77). In addition, this process of revisioning/questioning of textualism foregrounds the idea of performance practices as "an impressive repertoire of conscious, creative, critical, contrapuntal responses to the imperialistic project that exceeded the verbal" (Conquergood 2002, 147). In this light, nonverbal and extralinguistic forms of communication become means of subversions for oppressed and subaltern people that, excluded from literacy, develop another kind of epistemology. In opposition to an idea of objectivity, "[p]roximity, instead of purity, becomes the epistemological point of departure and return" (Conquergood 1998, 28). Moving from Frederick Douglass's understanding of knowledge as a located activity, that "must be *engaged*, not abstracted," since "it is derived from *solidarity* with, not separation from the people" (Conquergood 1998, 27), Conquergood sees in the slaves' performative hermeneutic the prefiguration of Antonio Gramsci's approach to a form of "engaged knowledge" (Conquergood 2002, 149), which is based on the *"[p]assage from knowing to understanding and to feeling and vice versa from feeling to understanding and to knowing*" (Gramsci 1971, 418; italics in

the original). Considering the two poles of the system, the popular element, that "'feels' but does not always know or understand," and the intellectual element who, conversely, "'knows' but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel," Antonio Gramsci contends:

> The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned (not only for knowledge in itself but also for the object of knowledge): in other words that the intellectual can be an intellectual (and not a pure pedant) if distinct and separate from the people-nation, that is, without feeling the elementary passions of the people, understanding them and therefore explaining and justifying them in the particular historical situation and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world, scientifically and coherently elaborated — i.e. knowledge. (Gramsci 1971, 418)

Proximity, in these terms, represents a process of interpretation through immersion —or what Conquergood calls "[t]he mise-en-scène of feeling-understanding-knowing"— that contrasts with "the world-as-text model in ethnography and cultural studies" (Conquergood 2002, 150). In this way, if text centrism is the core of the dominant epistemology, performance practices are the "backbone" of a countercultural system that shows the most serious limitation of the dominant model: to valorize literacy "to the exclusion of other media, other modes of knowing" (Conquergood 2002, 151).

Given the fact that the aim of performance studies is "to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledges [by] drawing together legitimated as well as subjugated modes of inquiry" (Conquergood 2002, 151), the return to the body in performance poetry works in two directions. On the one hand, it casts light on Bakhtin's "bodies of meaning,"[123] to recover those "nonverbal dimensions and embodied dynamics that

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[123] Body as "material bearer of meaning" is one of the key concepts (like "unfinishedness" and "outsidedness") in Bakhtin's critical work of the early period (Holquist 1986, xii). There are two different connotations of this element. The first one, from the early 1920s, operates on the "relations between writers and the characters they create" (Holquist 1986, xii). The second one, in 1970, concerns the "relations between one's own society and other cultures that are foreign to it in space or time" (Holquist

constitute meaningful human interaction," that the textual paradigm is not able to "register" (Conquergood 1998, 26). On the other hand, it attempts to embrace a more holistic perspective on the poetic creative process, insisting on those nonverbal and experiential paradigms which are ignored or neglected since poetry is conventionally considered the highest and purest expression of language. This does not imply a hierarchical inversion, a substitution of epistemological models (the body in place of language), but a rebalance. Recovering the body and its dynamics, while re-discovering their influence on poetics processes, it means to "put culture in motion"[124]; to expand the horizon of perception in order to overcome the binarism of the writing-reading system of knowledge, where it is needed to "hold something down," or "fixing it in place" for a text to mean, "to arrest" something in order "to understand" it (Conquergood 1998, 30). Furthermore, embracing this "kinetic turn," to approach poetry through the body means to include in the poetic analysis those "subjugated knowledges" that participate in the craft and composition of a poem even if they have been "disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (Foucault 1980, 82). Re-qualifying and recovering them is not only an act of freedom from a eurocentric perspective, but it is also the beginning of a process of re-discovery of a whole set of possibilities and potentialities through which reframing poetry and its relations with literature, and, more in general, with arts and social disciplines.

1986, xii). Despite the distinct theorization, both of them satisfies the same analytical model: namely, to understand a culture it is pivotal, first, "to penetrate" it as deeply as possible, and, then, "to return to the perspective provided by our native self or our native culture" (Holquist 1986, xiii). Conquergood elaborates on this model his theorization of proximity as an epistemological point of departure and return.

[124] See Rosaldo 1993, Stearns 2001, Inda and Rosaldo 2002, and Rodgers et al. 2014.

2. *Habitus* and Gesture

Such a process of epistemological "rebalance" (through the "deconstruction" of western textualism) finds fertile ground in performance studies. Since performance "is pre-eminently an activity of bodies," the physical entity of the performer acquires great importance, because it becomes the main semantic function and structure of a certain performance (Shepherd 2004, 191). According to the theatre tradition the actor's body serves as an aural, kinetic, and visual icon,[125] which "work[s] according to a social code, a certain way of representing reality" (de Toro 1995, 76). With postdramatic theatre, however, the body has gained centrality not only as a mere "carrier of meaning," but also as an "auto-sufficient physicality" that presents itself through its shape, materiality, and gesticulation (Lehmann 2006, 95). This self-sufficiency opens space for different possibilities of existence to come to prominence, that question and repudiate "all perception that has established itself in the world at the expense of knowing how narrow the sphere is in which life can happen in some 'normality'" (Lehmann 2006, 96). For this reason in postdramatic theatre the exploration of the body proceeds along with that of the "deviant body" —of which markers are deformation, illness, and disability— in order to "revoke the separation of the body from language and to reintroduce into the realm of spirit —voice and language— the painful and pleasurable physicality that Julia Kristeva has called the semiotic within the signifying process" (Lehmann 2006, 96). In this way, postdramatic theatre leaves behind "mental, intelligible structures" in favor of intense physicality, sometimes even extremely ambiguous. Such an over-exposure of the body, or in Lehmann's words, such an absolutization of the body "that no longer demonstrates anything but itself," brings to an unexpected conclusion, "an interesting volte-face":

> as the body no longer demonstrates anything but itself, the turn away from a body of signification and towards a body of unmeaning gesture (dance, rhythm, grace, strength, kinetic wealth) turns out as the most extreme charging of the body with significance

[125] On icons and their function in theatre, see Eco 1986, deToro 1995, and Elam 2002.

> concerning the social reality. The body becomes the *only subject matter*. From now on, it seems, all social issues first have to pass through this needle's eye, they all have to adopt the form of a physical issue. (Lehmann 2006, 96)

Understanding the body as "the only subject matter" implies a change in paradigm that involves theatre as well as performance. It marks the passage from a pre-modernist incidental idea of the "semantic body" —a "disciplined, trained and formed" signifier, whose marginalized physicality symbolized "the 'domination of nature applied to the human being'" (Lippe qtd. in Lehmann 2006, 162)— to the modernist and avant-gardist concept of the body as "*agent provocateur*," which aim not "at the realization of a reality and meaning but at the experience of potentiality" (Lehmann 2006, 163). Such a new understanding foregrounds the idea (later explored by post-humanism) of an "anthropological mutation," where the union of man and machine produces "a programmable techno-body," a "controllable and selectable apparatus" (Lehman 2006, 165). And this potentiality is achieved through a "*self-dramatization of physis*," a quest for "*anthropophany*," where the body ceases to exist as a function (a medium to tell or to represent something else) and it finally becomes "its own reality," a presence that "*manifests* itself as the site of inscription of collective history" (Lehmann 2006, 97, 163; italics in the original). This approach, first adopted in dance studies,[126] finds its origins in a millennial debate on language that investigates movement, action, and gesture as "units of synthesis" between body and meaning, movement and sense, material and ideal[127] or, according to a semiotic perspective, "any performed act with a beginning and an end that carries a meaning" (Maddalena qtd. in Oliva 2018, 174). In the

[126] Since the early 1970s dance studies began to shift the focus from meaning to action, looking at dance as a complex and coherent assembly of codes that can be read as a text. In this light, choreography becomes a textual structure, while movements and gestures are considered as writing and speaking acts through which the linguistic materiality of the body is realized. See Foster 1995 and 2011, Goellner and Murphy 1995, Lepecki 2004, 2006 and 2016, Banes and Lepecki 2007.

[127] See Agamben 2018, Cicchini 2018, Dattilo 2018, Di Vita 2018, and Oliva 2018.

specific, gesture acquires notable relevance as a predecessor of language,[128] or as a counterpart of language in the multimodal evolution of both verbal and gestural expression.[129] In postmodernist performance, bodies tend to embody more what Giorgio Agamben[130] postulates as "pure mediality" (Agamben 2017, 134), rather than the Barthian notion of supplement to an act which is produced by "a historical and cultural process" (Berio qtd. in Oliva 2018, 173). Moving from Walter Benjamin's "mediality without end" (1921) —or "immediate" mediality as "*un-medi-able* (*un-mittel-bar*)" (Weber 2008, 198)— Agamben questions the common relationship between action and meaning in the attempt to overcome the Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*. As he states,

> a pure means is thus a means that, while remaining such, has been emancipated from the relation with an end. It is as if Benjamin here causes a paradoxical "mediality without end" to correspond point by point to the Kantian "purposiveness without purpose (or end)"; but while purposiveness without purpose is, so to speak, passive, because it maintains the void form of the end without being able to exhibit any determinate goal, on the contrary, mediality without end is in some way active, because in it the means shows itself as such in the very act in which it interrupts and suspends its relation to the end. (Agamben 2018, 81-82)

Therefore, gesture becomes the quintessential exhibition of mediality, the expression of the full potentiality of a medium free of any external or internal purpose. In other words, gesture is the means that is as such.[131] In this way, Agamben goes back to that *tertium genus agendi*,

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[128] For more on the theories in support of the "gesture first" principle, see Corballis 2008, and Tomasello 2008.
[129] On the multimodal evolution of language, see McNeill 2005, Seyfeddinipur and Gullberg 2014, and Kendon 2015.

[130] In the 1980s Agamben began his study on gesture, moving not from the norm, from a cultural "above," but from its pathologies, like the syndrome of Gilles de la Tourette, to recover a part of western culture that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, seemed to have been "lost," due to multiple factors. Among them, Agamben mentions the rising of cinema, the attempts to photograph movement by Muybridge and Marey, Aby Warburg's researches on *Pathosformeln*, and, in philosophy, Nietzche's idea of the eternal recurrence (Agamben 2019). See also Agamben 1993, 2000, 2005, and 2017.

[131] In the comment to Aristotle's *Physics*, ancient philosopher Averroes explained the reason why some philosophers had defined "movement" as a non-being. And Agamben reports such an explanation in the following terms: "il movimento non rientra né nell'ambito della Potenza né in quello dell'atto, ma è un essere intermedio fra queste due fondamentali categorie dell'ontologia aristotelica, che egli definisce come 'il compimento della potenza in quanto potenza'" (Agamben 2019, 4).

expressed by the Latin verb "*gerere*,"[132] not only as the mere epistemological origin of the noun "*gestus*," but as the very alternative to the classic distinction between "*facere*" and "*agere*": the "third mode of human activity." This is possible because

> gesture, as pure means, breaks the false alternative between making that is always a means directed toward an end —production— and action that has its end in itself —praxis— but also and above all that between an action without a work and a necessarily operative action. Gesture is not in fact simply lacking a work, but instead defines its own special activity through the neutralization of the works to which it is linked as means, […] That is to say, it is an activity or a potential that consists in deactivating human works and rendering them inoperative, and in this way, it opens them to a new, possible use. (Agamben 2018, 84)

And Agamben finds in the art of dance, as well as in miming, the privileged fields where the two ontological categories of existence and essence, "*quidditas*" and "*quodditas*," potential and act, coincide (in the Latin sense "to fall together"[133]). Thus, as dance is "the perfect exhibition of the pure potential of the human body," gesture without end is the means to "explore, sound out, and show forth all the possibilities of which it is capable, without ever exhausting them" (Agamben 2018, 82). In this perspective, gesture, as a third modality of human activity, converges in a more complex poetic discourse that develops from language and its performativity as well as from performance and sociological issues and practices, which are *not* collateral to, but constitutive of the poetic enterprise. Thus, considering a basic understanding of performance as an embodied event, the performing body acts in multiple ways; modalities of action that are "interpretative layers" too. Indeed, the body is a biological system that works as pure mediality —but as a communicative and cultural means, as well— and it can be also considered as a sort of "social litmus paper," given the fact that "[t]he human body always carries the effects of the society in which it grew and was educated" (Shepherd

[132] "Those who *gerunt* are not limited to acting, but in the very act in which they carry out their action, they at the same time stop it, expose it, and hold it at a distance from themselves" (Agamben 2018, 84).

[133] "Tra la possibilità e la realtà fattuale, il 'tripudio' del danzatore insinua qui un terzo genere di essere, un medio in cui la potenza e l'atto, il mezzo e il fine si compensano e si esibiscono a vicenda. Questo fragile equilibrio non è una negazione –è, piuttosto, una scambievole esposizione, non una stasi, ma un reciproco tremare della potenza nell'atto e dell'atto nella potenza" (Agamben 2019, 5).

2004, 191). From a sociological and performative standpoint, the notions of *habitus*[134] and *gestus*[135] aptly outline the framework of influence of those superstructures that, not only determine the way the poet-performer will move, behave, present him- or herself to an audience, while creating the performance itself, but they also deeply influence the audience's process of decoding and understanding the performance. Moreover, given the fact that the body's *gestus* and *habitus* is often displayed without the person being aware of it, and that social, political, and cultural superstructures "speak louder" than personality (Shepherd 2004, 192), each performance becomes the stage where multiple and different *habitus* converge, meet, or clash. Thus, the degree of participation and involvement of the audience, as well as its understanding of the performance, in part depends on the level of similarity or difference between the many *habitus* of the spectators, the one of the poet-performer, and the dynamics of interaction (or its absence) that are created during the performance. This aspect gains crucial importance since it is strictly interwoven with the communication and performance skills of the poet-performer, given the fact that a performance, like a communication act, is a social pact where the poet is responsible for, and has control over, one part of the "ex-change," while the other part is responsibility of the audience. For this reason, experience and practice in performing provide the poet of the knowledge required to make "assumptions about the proper way of moving and standing on the stage" (Shepherd 2004, 193), as well as of a certain awareness of the dynamics, even unfortunate, that might develop, and how to deal with them. It could happen that in spite of the quality of the poem and performance, the audience is not responsive or appreciative of the exhibition. And the reasons are as numerous as the variables involved in the making of its success. It could even happen that poet and audience do not

[134] I am referring to both the first theorization of the term by Marcell Mauss (1992) and the following elaboration by Pierre Bourdieu (1998).

[135] Term was coined by Bertolt Brecht about acting in theatre, and here presented as a sort of "performative equivalent," or, at least, a notion very close to the sociological concept of *habitus*, see Silberman, Giles and Kuhn 2014.

share the same cultural and social context, and this lack of "a common ground," sometimes extremely interesting and productive, other times invalidates the empathic sharing or even the full understanding of the performance. Like what happened to poet performer Gabrielle Civil[136] in one of her performances of "Berlitz," a solo performance artwork commissioned by the Organization of Women Writers of Africa, for the conference *Yari Yari Pamberi: Black Women Dissecting Globalization*, which was held in New York, October 2004. To address global archetypes and stereotypes in the representation of the black woman's body, Gabrielle Civil went back to the old debate about hip hop and feminism, re-visiting black women's relationship with sexuality, exhibitionism, and money, to understand "[h]ow does one person's burden become another's pleasure (and vice versa)?"; and how this reflection could champion the creation of a "new *lingua franca*" for black women (Civil 2017, 258). The performance was built on the poet reading a letter in Swedish, written for Gabrielle Civil's "Haitian Kreyól" grandmother, as well as on the presentation of an original poem, "Checking Powerful Black Women Writers," delivered in English with a French translation, which was recorded on a tape that played simultaneously with the poet's reading. Moreover, reading and recitation were accompanied by a sequence of actions that should have embodied and contrasted different figures of black women: "the black woman carrying the box on her head, the black woman rummaging through the rag pile, the black woman opening a huge birthday surprise full of festive balloons, the black woman throwing down dancing by herself, the black woman scantily clad, gyrating stiffly in a hip hop video" (Civil 2017, 258). All these characterizations of women represented and questioned different ways in which the black woman's objectification occurs, following an increasing progression in the intensity of the performance, that reached its apex with Gabrielle Civil's striptease. On high heels and

[136] "Gabrielle Civil is a black feminist performance artist, originally from Detroit. She has premiered over 40 original solo and collaborative performance works around the world." From the section "about" on her official website. <https://www.gabriellecivilartist.com/about>

underwear, she “pretended to be vacant, screwed [her] finger into [her] cheek, gyrated” and put herself into a carton box (Civil 2017, 258). The playful over-exhibition of her body was meant to “contrast the way a black woman’s body could feel to herself, dancing joyfully without many clothes, to the way a black woman could look objectified in the same attire in a different (global) context.”[137] This performance was presented as a preview at Patrick’s Cabaret in Minneapolis, a few days before the conference in New York. It is telling the account that Civil does of how the reception of the same performance was radically different in the two contexts —a predominantly white group in Minnesota, twentyish people, including some friends and colleagues of the poet; and a multicultural audience in New York, with a majority of African American women. Indeed, the cultural specificity of the white Minnesota audience “did not jibe” with the performance. As Gabrielle Civil reports,

> My jokes were met with stony silence. My tongue-in-cheek spoof of nikki giovanni’s ‘ego-tripping’ received quizzical looks and it seemed people were a little embarrassed for me during the striptease and the hip hop transformation. They looked completely at a loss when I talked about Abbey Lincoln or of Wanda Coleman. And at the end of the piece […] I stood there looking at the audience looking at me. Dead silence. (Civil 2017, 272)

The second audience, on the contrary, received the performance in a totally different way, as it was a completely new show. As the poet comments:

> As I performed the work, I could see the glint in their eyes, hear *Uh huh* and *Lord*, the chuckles at my jokes that turned into warm chortles. The hooting and hollering when I did my striptease. The Yari Yari audience died laughing when I became the ‘video ho.’ They hung on every word of my last poem/monologue. And many of them […] gave me a standing ovation. (Civil 2017, 273)

With this recounting, Gabrielle Civil reveals an aspect of “the power of the audience”: its physical presence empowers its members to understand and, so, to decide whether to

[137] This contrast was even more amplified by a general rate of dissatisfaction that almost 96% of American women have with their bodies. As reported by psychologist Linda Siemanski’s account of such a social plague to the poet, “[w]hether they’re thin or fat, tall or short —their normal state is to believe that something is wrong with them. In fact, a mark of assimilation for immigrant women is their rising rate of body dissatisfaction” (Civil 2017, 258).

embrace or reject what is displayed for the audience's sake. Therefore, "[e]ven if the steps, the lines, the actions are the same, the people in the room are different, which makes the way that you are understood among those people different" (Civil 2017, 273). Such an awareness empowers the poet performer who can "take into account the specificity of audiences in relation to the specific meaning generated by a work performed before them" (Civil 2017, 274). This means that the performer is not pushed to just "cater to the audience *per se*," but to decide how to deal or not deal with what happens, or what does not happen, in that precise circumstance (Civil 2017, 274).

This ability to "get oneself attuned to the audience" is part of a communication and performance strategy that poets gain through experience —especially when they have any training in acting or performance. Experience, thus, becomes a great ally for the poets who learn how to establish, grow, and refine a relationship with the audience and, in so doing, to achieve the independence to decide how to manage every single situation. To say, they can decide to make an effort to gain the favor and sympathy of the spectators or, conversely, once they have acknowledged the level of disinterest, distance, or even hostility, of the audience, the poets can decide whether to address it, or "just let it in"[138] —let that hostility or distance into the performance with no apparent reaction. All the same, a certain awareness and expertise give the poets autonomy and control of the situation, so much as to let them experiment and improvise while keeping a high-level quality of poem, performance, and audience's engagement. A very hard balance to obtain, since it requires a huge effort to master

[138] From a conversation with poet, singer, and performer Tracie Morris, who addressed precisely such an eventuality with specific reference to her improvisation practice in sound poetry. Morris accounts that, although people generally come to see you because they are interested in your work, it could still happen that you don't feel the connection with that particular audience. Nothing "comes back" to you from the audience. And "with no audience there is no poem."

different skills,[139] especially when the poet has to collaborate and improvise, co-creating, with other poets and/or artists.

Anyway, during this two-way exchange between poet and audience, the body, in the purport of "means as such," exceeds poets' control. Its material presence becomes revelatory and telling without regard to the poets' will, intentions, and actions. This is possible because, drawing on Paul Watzlawick's first axiom, the body "*cannot* not *communicate*" (Watzlawick et al. 1967, 51; italics in the original). Thus, elements like age, gender, ethnic features, class, clothing, etc. influence the rendering and the reception of both poem and performance (as already explained in the previous chapter), leaving to the poet a scant, but still relevant, decisional margin of action, with the cognizance that every single member of the audience will receive and interpret those elements as well as the performance in a way that might even differ from the performer's intentions, beliefs, representations, and practices. Such a possible divergence between the two processes of codifying and decoding may be read as one consequence of that shift from an objectivist to a subjectivist understanding,[140] that Rogers Brubaker has investigated in relation to race and ethnicity as "*perspectives on* and *constructions of the world*" (Brubaker 2015, 48; italics in the original). Moving from a Bourdieusian emphasis on the "objectivity of the subjective" to explain the paradox of the "simultaneous obdurate facticity and evanescent insubstantiality of race and ethnicity," Rogers Brubaker notices how race and ethnicity (and for extension, gender, age, and class too) are not "*experienced* as subjective," but as the "result of the collective work of objectification and reification involved in all processes of institutionalization" (Brubaker 2015, 164, 49, 48). Thus, this means that, if race and ethnicity (and I also add gender, age, and class) are

[139] And the difficulty of the task often induces poets to look with circumspection at those who practice performance poetry, questioning the very possibility to produce a poem of good quality that could perfectly work on and off the page. Therefore, many poets obviate to such a hard task by preparing two or more versions of the same poem: one for the publishing and one for the performance (Thomas 2019).

[140] See Mills 1998 (ch. III in particular), DuPlessis and Quartermain 1999, DuPlessis 2006, and Kaplan and Winther 2012.

independent of the individual's system of beliefs, practices, and representations, they "exist and persist only insofar as they are institutionalized, recognized, and reified in and through ongoing, chronically reproduced beliefs, practices, representations, and classifications" (Brubaker 2015, 48). In spite of the audience's positioning towards the poet and the performance, all these elements should also be considered as the "material utterances" which give a physical dimension to the disembodied practice of poetry. According to Javon Johnson, this "incarnation" of poetry works in reaction to a tendency of many poets to ignore "the sexual assault that was happening in various slam and spoken word spaces" before 2013 and to "erase the bodies of color in slam" (Johnson 2017, 21). The dominant success of black poets, Johnson reports, brought discontent inside the national community that called for "real poetry": to say, written poetry to be read calmly while standing still. Such a standpoint not only contradicts the strongly performative nature of slam, but it also attacks the body in the attempt to remove it. Therefore, "[b]y suggesting that what the body offers is somehow less relevant than what the mind offers [...] erase[s] the brilliant contributions of marginalized poets and champion[s] older, disembodied poetic practices that ha[s] made slam necessary in the first place" (Johnson 2017, 21). For this reason, the practice of "performing poetry" goes even beyond how Bob Holman defined it: a part of the editing process and, even more, "publication through the body" (Holman 2007, 66). Indeed, it seems that performance nullifies the power of publishing offering itself as an alternative. Thus, the poetry, which is "sung with the whole body," opposes not only published poetry but the whole cultural and economic system that gravitates around it —creative writing programs included (Johnson 2003, 202). In this way, for those poets who belong from marginalized communities, the choice of publishing becomes a seditious act of "disturbing binaries and searching for something beyond them" (Johnson 2017, 22). And for Johnson, this "something beyond" is represented by the digital space. Internet, in fact, offers an alternative to print while satisfying

the need to archive, due to "[t]he conflation of the performance and the text"; it opens multiple "stages" for the poets to perform, annihilating spatial and temporal barriers, and in doing so, it questions notions of community, reality, and simulation, while challenging "the importance of the immediacy of performance poetry" as well (Johnson 2017, 95). Besides, the vast circulation of videos allows the body to gain relevance over the written word, insomuch as "videos allow us to feature the body not just *in* poetry but also *as* poetry. In other words, watching poets perform forces the audience to wrestle with the body of the text, the body in the text, and the body who produced the text" (Johnson 2017, 95; italics in the original). In a certain sense, Johnson's study of the use of the body by marginalized poets confirms what, twenty years before, Stephen Tyler had provocatively prognosticated in his parody of "the dominant discourse of a decaying order," which would have been marked by a new postmodern ethnographic text that, in Tyler foretelling, "will be a text of the physical, the spoken and the performed" (Tyler qtd. in Carlson 2018, 176). And performance poetry is a sample of the new postmodern ethnographic text, in which the body can be explored and experienced in all its significant variations, which go far beyond the mere representation of the body as the "interface" between poetry and performance, poet and audience, as well as material and immaterial, real and digital.

3. From "Natural Body" to Tactile-Kinesthetic Interface

The beginning of the "biotech century" has been characterized by the increasing influence of studies in "life sciences" —like neurobiology, cybernetics, molecular genetics, bioethics, law, biotechnology— and "the proliferation and emergence of technologies and practices which enable the enhancement, alteration and invention of new bodies" (Blackman 2008, 2).

The technological advancements in medical intervention and health care, coupled with the rise of new biotechnologies, has brought “hybrid assemblages oriented toward the goal of optimization”: namely, the technologies of life (Rose 2008, 17). These technologies “seek to reshape the vital future by action in the vital present,” changing what it is to be considered a biological organism, by refiguring vital processes themselves (Rose 2008, 17-18). Forward visions, thus, influence current reformulations of the body within human, social, and natural sciences. Indeed, two dimensions, susceptibility[141] and enhancement,[142] have especially amplified the range of action of such a technological advancement, which encompasses practices of body modification (like cosmetic surgery, organ transplantation, and gender reassignment surgery), biotechnological procedures (as hormone replacement therapy, oocyte cryopreservation and in vitro fertilization), and “intervention at the molecular level of life (codes, enzyme activities, neurotransmitters and transporter genes, for example)” (Blackman 2008, 2). These technological and scientific developments not only disrupt the idea of “natural” body —“singular, bounded, [and] carbon-based” (Blackman 2008, 2)— but they also challenge the cultural and social systems[143] that elaborated such a belief, questioning our understanding of concepts like life, humanity/humanness, and the natural. For this reason, when in the 1980s the sociology of the body emerged to study “the corporeality of the social

[141] “Susceptibility indexes the problems raised by attempts to identify and treat persons in the present in relation to ills that they are predicted to suffer in the future [geneticization]. […] In one sense, the contemporary focus on susceptibility is merely an extension of two other modes of thought that have a long history—that of predisposition and that of risk” (Rose 2008, 18).

[142] “Enhancement, like susceptibility, is future oriented. Almost any capacity of the human body or soul—strength, endurance, attention, intelligence and the lifespan itself—seems potentially open to improvement by technological intervention. […] the new molecular enhancement technologies do not attempt to hybridize the body with mechanical equipment but to transform it at the organic level, to reshape vitality from the inside: in the process the human becomes, not less biological, but *all the more* biological” (Rose 2008, 20; italics in the original).

[143] “Organ transplantation is not merely a triumph of surgical techniques but requires new sets of social relations bringing together donors and recipients across time and space, entailing and generating new ideas about end of life, new senses of ownership of the body and rights to a cure, as well as the complex financial and institutional relations that make the procedure possible” (Rose 2008, 17).

and the sociality of corporeality,"[144] it also brought new insights in the understanding of the body, as it was theorized by gender and cultural studies: to say, a "culturally constructed, gendered, racialized, and class-contoured concept" (Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche 2007, 11). The living body, indeed, might be seen as a site of transformation, in which technology and practice of "social influence" entrench dynamics of communication and identity-construction, which trouble "the idea that the biological and the cultural are two separate, discrete entities" (Blackman 2008, 12). The general representation of the body, in fact, lies in the metaphor of the body as both a project and object "immensely vulnerable to being undone" (Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche 2007, 29); a site of oppression that "serves as a symbol of social difference and a basis for discrimination" (Gimlin 2002, 141); and a means that enacts, while being enacted, the dominant ideological system where it lives and operates. Thus, "[i]n a society that equates the body with both self and moral worth, cultural meanings are attached to physical differences," and this is particularly evident inside those local institutional settings where people "learn to enact gender, social class, ethnicity, and age through the body" (Gimlin 2002, 141). And through those very same patterns, people learn the rules governing such enactments while being defined by them. This double process of enactment and self-definition is the result of a two-level organization which Debra Gimlin has studied about women, and how they respond and react to beauty ideology in local institutional settings like the hair salon, the gym, the plastic surgery clinic, etc. According to Gimlin, these institutions do not openly introduce notions that may undermine social worth for markers of aging, ethnicity, and even womanhood, but at the same time, offering remedies for those very markers they are surely reinforcing the idea.

[144] "'Thinking through the body' creates an important challenge for reimagining possible solutions to some of the frameworks which have organized theorizing across the humanities. These can be characterized as how to 'think' the relationship between the *micro* and the *macro*, the *individual* and the *social*, *structure* and *agency*, *mind* and *body* and the *inside* and *outside*, for example" (Blackman 2008, 2).

A representative of this system, for example, is the medical industry of plastic surgery, since it provides means to enact the "normative identity" embodied by the image of the "youthful 'WASP' who is the only truly valued member of contemporary Western culture"; in this light, hooked or wide noses and almond-shaped eyes (facial features indicating ethnicity) are placed together with signs of aging or "the markers of childbearing with tummy tucks and breast alteration" —all elements that are generally considered as "defects," until, from a cosmetic-surgery perspective, they become problems that modern medicine techniques can solve" (Gimlin 2002, 142). Therefore, Debra Gimlin denounces that "[i]n the very act of correction, the surgical practice effectively locates other body types within the realm of the deviant," turning the plastic surgeon into a sort of "redeemer": the surgeon "does not only repair and correct physical flaws, he/she "provide[s] the opportunity to 'look like the person you really are,'" that is the young "WASP" version of yourself (Gimlin 2002, 142). Also, the common awareness of an everchanging definition of physical perfection keeps everybody constantly vigilant in re-defining once own self-image according to the new parameters of beauty standards. The specificity of Gimlin's study represents an aspect of a more general and widespread "two-way-system," that rules our "civil coexistence" in organized societies. On the one hand, institutions provide the "normative model" to follow, together with "new and more effective methods of correction," while, on the other hand, the population is absorbed in constant self-examination (Gimlin 2002, 142). In this distinction between the "norm" and the "deviant," the "different," and the "divergent," the body becomes pivotal in elaborating more or less conscious strategies of adjustment and compliance or, conversely, of resistance and subversion. Thus, collective and individual strategies of action and behavioral patterns display the complex mechanism, in which the social, the cultural, and the technological are interwoven together. And precisely from the investigation of such a crucial and delicate question, "body studies" have produced a change in paradigm.

The body ceases to be "something that we both *have* and *are*" (Blackman 2008, 1), to become a complex entity, what AnneMarie Mol calls "the body multiple": to say, "the coexistence of multiple entities that go by the same name" (Mol 2002, 151). The newly discovered "manyfoldedness" of the body, that never shifts into a form of pluralism, arises from the acknowledgment that "ontology is multiple and reality leaves us in doubt" (Mol 2002, 166), rejecting, therefore, the idea of the body as an autonomous and self-sufficient entity. In this light, the body is no more bounded by the skin, which ceases to be the container for the self. Without a clear boundary between inside and outside, "bodies always extend and connect to other bodies, human and non-human, to practices, techniques, technologies, and objects which produce different kinds of bodies and different ways, arguably, of enacting what it means to be human" (Blackman 2008, 1). In this way, the body finally gains its autonomy of action, its agency, shifting the focus to "what bodies can *do*, what bodies could *become*" (Blackman 2008, 1; italics in the original). And corporeal agency "radically refigure[s] the idea of the body as *substance* or *entity* and even as distinctly *human*" (Blackman 2008, 1; italics in the original). This new social theorizing, that might be subsumed by the motto to "think through the body," champions "the interplay of biological, physical and social processes" in the embodiment of our sense of subjectivity (Blackman 2008, 3). Such a revision tries to overcome the Cartesian dualism, which is one of the key splits "that have been reproduced in different ways across the natural and human sciences" (Blackman 2008, 4). The foundational dualism between the mind —location of thought, characterized by voluntary control, the *wil*— and the body —mere container of involuntary, therefore fixed, physiological processes— lays at the basis of two thorny issues: the body as substance, and the body as "absent presence." There is a long-standing tradition in western thought —that has been inherited by the academic world— to see the body as an entity, a substance, that, even if constantly present in every activity we undertake, yet, it has no relevance at all in the thinking

process. This is one of the most deep-rooted prejudices about the body in western culture, aptly embodied by Descartes's *dictum* "*cogito, ergo sum*." The philosopher, in fact, "deprecated sensory knowledge, which could not shake off the uncertainty of subjectivity. Because 'the notion of thought precedes that of all corporeal things and is the most certain,' it must be the conscious mind (*res cogitans*) which formed the essential 'I'" (Porter 2003, 212). This ennoblement of reason above the body and, for extension, the senses, symbolizes the ontological, almost oppositional, distinction between the two realms (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*)[145]; a radical chasm that has survived until recent years in the common understanding that is the mind to superintend the work of thought,[146] so that "thinking primarily takes place independently of the body" (Blackman 2008, 5). For Descartes, the corporeal object was inert flesh, a human animal, whose mechanical model could be outlined through "analogies with clocks and automata" (Porter 2003, 214). This machine-like formulation of the body has been entrenched by our cultural system which is sense-making oriented. And the first step in sense-making happens through the sight. This means that the object of study is always looked but rarely touched, privileging distance and separation, rather than proximity and contact between observer and observed. As Annemarie Mol argues:

> In talk about meaning and interpretation the physical body stays *untouched*. All interpretations, whatever their number, are interpretations *of*. Of what? Of some matter that is projected somewhere. Of some nature that allows culture to attribute all these shapes to it. This is built into the very metaphor of "perspective" itself. This multiplies the observers —but leaves the object observed alone. All alone. Untouched. It is only looked at. […] They seem to get to know the object by their eyes only. Maybe they have ears that listen. But no one ever touches the object. (Mol 2002, 12; italics in the original)

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[145] "Descartes's view of dualism […] were based upon a fantasy that he could exist without a body. Descartes suffered with physical infirmities and produced his philosophical speculations on a misguided fantasy that he could overcome the body" (Blackman 2008, 57).

[146] "Insofar as brains are typically treasured in a manner parallel to minds, the primary uneven valorization explicit in the classical mind/body dichotomy transfers implicitly to a brain/body dichotomy. Bodies are, in effect, disposable both in typical models of mind and in typical models of brain. Developmental histories are forgotten in these models because bodies are forgotten; movement is forgotten for the same reason. Clearly, cognitivists in general run off with the brain and leave living bodies behind; they take cognition out of perception and hide it away to heady climes where weightings, unit processings, and the like, take the place of those actual living encounters that inform the life of animate forms" (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 186).

Moreover, given the fact that all kinds of sense-making activity (interpretation, judgment, meaning, etc.) are works of the mind, even when the body is taken into account, it is seen as a mere “container for experiences, which are a product of the ways in which we use particular cultural narratives and interpretations to make sense of our lives” (Blackman 2008, 6). It is precisely this total transparency of the body in cognitive practices to turn it into an “absent presence.” In opposition to the corporeal absence in the sense-making process, “thinking through the body” becomes the alternative strategy to explore the body as a site of potentiality, process, and practice, that goes far beyond the very mind-body dualism. In this way, Maxine Sheets-Johnson’s idea of a “felt somatic body,” or Lisa Blackman’s “affective body,”[147] cuts across “the artificially instituted ontological divide of ‘the mental’ and ‘the nonmental’” (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 186). As “somatically felt,” the body has “aliveness or vitality that is literally felt or sensed but cannot necessarily be articulated, reduced to physiological processes or to the effect of social structures” (Blackman 2008, 30). For this reason, it questions fixed notions of “outside” and “inside,” and emphasizes cultural and social processes of “permeability,” that take place among and through the bodies, compelling to re-think concepts of embodiment and disembodiment. Besides, the revolutionary act of retrieving the body in the process of sense-making reminds that “at the basis of all judgement, decision, and action […] lies the experience of something ‘that is a substrate with simple sensually graspable qualities’” (Nenon qtd. in Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 186). Thus, the felt and kinetic aspects of the body are the two ontological pillars of a new “body-scheme,”[148] that

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[147] “The body has been extended to include *species bodies*, *psychic bodies*, *machinic bodies*, *vitalist bodies* and *other-worldly* bodies, which do not conform to our expectations of clearly defined boundaries between the psychological, social, biological, ideological, economic and technical, for example. Bodies are processes that are articulated and articulate through their connections with others, human and non-human. In this sense, if there is one guiding principle towards which work on the body has moved it is the assumption that what defines bodies is their capacity to affect and be affected” (Blackman 2008, 133).

[148] “[Yasuo] Yuasa’s ‘body-scheme’ is an attempt to bring together four different ‘circuits’ of the body: the neurophysiological, the kinesthetic and somesthetic, the emotional-instinctual, and the psychological. In contrast to Western scientific construals, these circuits or planes of body functioning are not separate self-sufficient systems to be ministered to in piecemeal fashion by specialists. They are thoroughly integrated, entwined facets of bodily life” (Sheets-Johnston 1999, 5-6).

through a whole set of processes —connectivity, relationality, attunement, becoming, somatic feeling, and affectivity— introduces a "non-cognitive" embodied mode of thinking: to say, a form of knowledge that is reached *through* the body.[149]

Such a theoretical revision allows the exploration of the role of the body inside the postmodern ethnic text of performance poetry from a threefold perspective. On a basic level, the body is a subject that makes the experience of the outside through its senses. Senses, *de facto*, connect the body with the outside, but they also filter and elaborate what permeates into the body from the outside. The bodily experience of the outside contributes to what may be defined as a *synesthetic somatic knowledge*. The second point explores the *multiplicity* of the body. In this light, the body is no more a singular, bounded unit but a multitude of entities "that are brought into being and held together through complex practices of self-production" (Blackman 2008, 12-13). This multitude of entities is organized as an open and unfinished system, that is in constant connection with other open and unfinished systems (bodies), both human and non-human, which are all involved in "a process of becoming" (Shilling 1993, 5). Such a conceptualization of the body as process echoes William James's theorization of the "stream of consciousness" as a "succession of discrete instances or state of consciousness" — James refers to them as "drops" or "pulses"— which are "temporally adjacent each one to the next one; they have nothing else between them except for possible time gaps or interruptions of consciousness," the frequency of which is not estimated (Natsoulas 1992, 3). States of mind, moods, "instances of consciousness" flow in a "continuous," where "[t]hey are distinct from one another though nothing lies between each one of them and the next one" (Natsoulas 1992, 5). Such a condition contributes to those aspects of "porosity," and "permeability" that are

[149] "At one level, self-cultivation as an Eastern concept is the epistemological equivalent of Socrates's 'Know thyself.' But it is at the same time a radically different precept on three counts: it originates in a disciplined practice of the body rather than a disciplined practice of the intellect; it culminates in a different kind of knowledge of the self; and it underscores the continuity and unity of self and world" (Sheets-Johnston 1999, 6).

pivotal for the articulation of the body's synesthetic way of communicating and knowing.[150] The "body multiple," thus, develops a consciousness-in-movement, a corporeal and kinesthetic awareness that is in perpetual change, because strictly interdependent to space and time. On a third level, therefore, a "primordial dynamism" informs our understanding of the body as a multiplicity that develops a kinesthetic consciousness, as Maxine Sheets-Johnston posits:

> This dynamism appears as distinctively linked to that which orients us in our movements, that is, to the phenomena appearing in our sensory fields, and that in such a way that our energy is always focused on something, on what we are doing. I listen and I am stretched out in the direction of the lecturer. When I am writing, the energy of my sensory fields and the posture of my movements focus on what I am doing; that becomes the center. (Sheets-Johnson 2011, 459)

In this "mindful movement," thinking and movement are not different and separate actions, but two "aspects of a kinetic bodily logos attuned to an evolving dynamic situation" (Sheets-Johnston 1999, xviii, xxxi). Hence, to "think the body" disrupts the old "molar" view[151] at the basis of the Cartesian dualism, that considered the corporeal "a constraining force that ideally should be brought under the control of the mind" (Blackman 2008, 21). Conversely, in this dynamic perspective, "the mind is function of body" (Sheets-Johnston 2011, 376). Bodies, therefore, are "mediated by processes and practices that produce dynamic points of intersection and connection" (Blackman 2008, 107), that allows the "intimate linking of subjective experience or consciousness with self-movement —"mental activity with motor activity" (Sheets-Johnston 2011, 378). The entwining of all these three levels— experience,

[150] "to be *articulated* is to be open to connection, thus increasing the potential of bodies to be moved and to learn to be affected. In this formulation, learning is not a cognitive skill developed and undertaken by a brain or mind, but rather denotes the capacity of bodies to acquire more and more connections to artefacts, techniques and practices. It is the conjoining or coupling of bodies with practices and techniques that allow for what we might understand in this context to be their cognitive development" (Blackman 2008, 106).

[151] The "molar" view describes the body at the levels of its biological elements (limbs, organs, tissues, etc…). According to Nikolas Rose, the "molar" is "the visible, tangible body, as pictured in the cinema or on the TV screen, in advertisements for health and beauty products, and the like. It is this molar body that we act upon and seek to perfect through diet, exercise, tattooing, and cosmetic surgery. […] this was the body —the body as systemic whole— that was the focus of clinical medicine, as it took shape over the nineteenth century" (Rose 2008, 11).

multiplicity, dynamism —engenders the tactile-kinesthetic body: that is "a body that has both a natural and individual kinetic history. It is a body rich in movement memories, expectations, and values, a body that has in consequence developed certain kinetic dispositions, habits, and ways of responding" (Sheets-Johnston 2011, 382).

The tactile-kinesthetic body, with its non-cognitive mode of knowledge-making, not only gains acknowledgment and value, but it also becomes more than a collaborator of the mind in the creative practice, in the writing process, as well as in the poetic performance. Considering, in fact, that "much of human life is lived in a non-cognitive mode" (Thrift qtd. in Blackman 2008, 58), its constant and permeable relations with the outside allow this multiple system to retrieve, elaborate, and store information, to which it would be impossible for the mind to have access otherwise. Furthermore, characteristics of affectivity, dynamism, and multiplicity help the body gain a "tridimensional personification" to contrast the dual dimension practice of objectification, that media have perpetrated against the body through overuse of the sight. As Maxine Sheets-Johnston remarks, media draws the body as "an extended substance," "a purely physical object," causing the spreading of the "popular body noise" (Sheets-Johnston 1992, 3). According to her, this phenomenon makes the "*living* sense of ourselves" vanish, because, by turning the body in an object to view, it deeply affects our sense of humanness.

> When the body is treated as a purely material possession, our humanness is diminished. Popular body noise drowns out the felt sense of our bodies and a felt sense of our individual aliveness. In place of these felt senses is a preeminently visual object groomed in the ways of quite specific, all-pervasive, culturally-engrained attitudes and values. What is diagnosed as needing thinner thighs, increased fiber, stress-reduction, or an at-home aerobic device, is precisely a culturally-seduced visual object." (Sheets-Johnston 1999, 3)

This mechanism is amplified by the digital device since the "ubiquity of cameras" constantly reminds people that they are being watched, feeding a state of hyper-awareness (Johnson 2017, 114). However, such a bidimensional eye-driven form of objectification is hindered by

poets, who employ physical features and poetic structures to realize the different dynamics of gazing and talking back. In this light, performance —both live and mediatized, even if with some differences between one another— goes beyond the physical realization of a poem in and through the very body of the poet. Thus, performance poetry may be seen as a manifestation of the "violent return to the passion for the Real" (Žižek 2012, 23) that is also characterized by what Peggy Phelan calls the "realm of all-performance-all-the time" (Phelan 2003, 292). Phelan's belief, that today an acknowledgment of the real is possible only in performative terms,[152] turns the tactile-kinesthetic body into a "living interface," that constitutes "the ever-shifting relation between material and immaterial worlds" (Sielke and Schäfer-Wünsche 2007, 15). Understanding the human subject as a process, the complex nature of "the body multiple" challenges the shifting binarism that constantly marks the confines between the realm of material and immaterial. And performance animates the tactile-kinesthetic experience of the bodily trespassing of these confines. This means that performance heightens the permeability of the body as a multiple system in process while standing the progressive detachment from the physical dimension of both existence and presence, which is caused by technology and digital media.

Even if it is easy to notice the role of the body during a performance, it is harder to spot its presence and influence in the performance of writing. A way to cast light on the participation of the body within this process, that seems to be very distant from the corporeal dimension, is the analysis of the workshop in poetic writing. The workshop combines performance with poetry, and, in so doing, it fully involves the tactile-kinesthetic body in the writing process of poems, that may or may not be later performed. Moreover, the observation

[152] "Performance has become a central lens for understanding events as disparate as the war in Iraq and Madonna newest video. We have entered a realm of all-performance-all-the-time. This is not to say that 'the real' has disappeared, but it is to acknowledge that it is impossible to recognize 'the real' without a concept of performance in view" (Phelan 2003, 292).

through the performance lens of the workshop activities shows how writing poetry is not only a process but rather an experience.

4. “Brainlingo: Connecting Tissues”

In April 2019 I took part in “Brainlingo,” Edwin Torres’ four-day workshop on poetry, that this year was organized in Beacon, a quiet and cozy city in the Mid-Hudson region, approximately 60 miles north of New York, where the poet lives with his family. As explained on the first day, the aim of the workshop was threefold: to experiment language and movement; to practice active listening, that is to interact with all the inputs that come from both the outside and the inside of the room in which we were; and, to experiment connection. To connect, in this context, is to share your ideas, emotions, feelings, and thoughts, but also to pay attention to how others react at what happens around you; what they say; how they elaborate the given instructions and information; how you adapt or not at their responses, and vice versa; and what you take from their work as well as how their work is influenced or not by yours. The workshop is designed to “experience” poetry by first hand: to use body, voice, movement, and physical contact as the constitutive parts of the creative process, in a continuous alternation of the individual with teamwork. In this way, the workshop turns into a sort of laboratory for both the poet and the participants to experience “an organic approach to the creative process” (Torres 1997). And “process” is a keyword to describe Torres’s poetic enterprise. Coming from the performance world, he found his poetic lineage “on the shoulders of Futurism, Mayakovsky, and Ernie Kovacs” (Torres 2014). That “unbridled creativity” shaped Torres’s poetry “by the making of its own communication, its formation of language out of sound and vice versa, by the how at the core of the why” (Torres 2014). This

intertwining between language and performance, body and sound, writing and movement is a crucial aspect in Torres' poetic practice itself, given the fact that since the very beginning of his career —from 1988 "Interactive Eclecticism" (I.E.) to 1990s performing groups "Poets Neurotica" and "Real Live Poetry"— the poet has elaborated more complex and refined strategies in performance to "mingle poetry with vocal/physical improvisation, visual theater, music and sound."[153] Torres's research for different ways to perform also derives from the need to use different media for the poem to exist. Although there is no fixed formula —sometimes a poem is created for a specific situation (a publication, a special occasion, a show, an exhibit, etc.), other times an existing poem is selected to become part of a project (a CD, a volume)— the medium chosen to transmit the poem still produces some changes. It "dictates reception,"[154] or panders to the development of a poem as it was a creature.[155] Therefore, the poem, the medium, and the performance settle Torres' poetic effort into "a diaspora of *edge as center*, that is, the exploration of what lies at the beginning of what I'm trying to say, what you are trying to hear —the physicality of language, a permeable territory traveled between us, infinite with mistake and wonder" (Torres 2014).

The edge becomes also the starting point and the push to acknowledge one's own "beyond." The edge, as a sort of category of the episteme, emerges as an empowerment point of departure for those subjects that, due to their subordinated social status, use language and poetry to break existing forms and patterns in the attempt to build new ones, insofar as new forms bring new awareness, that models new consciousness, that champions new

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[153] From now on all the quotations taken from Torres' website "Brainlingo" will be referred to as (Torres BRNLNG). When possible, it will be indicated in the specific section.

[154] "Poetry lives on page as words in type, poetry lives on stage as words in body, challenge of CD is to let poetry live as words in air. CD medium has one entrance for senses: sound. From this entrance, other senses follow. […] Challenge for recorded poetry is to utilize the medium, to not just be words documented but to be as linear or non-linear as poem dictates. To have sound be poetry using words" (Holman and Torres BRNLNG, interview).

[155] "Poem gets life once born —at moment of poem's concept, poem's life is unformed. First words tell me what it wants…sounds like cute analogy, but poem is creature to me…up to me as its creator to guide it. Means knowing where its best chance for survival is…(how dramatic!)…whether page verse or theatrical vision. The more mediums I'm familiar with…the more chance of it not going hungry!" (Holman and Torres BRNLNG, interview).

communities. As Torres wonders, "[t]he resolve of change happens when you let it. In claiming existence as an abstract phenomenon, can poetry affect the process of community by re-inventing community as process?"[156] This cycle of empowerment is particularly evident in those cases, like Nuyoricans, latin@s,[157] and African Americans, where the novelty carries within "the traces and influences of many dissident or socially subordinated traditions as well as evolving new ones" (Damon 1998, 479). And this is true for all those poetic-subjects that belong to, and start from a borderline condition of constant "productive, creative tension as well as destructive, soul-killing anxiety," and use it to "*create* experience and subjectivity in the process of meaning-making, of poiesis" (Damon 1998, 479; italics in the original). Studies in anthropology and folklore[158] give new insights in literary analysis, and display how poetry —in the acceptation of "the activity surrounding and composing the production and consumption of imaginative language"— develops into "a continual process of making and remaking" that, through language, enacts mechanisms of "self-formation," and renegotiation of power relations between and inside languages (Damon 1998, 480). Given the fact that language is perceived as "the object of and not just the medium for representing the struggle for power, representation, and expressive freedom," in this context, any kind of interlingual punning, code-switching, neologism, or language disruption are "means of dramatizing political at-homeness in the otherwise forbidding culturescape of the U.S." (Damon 1998, 480). In the very friction between the two languages resides "that pathological duality born of contending cultural worlds and, perhaps more significantly, of the conflicting pressures toward both exclusion and forced incorporation" (Flores and Yudice 1990, 60). In this way,

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[156] From the unpublished notes that the poet prepared for the workshop. From now on quoted as (Torres WN, 4).

[157] "Latinos do not comprise even a relatively homogeneous 'ethnicity.' Latinos include native-born U.S. citizens (predominantly Chicanos —Mexican-Americans— and Nuyorican — 'mainland' Puerto Ricans) and Latin American immigrants of all racial and national combinations: white —including a range of different European nationalities— Native-American, black, Arabic, and Asian. [...] Moreover, both of these groups —unlike any of the European immigrant groups— constitute, with Native-Americans, 'conquered minorities'" (Flores and Yudice 1990, 57).

[158] See Flores and Rosaldo 2007, Grosfoguel et al. 2005, Paredes 1991, 1993, and Saldívar 1997, 2012.

everyday language and poetry blends in that aesthetic of the "border culture" which, like Baudrillard's "uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (Baudrillard 1995, 6), manifests itself through practice: to wit, "an integral part of an ethos which seeks to be politicized as a means to validation and self-determination" (Flores and Yudice 1990, 61). Moreover, since language works like race "in identifying targets for possible privilege or discrimination" (Flores and Yudice 1990, 61), poetry becomes the privileged site and tool to navigate the edges, the fractures, and the interstices between languages and cultures, casting light on social and geopolitical boundaries, which are characterized by a high level of heterogeneity and power asymmetry.[159] For this reason, "juggling cultures," while operating in pluralistic and contradictory ways champions the "art of cultural blending": a practice very common among the Chicanes, for example, who have become masters in "developing new forms of polyglot cultural creativity" (Rosaldo 1993, 216), that is one of the main characteristics which informs the literary practice within the different contact zones.[160]

And the workshop "Brainlingo: Connecting Tissues" became a powerful and empowering contact zone, a temporal liminoid space, where through the explorations of many cultural, linguistic, artistic, and personal edges it has been possible to enact mechanisms of both self-formation—that always embeds and champions dynamics of self-transformation—and poiesis.

Although this workshop has been thought for almost two decades, each year Torres adjusts and modifies some elements as his teaching techniques get refined, and in part

[159] "important historical transitions alter the way people write, because they alter people's experiences and the way people imagine, feel and think about the world they live in. The shifts in writing, then, will tell you something about the nature of the changes" (Pratt 2007, 4).

[160] "Autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression—these are some of the literate arts of the contact zone. Miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning—these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone. They all live among us today in the transnationalized metropolis of the United States and are becoming more widely visible, more pressing, and [...] more decipherable to those who once would have ignored them in defense of a stable, centered sense of knowledge and reality" (Pratt 1999, 4).

influenced by the different people and experiences with which he comes in contact.[161] Since the poet draws on his creative process and history, his teaching is inevitably informed by his own poetic practice. In this light, the workshop might also be seen as a privileged window on all those dynamics that concur in Torres's poetic endeavor. It is like having the chance to "peek behind the curtains," to see, at least partially, how a poem comes to life, to assist to those phases that are normally hidden from the reader/spectator's eye, and which the critics are supposed to investigate *ex post facto*. The new elements of this year were mainly three: setting, time, and participants. Whereas it was generally held in the Lower East Side of Manhattan,[162] this year the location was the historic Telephone Building at 291 Main Street, Beacon (NY). The same two-floor building, that in 1907 hosted the Hudson River Telephone Company, today "is home, once again, to those in the business of communication," with its "twenty-first century tenants [who] connect via internet with local, national and international clients."[163] The workshop took place at the "conference room or kitchen expansion" (Beacon TB, 2019) situated on the left corner of the second-floor room (European first floor)—a space rent during week-ends for private activities.[164] The small room with white walls and a light-brown wooden floor has two big windows that look on the main street, and from which a lot of light fills in the inside. The adjacent small kitchen has another big window on the same street that, when the door is left open, contributes to light up both the two rooms, giving the idea of a cozy living space rather than an office.

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[161] The context of the workshop (formal or informal), its purpose and organization, as well as the number of participants, are significant in the definition of the teaching strategies and activities, that need to be adapted to every single situation. Edwin Torres, for example, would have taught the same workshop at Naropa University the following June. For that occasion, activities would have lasted five days, all day, and should have been inserted in a wider teaching program. He also had to organize a system of monitoring and evaluation while creating an adequate progression of difficulties and goals to submit to the students.

[162] In the 1990s this area was "the Greenwich Village" for the boom of slam and performance poetry.

[163] I consider the historical connotation of the place an important added value to the whole activity, even if not made on purpose, because, considering the "purpose" of the building, together with the fact that poetry is a literary form of communication, eventually, it seemed to play at home. From the web site of the Telephone Building. From now on all the quotations from here will be referred to as (Beacon TB, 2019).

[164] There are photos of the space on the website both at the sections "Gallery" and "News".

The workshop was scheduled for each Saturday of April, and it took two hours in the morning, from 10:00 to 12:00 am. In this way, who was coming from the city had enough time to reach the place. leaving from Grand Central Terminal, heading to Poughkeepsie Station, it took almost 1h and 30 minutes by train to get to Beacon Station and, from there, another 20 minutes walking to the Telephone Building. It was a very pleasant ride that I lived as a part of the "workshop experience," since the "timely-diluted" schedule of the meetings (once a week), coupled with the considerable distance to cover along the banks of the river Hudson, increased the perception of the workshop as a parenthesis from the routine, as well as from the chaotic and sometimes overwhelming City. Besides, the train ride facilitated a relaxed, almost meditative state of mind, that later would have been recreated during the workshop. This temporal and spatial discontinuity was made on purpose, as a sort of teaching experimentation in intertwining formal and informal training. Instead of the canonical four- or even more days-intense workshop, he decided to soothe the stress out from the activity and to give us enough time to sediment and elaborate the information. The combination of self-practice with group activities characterized the main teaching strategy. During class, we came in contact with different kinds of stimuli, information as well as techniques on which we could have practiced independently, each one by herself, for the rest of the week.[165] In addition, Torres wanted us to pay attention to our own "system of information processing," in order not to just focus on the task for the next week, but to fully experience the creative process while being immersed in the everyday life. It was a way to become more aware of all those activities in which we are normally involved but to which we do not pay much attention, even if they are "part of us," and constantly influence our behaviors and actions.

[165] "Training is logically if not always experientially the first step of the proto-performance. [...] In informal training, the novice acquires skills over time by absorbing what is going on. Mistakes are corrected as part of daily life. This training method can be very effective because what is learned is integrated into the student's overall life. This is the way infants learn to speak. This is how most people learn how to 'fit in' to their families and social groups" (Schechner 2013, 228).

A very calm and informal pace characterized the whole workshop, giving almost the feeling of a group of friends gathering to write poetry, rather than a formal course. And this is was, in part, due to the context —outside any academic venue, there was no hurry or need to fulfill any curricular requirement— and in part, due to the members themselves. This time the group was very small: the poet and organizer of the workshop, Edwin Torres, a Nuyorican man in his early sixties, that served as the conductor of the activities, and three white women of different ages as partakers. Ruth Danon is a Jewish poet and writer in her seventies, whose works have been published in well-known journals and anthologies, like *Mead, BOMB, The Paris Review*, *Fence*, *The Boston Review*, *3rd Bed*, *Crayon,* and *Best American Poetry* (2002). She has thought, directed and founded creative and writing programs as well as workshops for the NYU; among the many activities as teacher and consultant, she is an active supporter of the literary community of the Hudson Valley, for which she has organized the Spring Street Reading Series.[166] Susan Osberg is choreographer, dancer, teacher, and writer. An interdisciplinary dance performance artist, as she defines herself, whose work "is informed by both spiritual and healing practices."[167] She taught and organized many dance theater workshops, symposiums, and festivals around the world, performing together with artists like Lucinda Childs, Linda Tarnay, Manuel Alum, Paul Sanasardo, Kazuko Hirabayashi, and Helen McGehee. Artistic director of her own company, "Workwith Dancers Company," her works are informed by experimentations with poetry, music, and visual artists. Along with her artistic career, she also worked as a professor of Dance at Simon Fraser University, NYU, and Bard College. From an ethnic perspective, she might be considered a member of the wasp American society. Other three people joined the group occasionally: a young white male in his early forties, named Ory, who is an experimental performer and conceptual artist that attained only

[166] See the "bio" section at Ruth Danon's official web-site: http://www.ruthdanon.com/

[167] See Susan Osberg's official web-site: http://www.susanosberg.com/susanosberg.com/Welcome.html

the first day; a friend of Susan, a white middle-aged woman who came just the second day; and a white male in his thirties, Stephan, aspirant writer and conceptual artist, who joined us the second and the fourth day. And finally, me, an Italian Ph.D. student with no experience at all in any field whatsoever (poetry, writing, performance, dance, theater, music, etc.). Thus, in this specific context, the ethnic element has to be analyzed with other aspects, like age, gender, professional experience, and language-cultural belonging, which played a greater role. The group was made of people who already had experience in writing and performance and who wanted to overtake their writer's block or simply to improve their writing skills. For the poets, the workshop thus became the chance to re-discover writing through a different creative lens: to get out of the comfort zone and experience other approaches and techniques. All the same, for artists and performers, the workshop was a chance to dig into, and strengthen their writing, while experimenting with new possibilities for their art (i.e.: dance, theatre, painting) to mingle with poetry. For me, it was the chance to participate for the first time in a workshop on poetry and to write poetry in a language that is not mine —not to mention the fact, that I could share the experience with professionals, from whose knowledge and capacities I could also benefit. Furthermore, the lack of any form of evaluation (in terms of text or exam), and the notable difference of age among us, coupled with the reduced number of participants, created the conditions for a welcoming and supporting atmosphere. "Connection" and "collaboration" were the two key aspects of the entire experience. Since the very beginning, everybody felt enough comfortable to openly show weaknesses in writing or performing (or both of them), but they were also ready to address the weak points of the others, suggesting possible changes and improvements.

4.1. Workshop's Structure and analysis

The informal and familiar tone of the "workshop gathering" —"writing by the participants, criticism, and general discussion of 'artistic questions'" (Hunley 2007, 22)— was also due to the hybrid nature of a course that combined two different pedagogical strategies. A rhetoric-based model of self-education,[168] together with a performance-oriented coaching system, which is developed in five steps —listening, action, analysis, writing, and revision. These five elements inform the activities proposed in each class and constitute the organizing structure of the whole workshop as well. Besides, the concern to "'open people up' to new experiences, helping them recognize and develop their own possibilities," looking "toward 'the new' both personally and artistically," makes Edwin Torres's workshop a viable model of "performance workshop" (Schechner 2013, 233-234). In performance, the workshop, together with training and rehearsal, constitutes the proto-performance, which is the first phase of the performance process.[169] In this case, however, "the active research phase of the performance process" is not oriented "to explore processes that will be useful in rehearsal and in making performances" (Schechner 2013, 233), but in dealing with poetic writing as a performance in itself. In these terms, the process of writing poetry is experienced through performance as well as performance. Furthermore, the

[168] The reference is to Walt Whitman's influence in the ideation of the workshop as the model on which the first creative writing program was created at Iowa University in 1897, with the title "Verse-Making Class," as well as to the following harsh debate which questioned the validity of creative writing programs as well as their Whitmanian legacy. For more on the ongoing debate, see Mayers 2005, Hunley 2007, Graff 2009, McGurl 2009, Menand 2009, Batuman 2010, Shivani 2011 and 2017. Moreover, "self-education" here reminds Whitman's account of a "democratic sublime" which "emphasizes the affective and autopoietic dimensions of political life" (Frank 2007, 402). See also Hoffman 2011, ch. I.

[169] According to Richard Schechner's model, performance is a "time-space-sequence" process, which develops in three phases (proto-performance, performance, and aftermath), each one divided into sub-sequences, for a total of ten parts. Proto-performance is divided into three phases: training, workshop, and rehearsal. Performance counts of four elements: warm-up, public performance, events that are at the support of the public performance, and the cooldown phase. For the aftermath, Schechner lists critical responses, archives, and memories. Although this model is not prescriptive, this three-phase process applies to all kinds of performances. See Schechner 2013, ch. 7.

coaching system[170] offers a tailor-made solution for each person while providing a supportive environment to go beyond the limits and vulnerabilities of the writing process together with other "companions."[171] This strategy is followed by many poets that, next to their professional writing, make their expertise available to others, as in the case of poet, performer, and coach, Marty McConnell. On her website, she presents her workshop on poetry, "Vox Ferus," as "designed to build a community of writers and performers interested in improving their craft by investing in and exploring others' poetry as well as their own."[172] Community bonding also helps to the process of revision, encouraging the growth of critical thinking: to wit, to learn how to pay attention and question a poem or, in McConnell's terms, "how to break down a poem" (McConnell 2019). While sharing Marty McConnell's standpoint —"to meet people where they are, and help them to push their limits" (McConnell 2019)— Edwin Torres also applies to his coaching the influence of a New Age "focus on meditation, whole-body healing, and the integration of many different religious and philosophical systems," that is typical of venues like the Esalen Institute or Naropa University (Schechner 2013, 233).

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[170] There is an increasing attention and use of spoken word and performance poetry as teaching tools to help students improve their linguistic and elocution skills. But they also become a way to bridge the distance and aversion that students generally tend to have for poetry, since it is perceived as a irksome literary genre. Poet and college professor Amber Flora Thomas, for example, has noticed the increasing appeal of performance on students, who try to break poetic forms by mixing poetry with forms and structures of other artistic fields, above all, hip hop music. For more on the topic, see also Weiss and Herndon 2001, Burn 2003, Ellis et al. 2003, Stovall 2006, and Rudd 2012.

[171] "Poetry leads us deeper into ourselves and from there, further out into the world with keener understanding of our place in it. *This is* how poetry makes the world better./Not because your particular poem will change someone's mind about a critical issue, though it might. [...] **Here's the thing: *You don't have to do it alone.*** [...] **Here's the other thing: *You don't have to be great already*.**/Hell, you don't have to be great at all. But maybe you are! Or maybe you could be./The fact is, it's the work that counts./It's the *work* that changes the world./**Let's do it together.**" From the section "coach" inside poet Marty McConnel's official website (italics and bolds in the original). https://martyoutloud.com/coaching

[172] From the section "Vox Ferus" of her official website: https://martyoutloud.com/voxferus
From now on, quoted as (McConnell, VF, 2019).

The first day began with a very short presentation of the participants. Sat in a circle, we just said our name and the reason for our interest in that workshop. Once we had introduced ourselves to the poet and the other participants, we moved the chairs in another room to have more freedom of movement. At that point, we started to warm up. All five in a circle, somebody barefoot, we started to walk stretching arms and hands. Every time Torres said "freeze" we should stop where we were and stay still for a couple of breaths (those who wanted could close their eyes). After a few rounds, Edwin turned on the recording of bells to accompany the walking and the stretching. And with a last "freeze" we sat on the floor to the point where we had stopped.

That was the beginning of the first activity, which was divided into two parts. In the first part, we were asked to tell a dream. By turns, each one should stand up, enter the circle, in one minute tell a dream, and then, go back and sit in the circle again. There was no particular order to follow. When someone wanted to start, he/she should just wait for the previous person to sit before standing up and entering the circle. Only one person needed to be standing in the center of the circle, while all the others had to look and listen to that person. No comments were allowed. The silence could be broken only by the teller. The second part was a re-doing of the first one. Again, we had to repeat what we had just done. Alternately, each person should stand up and enter the circle. But this time, instead of telling a dream, everyone had to mime a story, that should be made up of the pieces of all the dreams told before, except for the teller's dream. We could only use body, face, and gestures, with neither words nor sounds of any genre. While the person was miming the dreams-collage-story, the rest of the group took notes of what they were seeing, alternating descriptive parts with personal considerations on what was observed, and/or any thoughts, feelings, emotions, or impressions that the scene was raising.

After the last mimicking, the second activity began. This time, we had to randomly walk in the room while reading aloud the notes we had taken in the earlier exercise. We were asked to read loudly and without any interruption until the end of the exercise. After a couple of minutes, Torres began to play numerous recordings. One track followed the other until there were so many tracks to play simultaneously, that it was quite hard to discriminate them: first, the same recording of bells that was played in the previous exercise, then some electronic music, and finally jazz music. The result was the overlapping of sounds and music with our voices. At the "sonic apex" of the exercise, when the room was filled with all these different sounds, Torres turned down the volume of the many recordings to give instructions for the second part of the activity. We should re-do the same thing: reading aloud our notes while walking through the room in all directions. But this time, he would have taken away our notes, so that, from a certain point, we had to remember what we had read. This phase was shorter than the previous one. All the recordings were played again from the beginning to the end. And this time, we had the feeling that the tracks had been played at a louder volume. Once Torres had taken the notes away from the last person, the exercise lasted other eight minutes. It took five/six minutes for us to stop repeating aloud what we remembered of our notes. Then, one by one we stopped speaking, but we continued to walk and to listen to the recordings that played for the remaining two minutes. In both phases of the exercise, Torres walked among us in silence, now following one for a while, and then following another person for another few seconds before passing to somebody else. Sometimes, he just stopped at one corner of the room, observing us, just to jump back in the group to guide the action toward another direction. As soon as everybody was "attuned" to the new modality, he left the action to observe us again. Towards the end of the exercise, Torres threw to the floor some big sheets of greyish

paper (the size of four A4 sheets of paper put together to form a big rectangle) and some markers of different colors as well. In this way, we had to walk and speak, avoiding to step on them or to bump into the people as well. When the recording of soft jazz music began to play, all the other tracks were turned off one after the other. The change in music and volume marked the beginning of the third exercise.

Sitting on the floor we were asked to write anything that crossed our mind in that precise moment, and that was also related to the activity just concluded: thoughts, impressions, images, words, etc. We could use how many sheets of paper we wanted as well as markers. Then, we read what we had just written. The reading was followed by a few minutes of observations and comments on the writing: how the space in the sheets of papers had been used, the colors that were used (if they were), the relation between form and writing (or color and form), what had been written (similarities and differences among the texts), and what had not been written (empty spaces). The comments were followed by a round of reflections on the previous exercise (walking while reading aloud the notes taken, with the many sounds on the background). Each one reported the impressions on the activity: how we related to the different voices and sounds, if there were particular sounds or voices who inspired or disturbed us, if we could hear our voice, what walking, speaking and listening simultaneously was like, what difficulties we encountered in doing the exercise, and if our perception of the music, voices, and/or sounds had changed (change in volume, or in rhythm, etc.). While the music played for the entire activity, the observations and comments happened in the silence of the room. Not many sounds came from the outside, and so our voices seemed to sound even louder in the silence which followed the mix of different types of music and sounds that were played before. With the last comment, we moved the chairs back into the room for the fourth activity: the interview.

Divided into two couples (Ory and Susan, Ruth and me), we had three minutes each to interview the person in front of us, and to take notes of the answers. After the three-minutes-interview, we had other two minutes to annotate any detail we could on the visual aspect of the person we had just interviewed. All the notes we had taken in these activities became the material on which we were supposed to work during the following week. They were the raw material for the first writing task: we had to extrapolate from our notes a poem of ten lines to present the next Saturday.

Once the "homework" had been assigned, we put aside notebooks and pens, and moved the chairs to a side of the room to form a circle again for the fifth activity: "animals." As in the beginning, we walked in a circle with a slow and calm gait, stretching harms and shaking hands. Every time Torres said "stop," we should stay still where we were, close our eyes and take two deep breaths. Then, with our eyes closed, we had to think about an animal and imagined to be that animal. When we were ready, we had to move around the room, acting as we were that animal, and every time that we came across with somebody, we should state who we were (the name of the animal) and what we could do like that animal. When everybody had introduced him/herself to everybody else, we were asked to change animals. This time we should embody the "opposite" of the animal we were before (for example, if you were a cat, you would have chosen the mouse, etc.) and repeat the exercise all over again, but this time with one exception. Instead of saying what we could do, we had to declare what we wanted to do. When the last person had introduced his/her animal, we had to change the animal again. For the last choice, we had to choose a fantastic or mythological animal and repeat the same activity all over again with another difference: we had to say in just a few words how we felt being it. Once this activity was completed, with the few minutes left, we sat back on the chairs to sketch out the

second task for the next Saturday: to write a one-page play with the three animals we had personified as the only characters. In the meanwhile, Torres was writing on a whiteboard what those animals represented, next to a schematic outline of the main points of that first encounter.

1st animal: what you do
2nd ||: what you want to do
3rd ||: how you feel

LISTENING
IS
RE-GENERATIVE

GIVES BACK
what you put in

How to listen
to a $\binom{loud}{silent}$ world

where are
your ears?

The other three days of the workshop were organized in the same way, reproducing this cycle of opposing actions: movement and stasis, collective action and individual reflection, sound and silence, standing and sitting, etc. The playful interactions among the participants were structured within a set of activities aimed at stimulating communication and artistic collaboration, while making the distinct phases of the creative process visible. For this reason, Edwin Torres's workshop seems to share certain similarities with Lawrence Halprin and Jim Burns's "RSVP cycles"[173] workshop model:

> "The RVSP cycles is a model of creativity that organizes and makes visible methods for people to work together in groups. The model is participatory and cyclical rather than hierarchical and linear; it emphasizes ongoingness and process, not sequence and goal attainment. It focuses on people as participants, not as mechanisms, tools, or inert recipients of products." (Halprin and Burns 1974, 27)

[173] "R. Resources, which are what you have to work with. These include human and physical resources and their motivation and aims./S. Scores, which describe the process leading to the performance./V. Valuaction, which analyses the results of action and possible selectivity and decisions. The term 'valuaction' is one coined to suggest the action-oriented as well as the decision-oriented aspects of V. in the cycle./P. Performance, which is the resultant of scores and is the style of the process" (Halprin 2014, 42).

Moving from the premise "that people have creative potential and that, when they interact in groups, this creativity can be unleashed and enhanced," the workshop becomes the framework in which the creative process is enabled (Halprin and Burns 1974, 27-28). This means that the sequence of activities "provides a way for many people to work together in groups productively rather than chaotically and to be aware of the process while they are involved in it"; besides, since "it is cyclical, it accepts input and change from each person rather than rejecting it if it does not fit" (Halprin and Burns 1974, 28). This inclusive and permissive context creates a playful atmosphere, in which spontaneous eruptions organically blend with scheduled activities, insofar as the experience of writing is also mediated by the experience of playing. And play is an intrinsic aspect of performing "because it embodies the 'as if,' the make-believe" which is proper of the "in-between" time-space in every play, playing, and performance as well (Schechner 2013, 89). During the workshop, the experience of playing leads the participants into a flow,[174] an "autotelic experience,"[175] in which the actor/performer experiences the complete involvement with his/her activity. Everybody does what everyone else is doing, while everybody is merging with the activity in which they are engaged.[176] In this light, the moments of reflection, observation, and sharing between the different exercises are pivotal to gain a certain awareness of what is happening. In this state of active consciousness, which is generated by "the tensions between individual prowess and team effort," players have control over the activity they are playing even if they are immersed in it (Schechner 2013, 98). This apparent contradiction actually reveals two complementary

[174] "Flow occurs when the player becomes one with the playing. 'The dance danced me'" (Schechner 2013, 98). See also Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 1990, and Natsoulas 1992.

[175] "This activity presents constant challenges. There is no time to get bored or to worry about what may or may not happen. A person in such a situation can make full use of whatever skills are required and receives clear feedback to his actions" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 36).

[176] "In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 36).

aspects of the same phenomenon. In the flow, we assist at the dissolution of "the boundary between the interior psychological self and the performed activity" (Schechner 2013, 97). In this "intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (Winnicott 2005, 3), creativity originates to be later molded and re-drawn into culture-codified schemes and artistic and literary models.

All the same, play has a deep relationship with poetry too. "*Poiesis*, in fact, is a play-function," "a dream of philosophic love," that "lies beyond seriousness, on that more primitive and original level where the child, the animal, the savage and the seer belong, in the region of dream, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter" (Huizinga 1949, 119). In ancient civilizations, poetry had both a social and liturgical function, combining esoteric doctrine, wisdom, and ritual.[177] However, the creative force of poetry, which "is rooted in a function even more primordial than culture itself, namely play" (Huizinga 1949, 132), became a matter of dispute in the ancient Greek agon between poets and philosophers, which ended with the poet's expulsion from Plato's Republic. Such an ouster symbolized the purge of the playful-mode in poetry, so that, once its most erratic and unconstrained aspect (*paidia*) was removed, poetry could have finally been subordinated to "the serious and moral truth of metaphysics."[178] For this reason, poetic practices of performance poetry —in particular slam, for its high level of competitivity— seem to represent a return to that "Hellenic prerational values," that reproduces the ancestral playful-matrix of poetry, but in a modern key (Spariosu 1989, 69). Without the intention to recapitulate the account of the historical transformation of poetry as a means of knowledge-making within the discourse of power in the western tradition, in this

[177] "All antique poetry is at one and the same time ritual, entertainment, artistry, riddle-making, doctrine, persuasion, sorcery, soothsaying, prophecy, and competition" (Huizinga 1949, 120).

[178] "Whenever prerational values attempt to regain cultural supremacy, what has been repressed under the name 'literature' or 'art' as mere play and illusion also reasserts its claim to knowledge and truth, that is, its claim to power. Faced with this challenge or threat, the modern philosophers may react in two ways: they either reenact the Platonic suppression of prerational values, relegating them again to the realm of "mere" art and play (the case of Kant); or they wholeheartedly embrace these values turning literature or art into an effective weapon against their own philosophical opponents [Derrida, Heidegger, Nietzche]" (Spariosu 1989, 162).

context, the reference to play provides a better understanding of the role of the body in the experiential process of writing poetry as a form of performance. In those activities, dynamism, connectivity, and permeability of the body were experienced as the primordial point of origin of the poem. Therefore, actions like walking, listening, speaking aloud, sitting on the floor, touching the wall, or just standing still represented the first step in the process of familiarization with the open multiplicity of our own body. To listen to the tactile-kinesthetic body, thus, was to become aware of a different form of knowledge, which is non-cognitive and non-linguistically shaped. For this reason, taking notes at the end of an exercise, commenting someone else's work, and writing down impressions, feelings, sensations, ideas, intuitions, etc… should be seen as the attempt to translate the information gathered from the tactile-kinesthetic body into the language system. This passage gives the "first-hand material" for the mind to start the cognitive process of writing.

The second step takes place outside the class. It is the individual stage of working on that material, elaborating those pieces of writing, in the attempt to craft them in what should resemble a well-known codified literary form: a short story, a dialogue, a play, an interview, a monologue, or the first twenty lines of a poem. At this stage, the chosen form serves as an "anchor point" for the following writings. Each step becomes an act of transition from one form to another, as well as an act of reduction, refinement, and incisiveness. The result of this personal elaboration is shown at the beginning of the next meeting. This is the moment of editing. Since no one sees the text, the reading becomes crucial —especially when English is not your first language, and words sound differently, dissonant with familiar melodic or rhythmic patterns. After the "collective editing" of each written piece, the process starts all over again, with different activities to carry out, and more notes to take and to add to the writing.

Even if Torres's workshop is not the exemplification of the whole field of teaching/coaching poetry writing, yet it is useful to better understand the "action-creation" relation from a physical perspective. The workshop, indeed, brings light to the constant and porous relation between what is bodily, emotionally, kinetically perceived and what is cognitively elaborated, displaying how the non-cognitive mode continues to work, passing information that is acquired and processed by the mind only in part. However, what is left outside of the cognitive mode does not disappear. It stays there, affecting our thinking, creativity, and writing as well. Like an iceberg, our mind can control only what emerges out of the surface, while all the rest remains under the water. In this light, the workshop gives resonance to the body, which is the most transparent medium in the writing process.

Chapter IV

A "Remediation" of Poetry

To me…there's no such a thing as a performance poem.
Every poem is …can be a performance poem.
Every poem exists on the page, so it's a written poem…
and every poem can come off the page however you want to do.
You can interpret it with dance, and music, and film, or
you can …mh…. just read it straight, with absolutely no…. dynamic differences…[179]

1. "To Be Twice as an Outsider"

This year, for two months I took part in a great variety of live events about poetry, that included a workshop, book launches, tributes, readings, open mics, slam, and different kinds of events, which were characterized by the intermedia combination of poetry with other art forms (hip-hop, jazz music, dance, painting, etc.). Although most of the time I was a member of the audience, in two occasions I had the chance to participate in first person. I began in April, "the poetry month," with Edwin Torres's workshop both as partaker and researcher of that specific activity. And I concluded my experience as one of the readers at "The *Song of Myself* Marathon," which was held the first Sunday of June, in conclusion of the International Whitman Week Seminar. For that occasion, and in honor of Whitman's bicentenary, I read the Italian translation of section twenty-seven of the well-known poem.

[179] From my interview to poet Bob Holman, April 11th, 2019.

Before this stay in NYC, my knowledge of American live performance poetry was only mediated by videos of the poetic performances uploaded on web platforms and digital archives like *YouTube*, *PennSound*, *Botton Poetry*, and *UbuWeb*. Thus, once there, I looked for the events hosted in some of the historical poetic venues of the city, like The Poetry Project, the Nuyorican Poets Café, the Bowery Poetry Club, The Poets House, and the Cave Canem organization. I started to check their websites on a regular basis, as well as the webpages of some poets I was already studying. During one of these events, I found out that the Schomburg Center for African American Studies was organizing many happenings (from poetry readings to conferences). Besides, talking to people (writers, performers, or simply poetry enthusiasts) I was told about one on-line service offered by the *Poets & Writers* no profit organization that, among many other activities, has a webpage with an "Events" section where it is possible to find any event related to literature. Upon typing the name of a city, a list of readings, talks, meetings, tributes, book launches, etc. appears. You can also see events that have already taken place or are going to happen in the following days. It is extremely useful, especially for those like me who are not familiar with the City nor its poetic venues. It was, in fact, my first time in New York, the first direct experience in one of the most important and historical poetic scenes of the United States, as well as my first field work ever. For this reason, the choice of the performances was done mainly on a personal preference. I tried to explore as much as I could by attending a great variety of events (from the most formal to more informal ones), meeting the poets I was already studying, and discovering new ones.

I am perfectly aware that for a professional and effective ethnographic research it is required a wider range of time, as well as a far more conspicuous amount of cases for the analysis to be quantitatively and qualitatively significative. However, this research is not meant to outline trends, schools, movements, or to explain the complexity of a whole poetic system. What I am presenting here is the analysis of poetic performances that, working in

parallel to the theoretical presentation made in the previous chapters, proves two main points. First, performance is an intrinsic characteristic of poetry, and not only an external element that deeply influences the poetic praxis: performance aspects, in fact, can be found even in those poetic texts that are not properly considered and meant to be performed, since writing itself is performance. Second, given the interconnected and intermedia modalities that poets adopt to create, present, and circulate their poetic and artistic effort, a more holistic and inclusive approach to the analysis of live performances, written poems, audio-video recordings, etc., is required. Because, although every single manifestation of the poem (poetic event) might be studied per se, they are all part of a more complex and dynamic system in which poets have access to innumerable possibilities and media to perform their poetry. This means that collective as well as single performances become moments of a creative flow which is visible through the performance lens. The same may be said for the recent, but very intense, history of spoken word, slam, and performance poetry: after almost three decades, it is already possible to identify two main phases. The first one coincides with the beginnings of the revolutionary movement, that, at the end of the eighties, put at the center of the poetic discourse elements like, the spoken word, body, and social gathering as inherent aspects of poetry, and not just as mere collateral effects of some exuberant poet. The recovery of orality, coupled with the epistemological change in interpretation —from poetry as a limited, finished, and bounded genre to an open, porous, and dynamic process— shocked the academy while reawakening the people's interest for poetry, which suddenly appeared more varied and "humanized" than ever. As Bob Holman recalls, one of the merits of slam was to make people discover how many varieties of poetry exist, and that they could choose what they liked the most, as in music.[180]

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[180] "The origins of the poetry slam were to show that there were as many kinds of poetry as there are of music…. People say they don't like poetry and they are…. considered…. eh…I get it, I understand what you're talkin'…. but people say they don't like music, I say, really?! What kind of music don't… You know, do, do you like country western, or opera, or hip hop…or, or…or, or, or heavy metal, you know…. or African music, or… whatever,

The second phase is strictly connected to the increasing pervasiveness of digital technologies. Electronic media offered new creative possibilities as well as new stages and audiences for the poets to explore. Books, social media, web pages, and live or recorded performances let poems and poets travel across the borders of real and virtual spaces, creating numerous opportunities for artistic collaborations. In this atmosphere of technological innovation, poetry not only displays its many varieties, but also reveals its different cohorts and communities springing up in response of the controversial social and political situation:

> The United States is in war with itself… the political situation with Trump as president is…uhm…**so** divisive, thaaaat…you know… for poetry, it's in times like this that people turn to poetry, to the essence of meaning… uhm…ah…there's ehm… […] in MfA programs, which had become like a "Ponzi scheme" for poetry. Everybody wants to go to the school. And what you do when you graduate, the only thing to do is to teach more people how to do what you're doing, you know… And yet, now what's happening is… it becomes such a bunch of cohorts, a bunch of, of… ehm… of groups of poets, who are really in their youthful… uhm… uhm… energies, just **exploding** with the truth of what's going on a ground level at the United States right now. It's an extremely exciting time for poetry. (Holman 2019; stresses and bolds refers to the emphasis and increased volume of the spoken speech)

In such a rich and vibrant climate, poetry makes its many aesthetic outcomes available to work on many levels. It serves as a diverse kind of narration and comment on what happens on a daily basis; it enables different forms of social and political criticism, as well as trauma elaboration, memory formation, and identity construction. And it also fosters, more or less overtly, community bonding on the basis of common ethnic and cultural background, and/or artistic affiliation. In this light, where you perform and with whom is as tellingly as your own specific work — what you say and how you say it. A clear example can be find in three common kinds of performance poetry: tributes to famous poets, book launches, and hybrid performances in which poetry entwines with other art forms.

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whatever… you know, so… But there are those many types of poetry as well, if you can find them. So, when the poetry slam, when we started that in the Nuyorican, when it re-opened…that was the idea: have poets from all different aesthetics, so that you could hear what you like" (Holman 2019).

2. Tributes: the poet as "object-protagonist"

Tributes have been perfect occasions to get familiar with some of the many poetic communities of New York City. The collective and willful show of respect, gratitude, and affection to a poet whose personality, work, and actions have had a great impact on the literary community in general, and on those who are celebrating him/her in particular, has both an aesthetic and social value. It represents the chance to re-discover the poet through the different voices that make his/her work live again, although in a different way, given the fact that another reading is another interpretation of the same work. It also champions and indirectly advertise the work of other poets, who generally read excerpts or whole poems of their own, together with those of the poets they are celebrating. Moreover, the rhythmic and regular alternation of readers, who share anecdotes, memories, and jokes, following a certain organization scheme, creates the ritual of the tribute: an almost liturgic celebration in which a community, through the celebration of the poet, celebrates itself.

2.1. Lawrence Ferlinghetti

On Wednesday, March 27, 2019, a tribute to Lawrence Ferlinghetti took place at the St. Mark Poetry Project. This event, entitled "Omniscient Tape Recorder: Lawrence Ferlinghetti Edition," saw a small group of seven poets[181] celebrating the centenary of Ferlinghetti's birthday with a reading of Ferlinghetti's most famous poems that lasted almost two hours. It was a celebration in the celebration. As anticipated on the webpage of the event, and later on that evening it was reasserted by the host, the choice to celebrate Ferlinghetti's centenary at The Poetry Project a few days in advance had a double meaning. First, it recalled that "on October 19, 1966, The Poetry Project

[181] Filip Marinovich, Steve Dalachinsky, Mary Jane Dunphe, John S. Hall, Lee Ranaldo, Bob Rosenthal, Janet Hamill.

[had] hosted Lawrence Ferlinghetti for [their] first Wednesday Night Reading, to an audience of 1,200 (with 500 turned away at the door)."[182] And secondly, Ferlinghetti's night of reverie was presented as the special edition of the series "Omniscient Tape Recorder" at The Poetry Project. The series started and curated by Judah Rubin in 2016, as a Monday Night Series, showcased The Poetry Project's history, and to encouraged "engagement with the organization's archival collection" (Ferlinghetti in *OTR* 2019). The vast collection of The Poetry Project, which has been "recently processed by the Library of Congress," includes over "4,000 hours of audio." The Monday Night Series was meant to give relevance to the audience's relationship with poetry. For this reason, the series was organized in the form of single events, "in which participants were asked to choose particularly rich poems and discuss their historical impact, the texture and grain of the work's recitation, and the impact of these readings, poems, and people on the landscape of poetry and art" (Ferlinghetti in *OTR* 2019).

The setting of the event was The Poetry Project's room at St. Mark church. At the entrance there was a table to sign in[183] with the flyers of that reading night, together with a pile of copies of *The Poetry Project Journal*. Behind it, near the fire place, another table with beverages and few snacks. The center of the room was occupied by two blocks of chairs oriented towards the only wall of the room provided with windows. The rows were interrupted from time to time by the white columns of the room. In front of the central part of the wall, in-between two windows, there was a wooden stand with a microphone for the poets. At the same level of the wooden stand, a black piano stood at the right corner of the room. The contrast of colors, black and white, seemed to involuntarily provide the background for the reading. The whiteness of the

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[182] See the webpage of the event in The Poetry Project web site.

[183] Although the reading was free, reserving a seat in advance was required.

wall, and the columns, coupled with the bright lights, created a sharp contrast with the black color of the piano (even if set in a marginal position) and the darkness that came through the windows from the outside. Moreover, all the poets dressed in total black or with dark colors. This fact contributed in highlighting even more their figures during the reading —especially in the case of Mary Jane Dunphe, who put a white gilet on a total black outfit, thus creating a double contrast.[184] The tripartition of the space in entrance, the chairs for the audience, and the wooden stand for the poets, helped to create a sort of stage-like division, in spite of the absence of a real stage.

The audience was prevalently white, with an average age of sixty years and very few young people. The gender composition was quite balanced between female and male members of the audience, in contrast with that of the performers: only two women on seven performers, and all of them were white. Following the tradition inaugurated by the Cave Canem poetic organization, the poets sat among the audience, to stand up and reach the wooden stand only when introduced by the poet who preceded. Those who were also friends, tended to overtly show a certain degree of intimacy and longstanding friendship, by slightly teasing and hugging one another. Since the very beginning the atmosphere was clearly informal. The place and the simple "buffet" at the entrance contributed to a general atmosphere of warm welcome. The tribute seemed to be organized on the model of a gathering of friends. Many of the participants (both members of the audience and poets) already knew themselves, and this favored a continuous interaction between poets and audience throughout the event. While waiting for the tribute to start, some groups of people started to form, generally around some of the poets who would have later read, or among the regulars of The Poetry Project. There was a big movement of people from one group to the

[184] Pictures of the event are still available on the webpage presentation of the reading <https://www.poetryproject.org/events/omniscient-tape-recorder-lawrence-ferlinghetti-edition/>

other, and towards the members of the organizations, who were quite busy in the final preparations for the reading, welcoming the arriving people, and adjusting organizational details with the speakers. And then, other people like me, who were totally new to the environment and to the people, simply took a seat, looking around and trying to get familiar with the place. Lots of smiles, some shy or embarrassed, others welcoming, others simply for etiquette. Since it was my first tribute ever, for me, the "tribute ritual" began at the very entrance, with a young girl in her mid-twenties greeting me and asking my name. Once I had my seat, the exploration started.

When it was time for the tribute to start, the executive director of The Poetry Project, Kyle Dacuyan, who served as host of the event, approached the mic and welcomed the people present and the poets who were about to read. He briefly presented the project, that started in 2016 in collaboration with the Library of Congress, to catalogue the enormous audio-recording collection of readings made at The Poetry Project. Then, he recalled Lawrence Ferlinghetti's first reading there and the astonishing success it had. Before introducing the first poet, the host quickly explained the order of the sequence of readings. After a pause of few seconds of silence, the host introduced Lawrence Ferlinghetti as the first speaker to his own tribute event. And the recorded audio of that first reading at The Poetry Project began. Together with Ferlinghetti's voice the audience of that day was well audible too. In certain moments there was an overlapping of the laughs and applauses of the two audiences: the one recorded in the audio and the one present at the tribute night. Once the recorded voice of Ferlinghetti was stopped, the first poet approached the pulpit while a member of the staff sat at the piano.

With no introduction, *captatio benevolentiae*, or any sort of explanation, Filip Marinovich immediately started to read a poem by Ferlinghetti and, then continued

with some poems of his own. In the same way, all the other poets began with a poem or an extract of a poem by Ferlinghetti, or with a poem of their own inspired by the famous poet, and then continued reading their own work. Those who had met Ferlinghetti were used to tell short anecdotes about funny moments they spent with the poet —i.e. commenting on the friendship between Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg and the competition between the two, or again they remembered Ferlinghetti's support to the NY poetic community. Memories and jokes marked the rhythm of the night that tended to "swing" from cheerfulness and laughs to melancholic moments. During the readings the audience tended to listen carefully. In few occasions, you could see the poets reading while many members of the audience were reciting by heart some lines or the whole poem. And if a poet misread a word or a line, the audience was immediately ready to correct him/her. After a laughter, the poet, a little bit embarrassed, repeated the right word or line under the audience's approval. The audience was very supportive and attentive. And approval was showed continuously and in many ways —silent gestures for the poets to see, like nodding the head in an affirmative way, keeping the rhythm with the foot, or simply smiling. Sometimes, the interactions were more direct and audible. "Uh," "yeah," and "right" were the more common exclamations. And when the poets were stressing few lines or words, the response of the audience was always immediate. What I call the "audience's care" was particularly visible with those poets who were a little bit nervous (or, at least, less able to hide their nervousness). Normally, in these situations, poets tended to fix their eyes on the piece of paper or the screen of the smartphone, which were tightly hold with one or two hands. Only in very few occasions, and for just few seconds, they raised the eyes to look at an imprecise spot above the audience or to someone who is sitting in front of them. They tended to read very fast, and their uneasiness was not only audible

but almost "palpable." In those moments the audience stood quieter than usual, so as to give space to the poet and not make any pressure. It seemed that the audience was waiting for the poet to find his/her rhythm and balance. And after the first uncertain lines, you could literally see the transformation of the performance. Not only the poets were gaining more and more confidence, but they literally started to relax, moving the body in a more fluid way. Their reading acquired rhythm, and the body was participating in the reading itself. They moved the upper body back and forth, gesticulating with arms and hands, keeping the rhythm with one foot, or simply looking and smiling at the audience. They stopped to hang on the phone or the sheets of papers in their hands, and the tension was relieved, while the listening too became more pleasant. Some poets even tried to be more communicative with their facial expressions or by suddenly adding short jokes after a line or a word they particularly enjoyed. And when the poets were enough at ease to leave even just a little space for the audience to interact with them, the audience immediately took those little moments to respond. If the members of the audience knew the poet, they did not wait for him or her to allow any kind of interaction, they just took the initiative (especially at the beginning, before the reading started). Otherwise, they tended to be more "respectful," waiting for the poet to "ask" for their interaction.

2.2. Bobbie Louise Hawkins

Another tribute at The Poetry Project was hold on Wednesday, April 24, 2019, at 8 pm. This time a ticket was required to attend the poetry reading in honor of Bobbie Louise Hawkins, "author of more than twenty books of poetry and prose, who taught for more than thirty years at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at

Naropa University."[185] Prolific writer, Bobbie Louise Hawkins gave ten speeches at The Poetry Project during the years. That night, ten poets[186] commemorated Hawkins's person and work by reading extracts from her prose, interviews, and poems. Each reading was introduced by the speaker's account of a personal anecdote, or a memory, to explain the importance that Bobbie Hawkins had in his/her life, career, and formation —many of the readers had been previous students of Hawkins and, later, her colleagues at Naropa University. Like in Ferlinghetti's tribute, each poet introduced the next one, before taking his/her seat back in the audience. This time, there was a preeminence of female speakers with only one male reader present. The other two male poets, who could not take part in the tribute reading, sent their contributions to be read. The performers were all white with the exception of the African American poet Julie Patton.

The setting of the room was similar to the one adopted for the reading in Ferlinghetti's honor. At the entrance there was a table to register or to buy tickets, and behind it there was another table with beverages and food, which was positioned in front of the fireplace. Between the two tables there was another one covered with materials on and by Bobbie Louis Hawkins. Two blocks of chairs had been set in rows in front of a wooden stand with a microphone on its right side, which stood at few meters from the fireplace. Behind the wooden stand there was a white screen on which images of Bobbie Louise Hawkins, that Caroline Swanson had provided from Naropa University, were projected. The first row was very close to the wooden stand, almost dissolving any distance from the speakers and the audience. This time, everything was

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[185] See the webpage of the event in The Poetry Project web site. From now on, it will be referred as (Hawkins in *TPP*, 2019).

[186] Laura Henriksen (with a contribution from Jennifer Dunbar Dorn), Edwin Ambrose Bye (with a contribution from his father, Reed Bye), Brenda Coultas, Eleni Sikelianos (with a contribution from her husband, Laird Hunt), Iris Cushing, Barbara Henning (with a contribution from Lewis Warsh), Julie Patton, Pen (Penelope) Creeley (reading on behalf of Sarah Hall Creeley), Eileen Myles, and Anne Waldman.

positioned in front of one of the two longest walls of the room to take advantage of wider space. The result was the impression of a bigger room, with more chairs, and more people. Such a disposition also gave the idea that the turnout was even larger than the one at Ferlinghetti's night, even if in both occasions many had to stand against the wall or seat on the floor, for the lack of chairs. In addition, the organization of space was not clear-cut as in the previous occasion. Most of the room was taken by the two blocks of chairs which immediately caught the eye at the entrance. They also seemed to almost surmount the wooden stand, giving the initial impression of an overcrowded room. Only later, the informal tone of the reading gradually turned the first claustrophobic feeling into a sense of intimacy, like the kind it could be felt in a large family reunion.

The audience was completely white with an average age of fifty years old. Few young people were present, and almost all of them were graduate students. Since the very beginning, in fact, it was clear that we were assisting to the celebration of the writer and woman Bobbie Louise Hawkins by friends, colleagues, students, and her family members. The reading developed as a sequence of the speakers' personal memories and anecdotes about her which were interwoven with readings of passages from Hawkins' short stories, interviews, and poems.

Like the tribute to Ferlinghetti, the reading began and finished with a recording of Bobbie Louise Hawkins's speech, which is one of the thousands voice recordings hold at The Poetry Project that the Library of Congress has digitalized. On this occasion, Hawkins's recorded voice served a double purpose. It outlined the framework for all the other readings, and it was the only audible presence of Hawkins: her speaking voice was both the sign of her physical absence and the most direct testimony to her work, that ran in parallel with the reading and telling about her

writings which had been re-created by her friends, colleagues, and family members' memories. Indeed, the reading followed this double pattern of presence and absence.[187] At the beginning, the lights were switched off to let the projector light make the photographs of the poet more visible. At the same time, the silence in the audience allowed the poet's recorded voice to be better audible. At the end of the recording, as the lights filled the room the projector light faded away. Thus, when the host reached the wooden stand the poet's photos had already disappeared. In the same way, as the poet's voice ended with the end of the recording, the rumors in the room marked the audience's presence, while the host's voice introduced the event, talking about Bobbie Louise Hawkins's reading, and about her poetics deeply rooted in rhythm and resonance.[188] Two readings contributed to outline this difference between presence and absence in a more visible way, while turning the general atmosphere into a more intimate sharing. The first one was by Ambrose Bye, who read his father's notes on "visiting Bobbie Louise Hawkins's writing workshop 'Character and Monologue,' Fall 2001."[189] Ambrose Bye, the only male presence among the readers, started from his father's notes. Two male perspectives conflated in one single voice and body: the son who gave his voice to his father's thoughts. The reading, initially hesitant with occasional stumbles, became more fluid and relaxed as Ambrose Bye started to tell about his own memories and anecdotes. It was no clear whether he was supposed only to read his father's notes, and his personal contribution was then a sort of

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[187] The whole video of the evening is available at https://www.poetryproject.org/events/tribute-to-bobbie-louise-hawkins/

[188] "listening to this recording you can hear Bobbie's intuitive sense of rhyme (more in the sense of emergence than resolution). And, maybe, a better word than rhyme is resonance. She apprehends distance, proximity, and approach in words but also in behavior and landscape; how things and people come together, and also how they go. There is a love of horizon in the work. There's also her great affection for the accidental and the off-kilter. We hear her ear turned in her writing toward what blimps the places where speech and gesture reveal what is more true" (Hawkins, in *TPP*, 2019, 0:42-1:22; transcription mine).

[189] [6:40-12:47].

improvisation on the written piece, or the two parts were thought to be delivered as complementary. Anyway, this passage from father's to son's anecdotes made by the son's voice and body had its specular counterpart in the reading by Pen (Penelope) Creeley, who delivered the "essay-eulogy" for Bobbie Louise Hawkins written by the poet's daughter, Sarah Hall Creeley, in which she recalled her "steely strong mother," by remembering some personal events of Hawkins' life.[190] This time, it was the voice and body of Sarah Hall Creeley's "second mom" (Hawkins in *TPP*, 2019) to deliver the words of Bobbie Louise Hawkins' daughter. After a brief introduction in which Penelope Creeley justified her presence there on behalf of Sarah Hall Creeley, with a gentle and poised elocution, the woman read the whole paper with some pauses here and there, to give emphasis on a particular passage or to add information. If these two moments could be considered as the apexes of a certain intimate, private image of Bobbie Louise Hawkins, other readings focused more on her abilities as a teacher and writer. Each friend of hers read one or two extracts from Hawkins's production, and especially from the collections *Fifteen Poems*, *One Small Saga*, *Selected Prose*, and *Frenchy & Cuban Pete, and Other Stories*. Laura Henriksen, the director of the learning and community engagement at The Poetry Project, read Jennifer Dumbar Dorn's three-pieces contribution, which included a poem inspired by Bobbie Louise Hawkins, "Remembering Bobbie." Iris Cushing gave emphasis instead to some aspects of Hawkins's poetics, like the importance of voice (or the sounding word), timber, *tessitura*, diction, words, as well as on Hawkins's idea of what it means to be a writer. These had been recurrent themes during the evening, particularly emphasized by Cushing's reading of few fragments from the two-days interview she had with the poet during the Halloween weekend of 2015, and from the transcription of two lectures that

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[190] [1:02:02-1:19:12].

Bobbie Louise Hawkins held at Naropa University in 1989 and 2005.[191] As a sort of response to Bobbie Louise Hawkins's deep interest in sound and voice, Julie Patton opened her contribution with a performance.[192] Once she had approached the wooden stand, Patton immediately started the reading of a piece that, she later explained, she had begun years ago but never finished. It was related to one of the many tea-time conversations that Julie Patton had with Bobbie Louise Hawkins during the fall semester of 1994 at Naropa University. In one of these meetings, Hawkins admitted she could not stand peas, fact that was ironically re-stated at the end of one of Julie Patton's reading at Naropa, where Bobbie Louise Hawkins, in a sort of sound-play with the sounds [p] and [pee], asked Patton if she could "do something with those P-eeeeeeas" (Hawkins in *TPP*, 2019). The performance opened with the explosive [p] sound, exaggerated during the whole reading. Sometimes, Patton also emphasized [b] and [t] sounds. Such sound stressing served not only to disrupt the reading flow, but also to create a sort of "aural pause" in-between one word and the other, one passage and the other. Moreover, her modulating the voice to gently shift from spoken to sung language and vice versa went along with her turning the volume of the voice down, so that in few passages she almost murmured. This helped to increase the difference between the explosive [p] sound and the rest of the text, which was accurately "disrupted" when, in some points, Patton stressed and repeated some syllables, disrupting even more the flow of the reading. The result was a sort of slightly syncopated rhythm, that ended with a sequence of stressed and unstressed p-sounds, suddenly interrupted by the unexpected statement "Bobbie hated peas," which caused a general hilarity.

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[191] [32:33-43:53].

[192] [55:48-1:01:58].

These tributes display three samples of a "performance *in absentia*": to wit, since the protagonist of the performance is absent, the celebrated poet becomes the "object-protagonist" of the different performances in his/her honor. The recorded voice, the pictures, and the poet's words are a testimony of the person he/she was, as well as of the work of a life. Given the fact that the poet cannot speak for him/herself and cannot be physically present (two conditions *sine qua non* for the performance to be possible), his/her performance is delivered to all the other members at the gathering, who commit to recreate it and make it live again through their own participation and performances. The tribute, thus, becomes a ritual enacted in the tacit agreement among organizers (the "callers"), readers, and audience (the "respondents"). The organizers create the setting and the conditions for the ritual/tribute to happen, calling for "the answer," to say, the participative presence of the poet's community. The readers re-inhabit the words of the poet and perform them for, and in front of the audience. All the same, the audience "responds to the call" by participating in the performance. And this participation is realized in two ways. First, the same physical presence of the audience in that specific spatial and temporal context and for that specific reason is an act of acknowledgement: the audience recognizes the poet as a member of their community. Second, participating in the tribute, the audience implicitly agrees to fulfill its part in the communicative and performative act together with the performers. In this way, the tribute turns into a ritual where the presence of the poet is enacted by the acknowledging and performing of his/her absence. Thus, audio recordings, photographs, books, etc. become traces of a creative process that is not able to perpetrate itself anymore, but, all the same, can still be acted, re-inhabited, and signified anytime someone gives his/her own body and voice to it, for someone to receive it. And this mechanism of "being done by," "being performed by," and "being re-inhabited by" is at the core of the process of "*a posteriori* community bonding,"

in which the tribute becomes the performance of the performer who is performed by his/her community.

3. Book Launches: the poet as "subject-protagonist"

Conversely, book launches might be conceived as forms of poetic ritual where the poet is the subject-protagonist of his/her own performance. The poet organizes or co-organizes the structure of the event (place, time, setting, co-performers, host, etc.), performs new work, directly engages with the audience, and is actively involved in the process of community making, through forms of collaboration with institutions, cultural organizations, other poets and/or artists.

Concerning forms of collaboration between poets and institutions, on Thursday, April 11, 2019, the Center for Black Literature (CBL), in partnership with Brooklyn Public Library and the English Department at Medgar Evers College (CUNY), presented "An Evening with Willie Perdomo and Friends."[193] This happening was organized as a follow-on from the celebrations for April "the National Poetry Month," to present the new collection of poems by Willie Perdomo,[194] *The Crazy Bunch*. The CBL was established in 2003 to serve as "a voice, mecca, and resource for Black writers and the general public to study the literature of people from the African Diaspora,"[195] by creating opportunities of encounter and dialogue among

[193] Title taken from the flyer of the celebration. For pictures of the event see: https://centerforblackliterature.com/photo-gallery-national-poetry-month-with-willie-perdomo-friends/.

[194] Willie Perdomo "is the author of *The Crazy Bunch* (Penguin Poets, 2019) *The Essential Hits of Shorty Bon Bon* (Penguin Poets, 2014), a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and winner of the International Latino Book Award; *Smoking Lovely* (Rattapallax, 2004), winner of the PEN Open Book Award, and *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime* (Norton, 1996), a finalist for the Poetry Society of America Norma Farber First Book Award. His work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, *Poetry*, *Bomb Magazine*, and *African Voices*. He is currently a Lucas Arts Program Literary Fellow and teaches English at Phillips Exeter Academy." From the "Bio" section of Perdomo's official web-site, https://willieperdomo.com/.

[195] "The Center for Black Literature was established in 2003 to institutionalize the National Black Writers Conference (NBWC). In addition to hosting the NBWC, the Center has a mission to provide a forum for the dissemination of knowledge about Black literature and to support Black writers and Black literature through

university, artists, and citizens. For this reason, the presentation of the book was conceived as an occasion to celebrate Black culture through a dialogue between emergent and well-known poetic voices.

The reading took place in the auditorium of the Brooklyn Public Library, at Grand Army Plaza. In the lobby, there were the registration desk and a small table with the books that would have been presented that day. A few yards further, another table with a white tablecloth had to be used for the buffet which followed the reading. Some background music welcomed people at the auditorium entrance.

The audience was almost entirely composed of African American college students, one Asian American teenager, a couple of white middle-aged people, and me. The atmosphere was relaxed and informal. At the moment of the welcoming address, the music was turned down and the director of CBL and the English Department at Medgar Evers College, Clarence V. Reynolds, introduced the event which was composed of two separate readings. The first one was made by two Medgar Evers College English majors, Cherish Pierre-Louis and Brianna-Christine Alicea. Their poems, "Grandma Hilda & The American Hostage"[196] and "Moonshine,"[197] had been just published in the second issue of the college journal, *The Crown Heights Review*. The reading in front of an audience, that for the greatest part was composed by students of the same institutions, thus became the celebration of the two girls' writing skills, as well as of the college and its journal. And this launch of new promising poetic voices of the African diaspora introduced the presentation of Perdomo's book.

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author readings, workshops, retreats, and conferences. To achieve its mission, the Center partners with high schools, the college, and community and cultural organizations to provide literary arts to youth, college students, and the general public." From "Our Story" section of the CBL website, https://centerforblackliterature.com/about/.

[196] To read the poem, see https://www.crownheightsreview.org/grandmahilda.

[197] To read the poem, see https://www.crownheightsreview.org/moonshine.

Perdomo's book launch unfolded in two parts: it began with the performances by Willie Perdomo and other two poets, Rico Frederick[198] and Nicole Sealey,[199] and finished with a round-table-like conversation among the poets, followed by a short Q&A session with the audience.

After the last round of applauses for the previous reading, the host introduced Perdomo and his friends, who were waiting in another room. The background music started again and, one by one, they entered the auditorium from a lateral door, heading to the stage, and followed by the applauses and the loudly screaming of the enthusiast students. At this point, the atmosphere was concert-like: it took a while for the host to gain the students' attention back as well as their silence. In the meanwhile, the poets took place at the center of the wooden stage on three armchairs, which were positioned in semi-circle with a small glass table in front of them, with bottles of water and glasses. Smiling and waving hands, they applauded back at the exultant young audience that responded crying their names, while a helpless but amused director tried to cool off the situation.

As soon as a little bit of order was established, the reading began. In order of appearance, Frederick, Sealey, and Perdomo went to the wooden pulpit at the left of the stage and read two/three poems each. The reading part unfolded quickly to leave a greater amount of time to the conference-like conversation among the poets, who were asked about their

[198] "Rico Frederick is a graphic designer and the author of the book *Broken Calypsonian* (Penmanship Books, 2014), holds an MFA in Writing from Pratt Institute, a Cave Canem Fellow, Poets House Emerging Poets Fellow, and the first poet to represent all four original New York City poetry venues at the National Poetry Slam. His poems, artistic work, and short film have been featured in the *New York Times, Muzzle, Epiphany, No Dear Magazine, The Big Apple Film Festival, an Academy of American Poets Contest - Honorable Mention, Best of the Net Anthology Nominee (poetry) 2017* and elsewhere. Rico is a Trinidadian transplant, lives in New York, loves gummy bears, and scribbles poems on the back of maps in the hope they will take him someplace new." Form the "bio/poetry CV" section in Frederick's official web-site, http://ricofdk.squarespace.com/poetry-1.

[199] "Born in St. Thomas, U.S.V.I. and raised in Apopka, Florida, Nicole Sealey is the author of *Ordinary Beast*, finalist for the PEN Open Book and Hurston/Wright Legacy Awards, and *The Animal After Whom Other Animals Are Named*, winner of the Drinking Gourd Chapbook Poetry Prize. Her other honors include a 2019 Rome Prize, the Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize from *The American Poetry Review*, the Poetry International Prize and a Daniel Varoujan Award, grants from the Elizabeth George and Jerome Foundations, as well as fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, CantoMundo, Cave Canem, MacDowell Colony and the Poetry Project." From the biographical section in Sealey's official web-site, https://www.nicolesealey.com/#about.

creative process, the relations among sound, cultural and ethnic belonging, the political and/or social implications of their work, etc.

The particular structure of this book launch, a mix of poetic performance and academic discussion, highlights some elements of the process of community making that poets enact during their performances —first of all, the collaborative aspect that informs the vast majority of this kind of performances. For this happening, Willie Perdomo invited Rico Frederick and Nicole Sealey to participate by reading some of their poems. They were the first to be introduced to the audience, reading before Perdomo. In this way, they served Perdomo as the "opening band" in the "concert" of the more famous poet. Their role was to warm up the audience (already more than ready), while having the chance to "play" in front of a bigger audience, to whom they could show their work. Such a praxis is quite common. More or less famous poets invite friend artists, poets, and performers to join them in the book launch which, in this way, turns into a sort of poetic show. This is a form of mutual support among the artists, since, generally, the poet who is invited will later invite back. Moreover, thanks to this kind of initiatives, poets create networks of friends and collaborators, gaining new opportunities of work (publishing, performance, participation in cultural and social initiatives, etc.) as well as new audiences. This artistic support and sharing of audience are particularly appreciated by bookstores, bars, and other public venues that gain from the poets' collaboration in terms of number of clients. The second aspect refers to the poets' education: what degrees they have and where they earned them. Although the declaration of the personal academic cv is not a common practice, in this case, considered the composition of the audience, it was particularly relevant. This is due to the fact that universities provide the first poetic cohort in which the poets grow. Thus, although poets' careers do not always start with the attendance to creative writing programs, when this happens, the academic affiliations is telling of the poetic lineage on which the poet draws, as well as of the poetic

communities to which he/she belongs.[200] Since the three poets are representative of different types of diasporas (Caribbean, African American, Nuyorican), the conversation opened with a question on their poetic lineage and the influence it had on their poetics. On this matter, Frederick and Perdomo's accounts were particularly significative.

3.1. Poetic Trans-Positions

Rico Frederick insisted on the relation between cultural legacy and personal authenticity that is embedded in the constant search for a balance between his Caribbean heritage, which sounds through the Caribbean lilt that informs his poetry and performance, and his fascination for the American culture. Born and raised in Trinidad de Tobago, when he was a child Frederick desperately wanted to become American. He could finally realize his American dream when he moved to the United States with his family. However, the long-awaited country was not so keen to receive the little Trinidadian, who found himself strained between the person he was and the one he wanted to be. The clash of cultures that the poet considerably experienced during the school years was recreated by the performance he presented at the Brooklyn Public Library. "First Day of School" shows the cultural tension through the linguistic juxtaposition between English, the written language of the just embraced culture, and Creole, the oral trace of a tradition that persists in the strong sound of the poet's Caribbean "lilt" (cadence).[201] And precisely this tension boosted him to recover

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[200] In a conversation with Tracie Morris, she explained the relevance of degrees in a poetry reading in terms of "poetic lineage": "If someone says that they have an MFA or a PhD from University of Buffalo poetics program… that's very different than say they have a PhD in…. literature from Yale. It's completely different. Because, the poetic program at Buffalo is famous for the avant-garde poets that it produces through LANGUAGE poetry, through Charles Bernstein, Bob Creeley … all of those people… Susan Howe. They all come from that Buffalo program. And they have lot of friends, or associates, affiliates with the Kelly Writer House at the University of Pennsylvania… That relationship between those institution, […] that tells you something about the kind of poetry you're about to experience. … If somebody said that they went to University of Iowa Writers Workshop… and they got an MFA in Comparative Literature from Yale, that is going tell you something completely different about the type of writing that you're about to experience" (Morris 2019).

[201] A version of the performance is available at

his origins, through the sound of his language, and the traditions and the stories of his people. As the poet told in the conversation, he began to search for, and get in touch with the Caribbean communities of the cities where he lived. Poetry, thus, was the form he chose to re-build, elaborate, and re-tell those legacies that, persisting in a different country, allow the new to coexist with the old through the images, words, and sounds of everyday life. And for this graphic designer and art director, the best way to combine images, languages, and sounds is by crafting the poem as if it was an installation. In this light, the page becomes the many spaces where imagination can take form. It represents the poet's working space, the place where images, thoughts, words, feelings, memories, etc. may be drawn, becoming the starting point for readers to go wherever they want with their imagination. The blank page becomes a drawing sheet. There, the poet translates his imagination in a drawing-like form of writing, where colors, forms, fonts, illustrations, posters, white spaces, black erasures, and even speech bubbles shape English, that sometimes is modulated by the transcription of the Caribbean accent, or abruptly interrupted by the signs of Morse code, when something needs to be said but not immediately seen. This multi-form and colorful ensemble of signs creates *Broken Calypsonian* (2014), Frederick first poetry collection which is set up as the written and drawn version of a Caribbean carnival. The four sections of the volume recall the songs and the days of the Trinidadian celebration (*j'ouvert morning*, *Dimanche gras*, road march, and Calypso monarch) which also mark the four passages in the poet's journey from Trinidad de Tobago to another island, Manhattan. And in this personal march, the poet becomes the *kaiso*, the *chantwell*, the griot of his own life. Each poem, as a fragment of the story, brings light in "that mind tingling bacchanal"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=83&v=A9QqAGCHtE4&feature=emb_logo.

(Frederick 2014, 10) where family stories, accounts of childhood and romantic love mingle with issues of race, belonging, masculinity, fatherhood, love, and sorrow:

Heart / break,
what drug do I take for the un-nameable pain?

Teething ache the earth cannot swallow,
sorrow-clawing at the windowspane,
wounded animal
(Frederick 2014, 10)

Sorrow and pain are the poet's companions in this existential research, but they are also the propulsive force of his creativity, that feeds itself on the pain, that later will be transformed in poetry: "—I sing of a broken heart,/hurt: is its own form of healing" (Frederick 2014). Thus, accepting the role of a "broken Calypsonian," the poet positions himself in the oral Caribbean tradition:

Broken Calypso,
my heart will sing you for a living.
The wind in my throat
is medicine for steam   this dizzyEngine.
(Frederick 2014, 10)

But this "singer of truth & folklore" re-visits his role in a contemporary key (Frederick 2014). And since the visual is the poet's realm, Frederick experiments with poetry, performance, and graphic art, participating in the realization of a 3D film-poem. *HeartBreaker* is "a stereoscopic short film in collaboration with Director, Aron Baxter [which] was a 2011 Official Selection of the 8th Annual Big Apple Film Festival."[202] The film is built as a musical video: the background music creates the beat on which the poet reflects on the failures of his romantic life, performing in a hip-hop style the poem written "FOR ANYONE WHO HAS EVER HAD/THEIR HEART BROKEN." On the

[202] From the poet's web-page, http://ricofdk.squarespace.com/poetry-1.

background the urban landscape of Manhattan by night is digitally re-created. The sound of the train running, together with other sound effects of the urban soundscape, emphasizes certain passages, disrupting the spoken flow, while the image of a woman dancing behind the poet embodies the poet's fifth ex-girlfriend, who "loving me/ was the best thing you never did."[203]

Whereas Rico Frederick experiments in more and more sophisticated visual realizations of his poems, Willie Perdomo continues his representation of the urban Afro-Latin community of East-Harlem, from which he emancipated acquiring fame thanks to a vibrant linguistic eclecticism that has become the poet's trade mark: a wise and engaging modulation of Harlem Spanish Vernacular, creative code-switching and code-mixing, strong lyric language, and syncopated rhythms. Even if now Perdomo lives in New Hampshire, the sounds, colors, and people of his childhood and youth continue to be vividly present in his memory, animating his poetry that still speaks about and to his "crew": the urban community and culture of *el barrio*, which he tells from a Latinos perspective, and that has been immortalized in his previous works. In line with such a deep sense of belonging and affection, this last book, *The Crazy Bunch*, is conceived as a journey down memory lane through a fictional lens: a poetic chronicle of a weekend of five black and Puerto Rican young men, who come of age in 1990s East Harlem, at the dawn of the hip hop era. And hip hop plays an important role here as well as in the rest of Perdomo's production, since, according to the poet, it is a notable source for language, and an incredible medium for storytelling, chronicle, and testimony.

[203] From the video of the poem. For the whole performance, as well as the videos grabbed by the poet during the shooting, see: https://ricofdk.squarespace.com/video.

During the reading, Perdomo's hip hop style of delivery accentuated even more the hybrid structure that characterizes many of the poems of the collection, like "Close to the River," and "They Won't Find Us in Books" —respectively, the first and the last poem to have been read— in which he alternates the long opening line of a stanza —reminiscence of a Whitmanian tradition— with shorter lines written in hip hop style, to create a contrast in rhythm and tone, that contributes to render the soundscape on which the poet draws. The rhythmic structure of the poem "vibrates" taking life during the engaging performances. Voice is fundamental in Perdomo's reading, since it works like the poet's collaborator: it re-creates the sonic background of the poem, boosting the readers' imagination to "see" the streets, the places, and the events about which the poet tells; besides, it gives an aural body to those characters that inhabit Perdomo's lines, and that on the page may only be distinguished one from the other by the blank spaces on the page, the italics, the code-switching, etc.

Moreover, the hip hop beat plays an important role of mediation in Perdomo's process of recovering and retelling of a past, that is overtly entwined with fictional elements, by bridging the physical, spatial, and temporal distance between the poet and his community "by sounding the same." Hip hop vernacular, indeed, unlocks Perdomo's memories and attunes the poet to the beat of the people whom he is addressing. And "to be in the same frequency" is pivotal to accomplish the task the poet has accepted. Perdomo's decision to chronicle and bear witness to his community rises from the poet's awareness of his responsibility to remember for those who are not here anymore, as well as for the new generations, who did not live in those years but still belong to the same community. To Perdomo, to remember and to transmit are responsibilities of the poet who has to honor the request of his community to remember, especially when the community is made by people he knows. Therefore,

this poetry collection was written expressively for the people of his crew, his community. It is the response to those who asked him to write about them. Thus, the poet wrote for them, with the intention to make them recognize themselves in those lines, voices, and characters, by elaborating familiar language, form, images, and sounds in the form of prose poems, vignettes, dialogues, etc. In a sort of contemporary epic narration, Perdomo reminds to his people, and to himself, what was living in a neighborhood that, in those years, was a "war zone" —for the ongoing drug war— but also the place where he grew up with the friends he had as a child, the crazy bunch. The connection Perdomo feels with his "street family" vividly emerges from the second poems he read: "That's My Heart Right There."[204] In this group of eight couplets, the poet presents himself as the choral voice of the community: "We used to say, /That's my heart right there" (Perdomo 2019, 37). The pronouns "we" and "I" chase and refers to one another throughout the poem, where the poet addresses a general, almost impersonal, "you" to explain what kind of bond he has with "her," the family from which he moved but that he never left: "That's the start of me right there" and again, "That's the end of me right there" (Perdomo 2019, 37).

4. Vision Festival

High-quality examples of artistic collaborations took place during the twenty-fourth edition of "Vision festival," a music event for "the promotion and advancement of Freejazz,"[205]

[204] For a sample of the reading, listen to the recorded version in the Poetry Foundation at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/148869.

[205] From the second page of the informative "libretto" of the festival. From now on it will be cited as (Vision 2019).

which was held during the second week of this June in the experimental center of Roulette — an artist-driven space based in Brooklyn.[206] The New York City based organization Arts for Art (AFA) organized the event as a music framework to host numerous collaborations among musicians, visual artists, poets, dancers, etc. The initiative aimed to gather artists, whose passion for jazz animates their work, to promote diversity and accessibility among the arts.

In this spirit of inclusivity and experimentation, poets Fred Moten[207] and Edwin Torres, together with musicians Brandon Lopez (bass)[208] and Gerald Cleaver (drums),[209] realized a performance of almost forty minutes of pure improvisation. A dialogue among music, words, and images, that was displayed on the two-level stage of the small auditorium. On the first level of the stage, the wider one on a wooden floor, the artists were disposed in a sort of semi-circle, with the two musicians at the bottom of the stage and the two poets in front of the

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[206] For the history and mission of the center, see: https://roulette.org/about/.

[207] Frederick (Fred) Moten "is a poet and scholar whose work explores critical theory, black studies, and performance studies. A professor at New York University, Moten is the author of *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003); *Hughson's Tavern* (Leon Works, 2009); *B. Jenkins* (Duke University Press, 2010); *The Feel Trio* (Letter Machine Editions, 2014), which was a poetry finalist for the National Book Award and Los Angeles Times Book Prize and winner of the California Book Award for poetry; *The Little Edges* (Wesleyan University Press, 2015), which was a finalist for the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award and *The Service Porch* (Letter Machine Editions, 2016), *A Poetics of the Undercommons* (Sputnik and Fizzle, 2016) and a three volume collection of essays whose general title is *consent not to be a single being* (Duke University Press, 2017, 2018). From the *Cave Canem* blog archive,
https://cavecanempoets.org/calendar/this-unholdings-long-night-lounge-a-lecture-with-fred-moten/.

[208] "New York-based composer and bassist working at the fringes of jazz, free improvisation, noise and new music. His music has been praised as 'brutal' (*Chicago Reader*) and 'relentless' (*The New York Times*). From the New York Philharmonic's David Geffen Hall to the DIY basements of Brooklyn, Lopez has worked beside many luminaries of jazz, classical, poetry, and experimental music, including Fred Moten, John Zorn, Okkyung Lee, Ingrid Laubrock, Tony Malaby, Tyshawn Sorey, Bill Nace, Chris Potter, Edwin Torres, Tom Rainey, Cecilia Lopez, Sun Ra Arkestra, Susan Alcorn, Mette Rasmussen, and many others." From Lopez's official web-site,
https://www.brandonlopez.nyc/.

[209] "Born May 4, 1963 and raised in Detroit, **Gerald Cleaver** is a product of the city's rich music tradition. Inspired by his father, drummer John Cleaver, he began playing the drums at an early age. [...] He has performed or recorded with Franck Amsallem, **Henry Threadgill**, **Roscoe Mitchell**, Lotte Anker, Reggie Workman, Marilyn Crispell, Matt Shipp, William Parker, **Craig Taborn**, Kevin Mahogany, Charles Gayle, Mario Pavone, Ralph Alessi, Jacky Terrasson, Jimmy Scott, **Muhal Richard Abrams**, Dave Douglas, Tim Berne, Jeremy Pelt, Ellery Eskelin, David Torn and Miroslav Vitous, among others. Cleaver has released two recordings as a leader. His 2001 recording ***Adjust*** (Fresh Sound New Talent) was nominated in the Best Debut Recording category by the Jazz Journalists Association. His latest release, ***Gerald Cleaver's Detroit*** (FSNT), is an homage to his hometown and to the late, great Detroit drummers Roy Brooks, Lawrence Williams, George Goldsmith and Richard 'Pistol' Allen. Cleaver leads the bands **Violet Hour, NiMbNl** and **Uncle June**." From Cleaver's page in MySpace,
https://myspace.com/geraldcleavermusic.

audience. On the second level, there was a huge screen on which a sequence of pictures of paintings and photos by visual artist Jo Wood Brown was projected without interruptions for the whole performance. Although the majority of the audience was composed of white and elderly experts of jazz music— critics, journalists, musicians— their cultural specificity did not contrast with the different ethnic and cultural background of the performers. On the contrary, the successful collaboration between musicians and poets aroused the interest of the audience, which fully participated in all the phases of the improvisation.

The initial idea was to present a conversation among the two poets. Each prepared his own poem to be read together with the other, as if the two pieces were two parts of an imaginary dialogue. Since no one knew what the other was writing, the surreal dialogue would have arisen from the playful exchange of lines among the poets, that read their poems as scripts of a conversation. The two musicians were supposed to do the same: to participate in such a fictitious verbal conversation with instrumental solos, and by playing back to poets' utterances. Without any previous rehearsal, they had to literally create the performance while performing. The beginning was a little rough. The first ten minutes were animated by a certain tension between musicians and poets that had to create the flow of words and music and find a balance among the different voices, human and instrumental. The enterprise was further complicated by the sound system: a high volume for the microphones of drums and bass in contrast with the low volume of the poets' microphones, so that music often towered over the human voice, making it impossible for the audience to understand what was said.

The key concept of the whole performance was "continuous re-ignition": improvisation should provide fertile ground to experiment new ways of listening, in which the communicative exchange had to be not linear and consequential, but un-controlled, unpredictable. In this kind of performance, "listening to one another" is crucial in order to understand when to enter the flow of music and words, when to quit, or when to join in

somebody else's "discourse," and how do it. It is a delicate balance between acting and waiting, doing and responding, where there is no order to follow. Musicians and poets experiment together individual forms of improvisation that, although personal, find their realization in the collective action, where one influences the others and vice versa, or, conversely, detaches himself from the rest of the group, to start a new process. The performance is about and made of continuous restarting: it is not important the goal or the process to reach that goal, but "to start" as an act in itself, completely detached from any end. In this light, each musical or linguistic utterance becomes the starting point of a new "discourse," that closes at the very moment another one is initiated.

Despite the uncertain beginning, when artists finally managed to attune to one another, the result was astonishing: the surreal dialogue became more than real thanks to quick turn changes, superimpositions, pauses, choral interventions, and solo performances, which followed one another as the many re-starts of a new way of listening, in which every member could embrace and unfold what was receiving from the others, and from there starting his own ignition, or reject it to offer another beginning, another possibility.

5. Conclusions: A Performative and Tactile-Kinesthetic *Poiesis*

Although poets generally consider and experience writing and performing as two distinct activities, performance poetry still lays in a liminal zone, where the material traces of the poem, the body of a live performer, and the material or virtual traces of the chosen medium (live performance, print, CD, blog, etc.) open to "an epistemological pluralism" which extends our "understanding of multiple dimensions and a wider range of meaningful action" (Conquergood 2013, 48). Such a pluralism, which contrasts the world-as-text model, however,

seems to successfully include the extremes of the two opposing practices: poetry, as the epitome of the knowledge that "rises above immediacy," and performance, as the paradigm of understanding through immediacy, involvement, and intimacy (Conquergood 2013, 48). In this light, performance in relation to poetry needs to be conceived as both the operative tool and the operation itself that create the space and conditions for these two fundamentals (poetry and performance) to engage one another in a sort of "collaborative friction." Such a cooperation allows performance poetry to mediate between opposing critical standpoints: a poststructuralist understanding of the relationship between text and textuality that is deeply informed by "notions of authority," and "a transcendental understanding of a text, event, or performance" (McDonald qtd. in Zarrilli 1995, 38). But it also enables performance poetry to enact as a sort of "buffer zone," that provides possibilities for other discourses to develop and coexist with new forms of artistic, media, as well as poetic "otherness."

Moving from this perspective, the previous analysis of the body as both "pure mediality," and open tactile-kinesthetic system casts light on the mediated character of the body, disrupting the illusion of a corporeal transparency.[210] The body is the first medium to influence how we receive and exchange information with the outside, and for this reason it might be considered as a "collaborator" of the poet. This tactile-kinesthetic entity participates in the creative process, also enabling the performance of writing. If we consider performance as an intrinsic characteristic of poetry and not only an external element that deeply influences the poetic praxis, performance poetry represents one of the many possibilities in which a performative and tactile-kinesthetic *poiesis* can be realized. According to such a new conceptualization of *poiesis*, where body as well as performance are intrinsic factors of both the creative and writing process, all poems, even those that are not meant to be performed, might be grouped under the label "performance poetry." This means that performance is an

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[210] See Murray 1997, Bolter and Grusin 1999, and Kattenbelt 2006.

intrinsic characteristic of poetry and not only an external element that deeply influences the poetic praxis.

All the same, the dynamism and permeability of the body, as an unfinished system in constant connection with other multiple bodies, perfectly combines with those characteristics of continuity and simultaneity that animate live performances. Like theatre performance, the live performance of poetry also happens "in the close continuum of here and now" (Kattenbelt 2006, 35). But, in the unities of time, space, and action, performance expands the idea of the poem as a process that accomplishes the "duality of embodiment and communication" (Lehman 2006, 135). Such a duality is driven by a "production of presence": a phenomenon that enables a self-referential type of presence that is experienced through the norms of a congregational gathering in a ritual ceremony like concerts and sports events (Grumbrecht 2004). The combination of "magic ceremony," interactive performance, and Grumbrecht's production of presence gives to the poetic event its realistic dimension, while distancing it from utterances of representation or mimesis (Lehmann 2006). Besides, the performative presence "always retains the character of the 'longed for' and the 'alluded to,' and always disappears when it enters into the reflected experience" (Lehmann 2006, 141). Such an ambivalence, that primarily characterized the aesthetic experience of theatre, concerns performance poetry too, inasmuch as the aesthetic experience is possible only "in a secondary manner reflection": a first confrontation with a "sudden," immediate presence follows "the processing of this experience by an act of retroactive remembering, contemplating and reflecting" (Lehmann 2006, 142). The aesthetic experience of the performative present is consequential of the distance of this temporality from the historical time in which is contained. Therefore, "aesthetic time is not metaphorically translated historical time. The 'event' situated within aesthetic time does not refer to the events of real time" (Bohrer qtd. in Lehmann 2006, 142). In this light, the present, no more "a reified point of time," manifests

itself as "a perpetual disappearing," a transition that accomplishes "a caesura between the past and the future" (Lehmann 2006, 144). The performative and tactile-kinesthetic *poiesis* grows out of the ambivalence generated by the difference between aesthetic and reflected experience. And such a gap is heightened in our mediatized culture (Auslander 1999), in which poets intertwine live and mediatized artistic experiences with work among inter-, multi-, and transmedia dynamics, and engage an increasing number of interdisciplinary practices with other artists, who "affect each other quite profoundly" both on and off the stage (Kattenbelt 2008, 20). From a "theatrical" view, this articulated phenomenon is the result of a process of theatricalization that occurs when two or more art forms come together. According to Chiel Kattenbelt, the interdisciplinarity and intermediality among arts occurs because theatre is an hypermedium that can incorporate all other arts and media into its performance time-space framework, "without being dependent on one of these in order to be theatre" (Kattenbelt 2006, 32). Besides, theatre boosts human creativity because "foregrounds the *corporeality* of the performer and the *materiality* of the live performance as an actual event, taking place in the absolute presence of here and now" (Kattenbelt 2006, 37; italics in the original). In a quite similar way, this process may be applied to performance poetry as well. During a live performance, the interaction between poet and audience follows both a social and an aesthetic orientation. As social actors, poet and audience participate in the collective experience of the poem moving from two complementary perspectives that gear one to the other to achieve a mutual understanding of the situation in which they are both involved (Kattenbelt 2010). This social and communicative dynamic determines the aesthetic orientation of the performance: to wit, "an emotionally intensified, affective perception and a reflexive orientation toward one's own subjectivity within the context of a presupposed communality in the life experiences of contemporaries who belong to the same […] lifeworld" (Kattenbelt 2010, 31). This means that the spatial and temporal framework of the

performance provides optimal conditions for poet and audience "to explore to what extent life experiences are shared with other human beings" (Seel qtd. in Kattenbelt 2008, 20). Besides, meaning and experience (or semiotics and phenomenology) are inextricably linked with each other, so that "meaning is no located in an object that supposedly exists on its own, but in the human experience in which we try to reveal the world that we inhabit" (Kattenbelt 2010, 34). These kinds of social and aesthetic dynamics are the consequence of a mediatized society in which mass media "have become a substantial part of reality itself, more than just representing reality through a mediating function" (Kattenbelt 2010, 34). Since digital technologies "have altered our practices of communication and representation," and modified our aesthetic expectations (Schaefer 2015, 169), even a discourse on live performances needs to point out how the "mediatized" —what is digitally, electronically, and technologically wrought— "complicates matters, introducing its own level of performance in addition to, though not replacing, the level of 'live performing'" (Schechner 1995, 37).

One of the consequences of such a mediatization is the transformation of the traditional view of live performances, which are no more "founded on an opposition between the immediate and the mediated" (Auslander 2008, 107). Indeed, the distinction between live and technologically mediated performance not only "remains a fundamental and culturally stratifying one," but it is "phenomenological and historical defined" (Auslander 2008, 108), because it ultimately depends on what poet and audience experience and feel in a specific cultural, social, and historical moment. Such a phenomenological understanding of live performance "change[s] continually over time in response to the development of new media technologies" (Auslander 2008, 109), and blurs the distinction between the "live" and the "mediatized," which are becoming more and more bounded and co-dependent.[211] In this light,

[211] "As a historical being, he cannot treat the theatrical experience simply on its own terms —inevitably, his perception of theatre, of live performance, is mediated by his experience of technologically mediated dramatic forms. Indeed, most dictionary definitions of the word 'live' show how closely our experience of live performance

the works of Steve Wurtzler (1992), Margaret Morse (1998), and Nick Couldry (2004) have demonstrated how the experience of "liveness" is not merely defined and limited to specific performer-audience interactions within "a set of temporal and spatial variables," but is given by "the feeling of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated co-presence with others known and unknown."[212] Thus, the performance of poetry, even in its "classic liveness" modality,[213] becomes one aspect of the multiform capacity of poets to multi-modally integrate the sound, visual, language, and performative dynamics of every single performance within a wider network of differently mediatized "performative situations" (Eco 1977). And precisely due to this sort of poetic mediology[214] —a complex system of multi-modal and pluri-media possibilities to produce poetry— performance poetry is characterized by a performative and tactile-kinesthetic *poiesis*, which displays aspects of "inter-connectedness" and "self-conscious interplay," that animate the relation between performance and poetry according to paradigms of hypermediacy[215] and intermediality.[216]

In these days of hyperreality, where "the Absolute Fake" does not simply reproduce "the real thing," but rather creates "'more'—in the sense of 'extra'" imitations, simulations and

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is bound up with our experience of technologically mediated forms. We cannot define live performance without reference to the other kind" (Auslander 2008, 109).

[212] (Auslander 2008, 109, 111). See also Schechner 1985, Auslander 1996, McKenzie 2001, Bauman 2004, and Weber 2006.

[213] "'classic liveness,' is as the kind of performance in which the performers and the audience are both physically and temporally co-present with one another" (Auslander 2008, 110).

[214] For the original meaning and usage of the term "mediology," see Debray 1996.

[215] "the logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and make them visible. Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on the world, but rather as a window itself […] The logic of hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 33-34).

[216] "'Intermediality' refers to the co-relation of media in the sense of mutual influences between media" (Kattenbelt 2008, 20-21). Moreover, focusing on the implications of such a mutual-affect, Chiel Kattenbelt assumes that "intermediality is an operative aspect of different media, which is more closely connected to the idea of diversity, discrepancy and hypermediacy […] than to the idea of unity, harmony and transparency. Intermediality assumes an in-between space — "an inter"— from which or within the mutual affects take place" (Kattenbelt 2008, 25-26).

simulacra, or improved versions of reality (Eco 1986, 7, 8), performance poetry becomes a form of corporeal[217] and performative literacy, which also features, though improving, the "alphabetic body."[218] It seems to participate in the next step of "a continuous co-evolution of humans and technology" (Bleeker 2010, 40), which champions "a postbiological and posthuman future" (Lenoir 2008, ix). In this light, the human, as "a three way hybrid, a bio-cultural-technological amalgam" (Rotman 2008, 1), expands its potentialities of expression through more and more sophisticated forms of intermediation, in which "complex transactions between bodies and texts as well as between different forms of media" (Hayles 2005, 7) are deeply embedded in phenomenological instances of perception and experience. Thus, as an adaptive response to our mediate culture, performance, thanks to its inter-, multi-, and transmedia character, allows the simultaneous display of different culturally specific modes of perceiving within the same single one spatial and temporal framework of the poetic experience. Perception, as a mode of acting,[219] challenges established modalities of audience and spectatorship —which are no more based on a language-verbal exchange[220] exclusively— but turns the poetic performance into "an experimental set-up for exploring and playing with the performance of perception": to say, "how perception actually produces what appears as the object of our perception" (Bleeker 2010, 39, 38). Such a conceptualization of a "poetic mediology," that realizes itself through the individual and collective entwine of multi-sensory

[217] "Corporeal literacy points to the bodily character of these perceptual, cognitive practices [noting down, reading, storing, and transmitting information] and draws attention to the relationship between bodily practices and modes of thinking commonly associated with the mind" (Bleeker 2010, 40).

[218] "The alphabetic body is a literate body which has acquired the skills necessary to read and write, and to engage with written and printed language in a conscious and critical manner. The alphabetic body is the body that does the reading and writing of language. It is also the body that perceives its surroundings, thinks and makes sense in ways that are profoundly impacted by writing and print" (Bleeker 2010, 41).

[219] "Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. Think of a blind person tap-tapping his or her way around a cluttered space, perceiving that space by touch, not all at once, but through time, by skillful probing and movement. This is, or at least ought to be, our paradigm of what perceiving is. The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction" (Noë 2006, 1).

[220] On performance as a form of verbal art, see Bauman 1984, 1986, Bauman and Briggs 1990, Darnell 2002, Sherzer 2002, and Taylor 2003.

perceptions in the space of a limited, bounded experience, foster a new understanding of poetry, which is no more "a self-contained medium" but, rather, "a transmedial configuration or network" (Schaefer 2015, 178).

In her poststructuralist view of intertextuality, Regina Schober draws on recent network studies,[221] and challenges the current notion of transmediality, "which presumes the existence of shared attributes between different media" (Schober 2013, 91), to re-conceptualize "adaptation."[222] By postulating adaptations as "intertextual by definition, multivocal by necessity, and adaptive by their nature" (Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins 2010, 19), Schober means to look at the possible relations among media through the lens of the rhizome, or network metaphor:

> Networks consist of a complex set of links between individual nodes. Unlike more hierarchical forms of organization, networks are decentralized, interactive, dynamic and spontaneous. In a network, individual nodes, which are defined only through their relationship to one another, are less important than the whole. In a network, an individual identity is not stable within itself, but something that results from reciprocal interaction with other entities, which is therefore in constant flow, depending on the orientation and intensity of its connections. (Schober 2013, 101)

This connectionist approach configures the idea of synergy in, at least, three entwined ways: as a set of connections an interconnected networks, where intertextuality origins and develops, as "an interdisciplinary transfer," and as a complex system of processes and relations through which media connect, combine, cooperate, and transform. Synergy, thus, is both the model and the process through which adaptation, as a kind of intertextuality, works in a media context; but it also lays at the core of the relation between form, content, and

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[221] See Taylor 2001, Watt 2003, Deleuze and Guattari 2005, and Castells 2010.

[222] "adaptation must be regarded as a much more complex assemblage of cross-influences rather than a seemingly unidirectional procedure between two media. […] Accordingly, adaptation must be regarded as a process that entails a much larger range of influences, implications and repercussions than suggested through an exclusive focus on adapted work and adaptation. […] Therefore, to discuss adaptations means to knowledge their complex textual environment, their cultural implications and their multi-layered processes of signification" (Schober 2013, 92).

medium, insomuch as every change in one of these variables inevitably affects all the others. Such a conceptualization of synergy elaborates on the ideas of intertextuality and media creation to frame a more sophisticate notion of network,[223] which helps to better understand the transformations that are currently affecting literature, while turning it into what Heike Schaefer calls "the media of literature":

> To think of literature as a cultural practice that extends across media boundaries allows us to replace the concept of literature as a self-contained medium with an understanding of literature as a transmedial configuration or network. […] the network offers a model for the conceptualization of reciprocal, recursive and decentralized processes of interaction, exchange and convergence, and of the complex systemic constellations these produce. […] the network model may help us conceive of media (including literature) as complex structures and dynamic processes that develop through multidirectional, distributed, recursive acts of connection. (Schaefer 2015, 178-179)

In this light, if literature is to be intended as a complex network, by extension, also poetry needs to be conceived as a dynamic and open transmedial configuration, in which performance poetry works as a kind of "remediation" of the traditional concept of the poetic genre:

> The word derives ultimately from the Latin *remederi* —"to heal, to restore to health." We have adopted the word to express the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another." And again, "remediation can work in both directions: older media can also refashion newer ones. Newer media do not necessarily supersede older media because the process of reform and refashioning is mutual. (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 65)

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin were the first to trace an historical lineage among the media to explain the strategies adopted by new media to introduce "themselves as improved versions of already existent technology" (Boenisch 2006, 106). They not only improve earlier media, but "they absorb and represent [them] within an altered framework," according to a

[223] "This network of interconnections is constructed not only of other verbal or nonverbal "texts" or media, but also, to the same extent, of recipients, production contexts and sociocultural and aesthetic factors. Presuming that intermediality, especially media transformation, is a transformation of semiotic systems and also always a process of cultural and social transformation, the relationship between different media and their respective translations can be described in analogy to social relations as network" (Schober 2013, 103-104).

strategy of remediation (Boenisch 2006, 106). In this perspective, "a medium is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 65). Therefore, the new media creates spaces for features of the older ones to continue to exist, "and in doing this they redefine the old media, which continue to survive very well in the updated versions" (Boenisch 2006, 107). Such a process works exactly in the same way for consumers: "instead of having to learn entirely new languages for every new medium, [...] their existing media competence can be swiftly transferred across the board of old and new media" (Boenisch 2006, 107). Such an idea of "mediality as remediation" outlines the evolutionary progress in media history as a twisting spiral, rather than a linear line, where "each seemingly radical progress in media technological developments turns out as yet another remediation" (Boenisch 2006, 108). Media evolution, therefore, is represented as an "inter-linked field" in which old and new media "are mutually dependant and reciprocally related over various planes of the twisting spiral" (Boenisch 2006, 108). And this very image of the twisting spiral might be used to explain how performance poetry represents an evolutive step of the poetic genre. It contains the same principles that foregrounds the "set of cognitive principles at the heart of Western cultural ideology": the language principles of clear and hierarchic organization that privileges linearity, uniformity, visual perception, and passive consumption (Davis qtd. in Boenisch 2006, 107). Nevertheless, it also allows those strategies of remediation to articulate poetry in the interconnected and multiform field of tactile-kinesthetic dynamics of perception, interactions, experience and knowledge, so that poetry turns into an open, dynamic, and polymorphous system.

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