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Performing Women's Poetry: An Evolving Craft

Thesis presented by
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for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism and intellectual property.

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I would also like to thank my colleagues and former staff at Waterstones, Cork; the beginnings of this project stem from the slew of insta-poetry publications entering the shop and I have been grateful for the support and flexibility afforded to me by my colleagues as I have completed this thesis.

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Abstract

This research project proposes to examine a current cohort of female poets employing performance techniques in their poetries, investigating how these poets continue to adapt and adopt the aesthetics of earlier poets. In recent years, the popularity of poetry in online communities has boomed, with an inevitable backlash to this poetic movement, criticising its contribution to poetry as a cultural form, such as Rebecca Watts' *PN Review* article. Throughout this research, I aim to locate these poetries (often described as "digital" or "e-poetries") along a continuum of performance, identifying the ways in which such a factor is evoked in both these new works and the work of earlier poets. Bearing in mind the theories John Miles Foley's book *Oral Literature and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*, which suggests the internet is a natural evolution of oral literature and spoken word poetries, I aim to connect the work of this cohort of poets with performance poets before them, examining the performative overlaps between oral and digital literatures. This project will interrogate the ways in which performance is enacted through a number of guises, from the sounds of orality and musicality, to the embodiment of performance by these poets. I aim to examine the creation of an aesthetic of performance among these women poets, paying particular attention to the ways the female body is performed in this work. Finally, I consider the social implications and contexts of such work, exploring the connections between poet and audience, the poetic persona and the performance of politics in these poetries. My research is primarily focused on work of poets disseminating their work chiefly through non-print methods, such as recording, performance, and social media, in the 21st Century. I will also examine the performance poetries of women poets in the 20th Century, examining the connections and creation of

a performance aesthetic, aiming to link the work of poets across these eras by examining a series of aspects of their poetics, such as the orality, the body, musicality, social engagement and public spheres of poetry.

Introduction

"Why is the poetry world pretending that poetry is not an art form? I refer to the rise of a cohort of young female poets who are currently being lauded by the poetic establishment for their 'honesty' and 'accessibility'" (Watts). This project originated as a rebuttal of Rebecca Watts' *PN Review* diatribe against the rise of an anti-intellectual, craftless poetry associated with (among others) Rupi Kaur, Lang Leav and Kae Tempest. Her assertion that such poetry "is not an art form" is a troubling one, presuming that poetry stems from a singular tradition or form of art. Watts' article, despite discussing a number of poets who work across both performance modes, fails to engage with the history and aesthetic qualities of performance, and to consider how such poetries operate in a context outside of the page poetry that she assumes to be superior. In responding to this article, this thesis addresses a number of modes of performance poetry[1], theorising a continuum of influence and practice between the work of women poets across a number of sites of performance. Performance poetry and women's performance are excluded from canonical conceptions of literature/orature: the practice of performance sits at a point of double exclusion, in terms of its mode of creation and the gendered biases that affect literary modes across the spectrum. This thesis considers performance under in-person, recorded and digital rubrics and historicises performative traditions that interlink and call back to one another.

The preconception that poetries in performance are merely 'louder' iterations of page poems, less worthy of literary analysis, is disputed in this

1 I employ the term "performance poetry" throughout this thesis to refer to a number of poetic practices, all of which employ performative techniques in their practice. Though some poets favour the term spoken word poetry, it is not only spoken word poetry that is explored in this thesis. As such, the term performance poetry allows for the examination of poetries published through performative means, an umbrella under which spoken word poetry can be considered in tandem with other methods of performance.

thesis. Although the poetries I examine are closer to "popular" poetries (both insta-poetry and hip hop feature prominently as sites of performance) they are no less significant for their popular appeal: indeed, these poetries bring performance poetries, and poetry per se, into wider public focus. The primary objective of this thesis is to explore the connections which link performance poetries into a counter-tradition: as the chapters which follow show, poetries in performance signify upon each other, revealing continuities in subject matter, form and technique.

Like performance poetry, women's writing is a contested term and field. This thesis brings the two together, and so I want to give a brief overview of how I understand and deploy these terms. Women's writing is not necessarily synonymous with feminist writing and both feminism and 'womanhood' may function as exclusive as well as progressive or radical categories. Moreover, the paradigm in which women's writing occupies intimate spaces — the woman writer's room of her own – would appear at odds with performance. I explore forms of women's writing which contest such distinctions. I also reject the concept of women's writing as a bio-essentialist category: understanding that the work of these poets often comes from the perspective of those excluded from historical conceptions of womanhood; this thesis is cognisant of non-binary writer Akwaeke Emezi's suggestion that the category of "woman" can (and, perhaps, should) be understood not as an exclusive or binary category, but as mindful of marginalised and excluded presentations of gender (Emezi). As a result, not all of the poets who are examined in this thesis conform to a binary consideration of gender, offering consideration to the ways that gender-based assumptions can affect writers outside of the binary, too. This thesis is alert to the reductiveness of white feminist models of women's writing, especially in a field like performance poetry, which is often populated by poets of colour and

queer poets. Instead, I explore such poetries through this wider lens, considering how the conception of gendered reception as enacted here can be useful in exploring the work of poets outside of the gender binary.

This thesis understands performance, too, as an expansive category and explores performance poetries in their multiple forms and iterations, from audio-text recordings and stage performances to digital performance, tracking commonalities and connections between these forms. While this thesis cannot cover every site of Anglophone performance poetry, it discusses influential iterations of the mode, both historical and contemporary, foregrounding the often sidelined issue of gender in such poetries.

The expansive approach taken to these factors extends to the origins of the poetries I examine. Although many of the poets who I analyse work in the United States, the poetries examined here are transnational in their origins. In an African American context, and in the wider context of the Americas and Black Britain, the oral cultures of Africa and Atlantic slavery profoundly inform performance poetries, including digital poetries, which flout national borders. At the same time, US performance poetries from slam to hip hop have become global modes, adopted and adapted by performers the world over.

This thesis explores Anglophone women's oral poetries of the 20th and early 21st centuries, focussing on the evolution of US and Caribbean oral traditions. While there are numerous studies of orality as in its social and artistic functions (Ong, Foley, Finnegan), there are few that are attuned to orature as a component of poetry, and criticism of performance poetries remains an evolving field. These criticisms continue into the present day, with critics minimising the legacy and craft of performance poetry and its connection to the e-literatures we see popularised today. This thesis expands the canon of performance to the contemporary moment. Exploring how digital sites of

performance are in a continuum with in-person performance, I theorise the intertexual "signifyin'(g)'" connections between these poetries. Insta-poetry, for example, is a poetics of the digital age which transforms performance in how it is enacted and received, while preserving many of the traces and markers of in-person performance.

This thesis analyses, primarily, slam, insta-poetry and BreakBeat poetry, as well as modes which lie between these iterations, establishing a continuum of performance poetries by women in a transnational context. Performance is understood here as a poetics, an aesthetics which has its own tradition on which its practitioners signify. Performance is understood here as a technique of poetic expression in its own right with historical connections and subjectivities which span and return across eras.

In beginning this project, I had envisioned it having a more or less chronological structure, exploring the histories and practice of performance poets across a number of time periods. However, in exploring the tradition, I came to realise that such a structuring would be misleading: this is not a serial survey, but an exercise in uniting performance poetries enacted by women poets across literary-historical eras, cultures and styles. I examine a number of aspects of performance poetry, beginning with orality and musicality as a basic impulse of performance, before moving on to the concept of embodiment in performance. Finally, I consider how poets explore both their publics and politics through performance. Throughout, I consider how the *act* of performance itself figures in performance poetics.

My research contributes a new perspective to studies of performance poetry in examining its iterations in the context of the gendered reception and the creation of performative traditions, and in uniting the performative qualities of both the o- and e-agorae, respectively the oral and digital realms of

expression, as suggested by John Miles Foley. My thesis is innovative, in particular, in its exploration of insta-poetry, a mode which has received even less critical attention than performance poetry per se. What critical reception there is of poetry in performance often fails to engage with performance as a tradition distinct from page poetry, or to make links between in-person and digital performance in the context of the demographics of the performers. My research reveals the close connection between in-person and digital poetries. I consider the difficulties posed in reading performance poetries generally, and extend this consideration into the difficulties in reading digital performance, too. As digital poetries, particularly, are more transmissible via print mediums and removed from their performative origins, the status of performance poetries is further diminished.

Literary critics have been wary of engaging, closely, with performance poetry and digital performance poetry. Scholars have tended to focus on the social and anthropological, rather than the form and stylistic dimensions of these poetries. Again, as Novak states, this is in part due to the interdisciplinary features of the form, which is "not only literary but also musical [...] and theatrical", "complicat[ing] its unambiguous allocation to traditional research disciplines and review categories" (11). Performance is less often considered as an aesthetic practice than as a social phenomenon perhaps because "the discipline offers no systematic methodology, no analytical 'toolkit'" (Novak 11). This thesis reads performance poetries closely and in context. Scholarship has yet to catch up with the new poetries explored in this thesis: much of the critical engagement with this material cited in my thesis stems from non-academic sources, since the reception of performance poetry, like its practice and consumption, takes place outside the academy. In the chapters which

follow, I sample selected poets to show how performance works as a poetic mode across time, reflecting on a number of aspects of these performances.

Methodologies and Literature Review

Given that this thesis seeks to explore the performance practices of female poets across a range of poetic scenes, the corpus of poets is something which requires some attention. My primary impetus in exploring this practice begins with insta-poetry and contemporary performance cohorts, with a focus on North America as a result of my own research background. The influence of the North American practitioners of performance poetry is equally cause for the selection of this corpus – though some British poets are included in this thesis, it is usually in the context of transnational poetries or indeed the globalised nature of online spheres. Certainly, there is much scope to explore the specific contexts of British performance poetries, but that is outside the remit I have delineated for this project. As such, in exploring a lineage within performance practices, I look back in time to potential sources for inspiration and exchange between these poets, but equally to contrasts between different iterations, emphasising the gendered dimensions to the practice of performance. Of course, it is important to note, too, that my choice of poets was somewhat limited to poets whose work *is* most widely available in recorded form, which influenced the choice of corpus, and as such is suggestive of "influential" poets and performers regardless of gender. In selecting digital poets to explore, I have primarily sought examples who have cross-pollinated from spoken word spheres, in light of the early connections I make between the o- and e-agorae. By limiting the scope of the thesis primarily to North America, each chapter is then able to investigate the historic and contemporary links between poets,

resulting in a chapter-by-chapter corpus exploring salient examples of performances and practice in poetry.

One of the primary aspects of the performance poetry analysed in this thesis is the oral component: this is a key aspect of the work of spoken word and slam poets, but also connects to e-poetries. John Miles Foley describes oral poetries as a craft that "lives throughout history and around the world, dwarfing written poetry in size and variety" (*How to Read an Oral Poem* 22). Foley, like the majority of theorists of oral poetry and the oral tradition, notes the critical neglect of the practice. In his *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Charles Bernstein points to the dual critical neglect and "crucial importance" of poetry in performance to poetries of the 20th century (3), an argument also made by Kamau Brathwaite, who emphasises that spoken word poetry, particularly the "nation language" poetry of Caribbean and African poets (and, as posited by Fahamisha Patricia Brown, African American poets), has long been neglected and, when noted, critically deprecated, despite the fact that oral literatures precede and co-exist with written literatures (*Nation Language* 17). Spoken word poetries remain an important component of the performance poetry tradition, and so my methodology incorporates critical paradigms drawn from orality studies to understand and excavate the place of orality in contemporary performance poetry, as well as examining the links between poetry and the online poetries that thrive in the contemporary poetic sphere.

In my first chapter of my thesis, I outline the importance and aesthetics of oral poetry, the way voice functions in poetry and how these two aspects converge. In doing so, I create a framework for understanding the present conditions of performance poetries/spoken word poetry that draws on Fahamisha Patricia Brown's findings. Brown warns against the reductive understanding of oral poetries as "the ancestor of the written language", a

genealogical definition that ignores the sustained production of oral poems and relegates orality to "a single pristine form that arises strictly in letterless societies" (Brown 27; *How to Read an Oral Poem* 26). I also examine the different contexts of oral poetries, as well as its resurgence in the 21st/late 20th centuries, drawing on Brathwaite's study of nation language in Caribbean poetries and Janet Neigh's *Recalling Recitation in the Americas*. I also expand on and interrogate John Miles Foley's position that the internet is the natural continuation of oral cultures, a concept that has been realised in recent years, revealing the live connection between the oldest and newest forms of communication, dissemination and cultural expression. As proposed by Foley, the internet is a 'natural' evolution of the oral tradition in that both are "dependent not on static products but rather on continuous processes" (*Oral Tradition and the Internet* 5). In my readings of digital performance poetries, I note the ways in which properties and functions of an oral tradition are reproduced in the participatory and communal nature of performance poetries, inflecting their performative aesthetic. There have been periodic resurgences of interest in oral/performance poetries, and although Bernstein warns against viewing these trends as part of a "perennial 'revival'" of poetry, it is hard not to view the current cohort of readers and poets as marking a new departure in poetry (5). For instance, Maria Damon draws attention to the democratisation of poetry through slam, while the counter-cultural/collective work of poets of the Beat Generation and Black Arts Movement is well-documented.

A number of the poets considered in this thesis have their origins in slam, and so critical perspectives on this movement inform my methodology, including those of Susan Somers-Willett and Javon Johnson, whose work focuses on the performative nature of slam poetics. In considering the gendered nature of orality – as Brown states, "men and women share a vernacular

culture, yet they experience culture, a way of life after all, with gendered difference" – it has been useful to consider the perspective of slam poet Alix Olson, who contends that "oral tradition has been integral to women's experiences since the beginning of recorded time" (101, xi). Olson's commentary in her introduction to *Word Warriors* in 2007, considers the contribution of women to the slam movement, and assesses the way in which the "undiluted expression" of orality enables them to create art that is "a vehicle for social change" (xv).

Literary theorists and sociologists have explored the history and status of oral literature and poetry, and many, from John Miles Foley to Ruth Finnegan to Fahamisha Patricia Brown, have elucidated on the role of the spoken word in literary culture the world over. This thesis focuses on oral poetries as a vital component of spoken word culture; drawing on and combining the theories outlined above, I have devised a critical framework in which I advance my interpretations of poetry in performance. Julia Novak's mediations on how we approach the study of poetry in performance is a key factor in my own approach, in particular her caveat that

> [i]f literary scholars continue to sideline live poetry as an inconsequen-tial by-product of printed poetry, as lying outside their academic domain, future scholars will find no documentation and prior critical engagement from which to reconstruct a history of live poetry that will enable them to engage with new developments in the light of their historical context
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Theories of performance stem from and are informed by several intersecting fields, but the area of poetic performance, as poet-critic Charles Bernstein notes in *Close Listening*, has been comparatively neglected: "while

the performance of poetry is as old as poetry itself, critical attention to modern and contemporary poetry in performance has been negligible" (3). *Close Listening* combines critical commentary on the performance of poetry from a number of angles, considering voice, sound, performance and visual components in reading and receiving poetry. Such a lack of attention has contributed to a "resulting lack of historical documentation and a critical language" which I aim to explore here (Novak 16). But Bernstein's book is not an exhaustive or definitive source; given the innovations in poetic form since the publication of his study in 1998, in combination with the wide range of performance poetries considered in this thesis, I also draw on theories stemming from other critical traditions and viewpoints, in particular theories of performativity that examine the staged performance of identity, the use and function of technology in performance, and the challenging of cultural hegemony through performance.

A key factor in exploring these poetics is the concept of intertextual exchange and interrelation between texts. In examining these poets along a continuum, by necessity, they *must* intertextually signify upon or refer to one another. As I mention elsewhere, the theories of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. are particularly germane here, as this mode of literature, I argue, is vanguarded by poets who find inspiration and influence in the African diaspora. I also invoke the work of Alice Walker and Susan Willis in terms of their ideas of a female tradition of signifyin'(g); understanding that oral forms as one which is a historical method of dissemination for women, who were long excluded from print modes of expression. Such a device, as Olson, too, suggests, has been utilised by women across eras and cultures in order to share and transmit stories and wisdom. Drawing from this I consider how Gates, Walker and others expand upon the intertextual theories of Harold Bloom, cognizant of how the

enactment of intertextuality differs for "marginalized and oppressed communities and individuals, the ' death of the Author ' and the celebration of interpretive uncertainty are not as obviously liberatory as they appear to be to critics such as Barthes" (Allen 4).

Firstly, I draw on theories of gender and performance, or gender performativity, in constructing a primary critical paradigm for my research. I have chosen to focus exclusively on the performative practices of female poets and so analysing gender in performance is necessarily a formative component of this methodology. Among the most influential theorists who have contributed to my own analytical rubric are Judith Butler, Jill Dolan and Peggy Phelan, three women critics who have shaped and gendered the discourse of performance theory in the 20th century. Butler, in their seminal work *Gender Trouble*, provides a template which allows for analysis of the performance of gender in culture – this is particularly relevant in considering the ways in which performance poets across different eras replicate and confront the cultural hegemony in which they write. Butler's *Gender Trouble* questions the "natural fact" of gender, supposing instead that "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real", and that femininity is an act of cultural performance rather than an innate state of being (xxxi). What I draw specifically from Butler's argument is their discussion of the ways that the performance of femininity becomes othered in a male-dominated world – performance and writing which is explicitly gendered as female is notable. While Butler's work focuses on the sociological performance of gender, given the blurring between poetic persona and poet in performance poetry, their theories may fruitfully be applied to poetry. In tandem with my examination of gender, I draw on Marjorie Perloff's point, that technological advances have led to a shift "from the high/low divide in the arts to an emphasis on

marginalisation" (10). As Perloff, taking inspiration from Fredric Jameson, contends, poetry criticism has moved from this high/low approach to one which considers the insider/outsider in cultural production and hegemony. These approaches have influenced my considerations of gender and ethnicity in performance, particularly with reference to the language of poetry. Equally important to consider here is Richard Shusterman's reflections on this topic, reflecting on how hip hop, like many of the poetries I explore here, "lurks in the underworld of aesthetic respectability" (613). Much as insta-poetry and other forms of performance poetry are often derided as simplistic, so too is rap, whose lyrics can "seem to be crude and simple-minded, the diction sub-standard, the rhymes raucous, repetitive, and frequently raunchy" (Shusterman 614). Yet, argues Shusterman, it is these factors that render this form as poetry, as well as offering a threat to broader cultural concerns. It is interesting to note how such factors can relate to other poetries in performance, too, particularly in his analysis of the form as "a postmodern popular art which challenges some of our most deeply entrenched aesthetic conventions" (Shusterman 614). As poetics challenge the status quo, particularly in relation to cultural reproduction, they can be subject to resistance and backlash in this struggle for cultural dominance.

Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, too, has allowed me to consider how performance troubles our relationship with both cultural dominance and temporality. Phelan argues:

> [p]erformance'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. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the

> promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance. The pressures brought to bear on performance to succumb to the laws of the reproductive economy are enormous.
>
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As I argue here, performance in a traditional sense resists reproduction, but Phelan's argument is focused upon performance art and theatrical performance, valuing an "emptiness" that expands the working space for artists, as well as shifting the value of art and literature more broadly (148). How does Phelan's argument inform a thesis which focuses on the reproduction of performance, whether in recordings, in the case of many of the earlier performance poets whose work I examine, or the explicit reproductions that occur in more technological strains of poetry? In light of Phelan's argument, we have to consider how to approach each individual iteration and performance of a poem; as Phelan insists, quoting Emile Beveniste, in her chapter on reproduction and performance, "Being an individual and historical act, a performative utterance cannot be repeated. Each reproduction is a new act performed by someone who is qualified. Otherwise, the reproduction of the performative utterance by someone else necessarily transforms it into a constative utterance" (149). Phelan's work is key to understanding the performance of language, as each performance becomes a new work of art, distinct from those which have come before.

The concept of experimentation (especially with voice) in relation to performance poetics is a crucial component of my thesis. At its core, performance poetry negotiates authority and identity, often in highly gendered and racialised ways. As Kathleen Crown writes in her analysis of spoken word poet Tracie Morris, "who speaks, and the materiality of the speaking body (its

race, gender, sexuality) *matters*", as this embodied performance allows performers to markedly differentiate themselves from a hegemonic society and literary world (217). This comports with Fahamisha Patricia Brown's exploration of the gendered and racialised aspects of African American vernacular culture in poetry, again illuminating how different performers and performances elicit different meanings and demand different interpretations. My approach also draws on Bettina Hoffman's survey of aurality in poetry, in which the "notion of race is not stable but contingent upon the ways every performer realizes race or ethnicity": as Hoffman notes, the aural quality of performance poetries and their reception have become widely accessible "due to technological progress" (223).

In exploring the role voice plays in the performance of poetry, it is important to note, too, the role of other sonic examples in performance. Music is a vital component in many performances of women's poetry. The blurred lines between (song) lyrics and poetry have often been noted, with many musicians described as poets in their own right, but the ways in which musicianship alters the way that we receive and write poetry is less often studied. Cross connections between music and poetry have been traced in the field of hip hop studies, but my examination of musicality in relation to the performance of poetry is different in kind, concerned less with the musicality of traditional poetic metre and rhythm and more with the cross-pollination that is a contributing factor in the creation of an aesthetic of performance, from jazz poems, the predominance of music in Dub and Black Arts poetry and in the work of slam poets, as well as performers such as Jamila Woods and Kae Tempest. As a result, my focus is on the ways in which music and poetry in performance are interlinked, particularly in light of hip hop culture and the work of artists developing out of this genre, such as the BreakBeat poets. I also

explore music as a tool in performance. In close readings of poets' and performers' work, from Black Arts Poets to Dub Poets to Slam Poets, I examine how these poets incorporate the sounds of different styles of musical influence.

I draw on and redeploy different critical perspectives on the continuum of poetry in performance, including Javon Johnson's discussion of slam poetries and Susan Kozel's considerations of performance in the technological space. My research examines performance poetry as a continuum, with women writers and gendered performance the focal point of performance along that continuum. Slam poetry is one such iteration of performance poetry, although, like insta-poetry, it is hardly a cohesive or singular style. Defined as the competitive wing of spoken word poetry, the movement involves performative battles between poets or groups of poets for the appreciation of a live audience. Javon Johnson's *Killing Poetry* examines the enduring power of the practice and its specific connections to questions of gender and authenticity[2]. His examination of the way that performance works in these regards is suggestive, particularly his examination of the role of the audience in what he terms this "radical theatre which refuses the confines of the traditional stage" (3). Johnson's model may be applied, I contend, to audience interaction with poetry in the digital sphere. Susan Kozel's theories of technological performance are likewise a useful tool for considering performance and the digital, in particular in considering the ways in which social media locations have become venues of performance. Kozel's chapter, "Multi-Medea: Feminist Performance Using Multimedia

2 I explore the authentic with consideration of Lionel Trilling's philosophical exploration in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, wherein he suggests that authenticity "suggest[s] a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity' does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life" (11). Further to this, Emily Bootle's recent essay collection *This Is Not Who I Am: Our Authenticity Obsession* provides useful context in consider the art, culture and authenticity in the digital age – as the internet has given us "enormous scope for fakery" while simultaneously "providing us with the means to have our authentic self [...] recognised by others through online engagement" (4).

Technologies" in *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance* considers the critical paradigms (and lack thereof) for examining the ways in which "the performing arts are distinct [...] from the performing life", a distinction I take into account in examining how the self is performed and constructed by poet/performers in genres of poetry where there is an "exceptional emphasis on the role of the author and his or her identity" (Kozel 301, Somers-Willett 17). In drawing on Kozel and Somers-Willett, I assess how the relationship between audience and performer is enacted, both physically and technologically, and how these converge with other aspects of performance and the performative.

This thesis seeks to recover the history and legacy of doubly excluded female poet/practitioners, and so gender, a key facet of the work I consider here, also shapes the critical paradigms with which I engage. As a result, in incorporating theories of performance, orality and embodiment, as well as the gendered reception of performance poetries, I incorporate feminist approaches to literary analysis to explore this work from a gendered perspective. My research identifies the ways in which a number of female-identified performance poets tap into an established craft of women's performative and poetic traditions. The gendered reception of women's performance, on the part of artists and in society at large, is crucial to my analysis. I have previously outlined some of the ways that gender and performance theories have been subsumed into my own critical framework, but here I will further outline the theories of gender studies theorists, embodiment and feminist readings of poetry that have been key to unlocking meaning in the work I am researching. For example, I draw on and develop Kathleen Crown's assertion that the "materiality of the speaker" is vital in performance poetry: the act of speaking as a woman (or as a woman of colour and/or as a queer woman) lends specific meanings to performance and reception (217). In other styles of performance,

the centring of the body as an aspect of the performance raises issues and questions as to how gender plays with and alters one's perception of a piece. Consequently, I draw on theories which engage with gender and performance (and where these two collide and intersect) in order to analyse, explore and understand these issues.

This thesis defines an aesthetic of performance among women poets and performers. Performance and spoken word poetries are forms that, through frequent resurgences, span many decades and many locations. My research pays particular attention to a women's tradition, more often ignored by both page poetry critics and the male-dominated performance circuit in anglophone literary cultures (Olson *WordWarriors*). In examining how gender impacts the aesthetic of performance poetry, I draw on Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue's *We Who Love to Be Astonished* (2002) and Elizabeth Frost's *Innovative Woman Poets* (2006), collections which explore the ways that women poets use performance in their work. In the latter, the investigation of visual poetics by Alan Golding and Linda A. Kinnahan have been useful in my consideration of the performative aspect of composition in the work of female Instapoets. The minimalist use of language and scarcity of presentation of insta-poetry is often mentioned in criticisms of the mode, crediting such an 'aesthetic' to the "deleterious effect" of social media (Watts). Golding, in his analysis of Susan Howe's visual poetics, draws on Kristeva's association of "the feminine with rupture, gaps, erasure, absence" (159). Golding's argument intersects with that of Instagram based artist Audrey Wollen, who celebrates the void in art as a specifically female space (or non-space) for creation, as demonstrated in the below images:

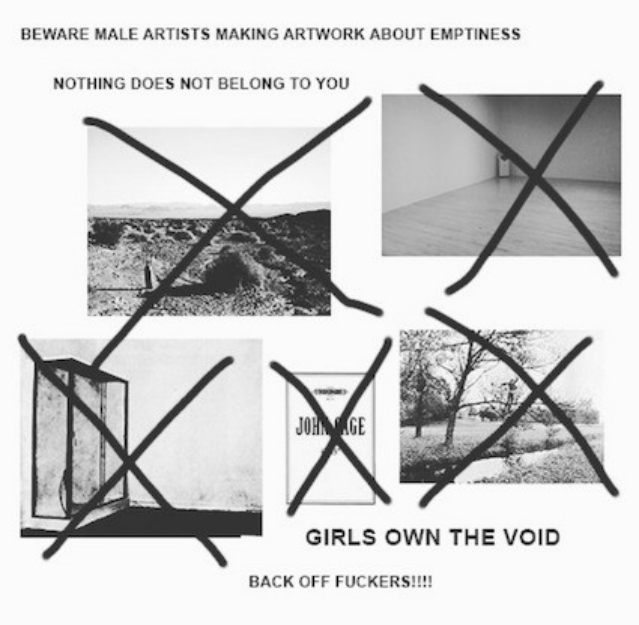


Figure 1: @audreywollen

THE SAD GIRL HAS "DADDY ISSUES", A BRUISED SEXUALITY

THE SAD GIRL FALLS IN LOVE EASILY, BUT COMMITS RARELY

THE SAD GIRL ESCHEWS THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DOMESTICITY

THE SAD GIRL AVOIDS THE DOMESTIC NOT OUT OF DEFIANCE BUT A SELF-DESIGNATED INCOMPETENCE

THE SAD GIRL HAS A HISTORY OF DISORDERED EATING, IF NOT TOTAL ANOREXIA

THE SAD GIRL CONSISTENTLY STRUGGLES WITH HER WEIGHT, DESPITE BEING TOLD HER SIZE IS ACCEPTABLE

THE SAD GIRL SETS TRENDS

THE SAD GIRL HAS OBVIOUS INVESTMENT IN INDIVIDUAL STYLE AND PERSONA

THE SAD GIRL MAINTAINS A NONCHALANCE THAT ANTICIPATES BEING STOLEN FROM

Figure 2: @audreywollen

Wollen's theories of performative femininity are a useful tool in building a mode of analysis for the technological aspects of this thesis: her "sad girl theory", for example, posits the witnessing and aestheticising of sadness as a signal of protest in a patriarchal world, something which can be immediately called to mind in the work of insta-poets. I also draw upon the work of Legacy Russell in this regard, particularly her explorations of how one learns to "construct and perform [their] gendered self" in the digital world, with "female-identifying people, queer people, Black people invent[ing] ways to create space through rupture" (1, 7) The nature of the work examined in this thesis also requires the incorporation of aspects of both theatrical and visual arts criticism, such as Erin Striff's commentaries on performance in theatre and art. I draw on Striff's identification of the freedom in feminist performance art which "created a space for women to voice their personal beliefs and feelings", allowing work of this kind to have a rhetorical function which ties to the public function identified as key to poetry in performance (*Performance Studies* 1). These excavations have proven invaluable to my understanding of the cultural contexts that allow gender to influence performance, interrogating the ways that women performing have been neglected and yet subversive figures across modes and eras of performance.

The notion of subversion is particularly pertinent in relation to the aesthetics of the poets considered in this thesis. Rupi Kaur, Dominique Christina and others centre bodily acts in their work, combining the performative, the visual and the poetic in new forms of embodiment. Theories of embodiment, therefore – the use of bodily experience to process emotions

and experience, relating these matters to others – is a key facet of much of the poetry I explore in this research, as the experiences are acted and enacted as they are processed through poetry. For example, Susan Bordo, writing in "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity", describes the female body as "a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed" (165). When used in performance, the female body – typically associated with a gendered voicelessness and patriarchal oppression – can take on a subversive meaning, signalling protest.

I also consider the gendered receptions of the work I examine. Women's writing has traditionally been associated with the private sphere, with inward expression and private experience. In the process of transference into the public sphere of performance, the women's poetries with which this thesis is concerned give women's writing a new life and voice, pushing female experience and expression into the public sphere, as well as exposing matters often relegated to the private realm. In doing so, these poets often provoke a backlash among their contemporaries. I therefore interrogate the second-wave feminist adage that "the personal is political" in women's writing, examining how that equation is enacted through performance. In a similar frame, I analyse how feminist readings may challenge cultural assumptions that the female reader and performer are "passive, invisible, unspoken subjects" ("The Discourse of Feminisms: The Spectator and Representation" 290).

My critical approach to gender does not assume white feminism or white femininity to be the default position of gender theory. While many of the theorists I have previously identified as contributing to my critical paradigm elaborate gender theories that do not cater to issues of race/ethnicity, I draw in equal measure from Black and Woman of Colour feminisms which are

cognisant of the complex relationship between race, gender, and ethnicity. Studies of the intertwined issues of race, ethnicity and gender by bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde and others enable me to examine women's performance poetries without the prior assumption that white femininity is the default when gender is performed. As a result, race and ethnicity become important factors in how gender is performed by these poets, as my research tracks the embodiment of both gender and race through spoken word and performance.

This tendency of many mainstream gender theory and feminist movements to focus on white feminism and to reduce the Other to a binary between male and female has long been noted by scholars such as Anzaldúa, Layli Philips and Barbara Smith, activists and academics who have pioneered racially and ethnically inclusive strands of gender studies. Writing in the seminal work *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, Cherríe Moraga identifies the necessity for a radical approach to gender, arguing that "the woman of colour life *is* the crossroad, where no aspect of our identity is wholly dismissed from our consciousness, even as we navigate a daily shifting political landscape" (xxii). While many of the pioneers of this revised and nuanced approach to gender theory were writing in the 1970s, the need for work of this kind remains. Sidra Zabit-Foster, writing in 2014, explores how online discourse has allowed Black feminism to expand its reach into new areas in the questioning of the self, and how social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr (sites that are often used in the dissemination of e-poetries) allow us to "attempt to achieve a liberating intersectional feminism" (120).

My critical methodology also integrates the gendered dimension of critical race studies. As suggested by cultural critic Dwight McBride, "whenever we are speaking of race, we are always already speaking about gender, sexuality,

and class", and this thesis acknowledges the ways in which these aspects intersect and coalesce (58). Bridget Baudril, in her essay "Contemporary Black? Performance Poetry", establishes the "vanguard" position of many Black artists and poets in the slam poetry and performance poetry spheres (718). As Baudril, amongst others, notes, performance poetry in contemporary contexts is often associated with African American or African diasporic writing, with performance an important aspect in many postcolonial and Black writing and poetic traditions. In contemporary performance poetry spheres, women of colour likewise occupy a vanguard role. As a result, not discounting the contributions of writers of other backgrounds to the development of the craft and aesthetic of performance, the legacy of performance poetry as a specifically Black or African American tradition needs to be addressed. Javon Johnson's study of slam poetry discusses the potential which poetry of this kind has to change the values of poetic form: "to assert one's own humanity, the pursuit of a different kind of aestheticism, or the establishment of new creative and political outlets, the black literary tradition – by talking black and talking back" (18). I have previously outlined how the work I study connects to a female tradition of writing back: in much of the work I discuss, gender, race and ethnicity are interconnected, the overlapping of identities creating a complex narrative for the traditions of writing and writing back traced in this thesis.

The success and creation of an aesthetic of American performance poetics has been credited to an African American poetic tradition, particularly slam poetry. Susan Somers Willett, in her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, gives poet Marc Kelly Smith sole credit for the creation of slam, an assertion that has been challenged. As Johnson outlines in *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*, while Smith may have formalised the practice of slam poetry, the narrative that slam poetry is a white

blue collar endeavour neglects the fact that many Black and Latinx poets, among others, were performing spoken word poetry as contemporaries of Marc Kelly Smith (13). Throughout *Killing Poetry*, Johnson explores how poetry in performance in the United States is almost always linked to African American poetries, tracking the cross-pollination of the craft with hip hop and through to page poetries. Indeed, notwithstanding that many successful performance/slam/Insta-poets are African American, the very problems that Rebecca Watts identifies with the practice – the preference for authenticity over lyricism – are the qualities which critics like Javon Johnson and E. Patrick Johnson establish as specifically African American markers of performance. It is therefore vital, in examining the continuation of the craft in contemporary performance poetics, to establish the origins of the performance poetry aesthetics in the work of African American and Afro-diasporic poet/practitioners.

Authenticity is a concept much discussed with regard to performance: it is the subject of Rebecca Watts' article, one of the key questions of the thesis of Susan Somers-Willett's book and one of the key issues that Susan Kozel identifies in performing art and performing life as separate entities. Questions of authenticity seep into the performance of race, in particular with regard to African American poetries. Javon Johnson considers this sense of authenticity a component of the creation of a "different kind of aestheticism", in notable contrast to Somers-Willett's estimation that "poets of color are often marketed to young multi-ethnic and white middle-class audiences in ghetto-centric ways" (Johnson 18, Somers-Willett 9). The question of authenticity, then, is fraught in these constructions of performance, yet I argue that Johnson's take is perhaps more generative: the ways in which many young female poets of colour see the

expansion of poetry in more democratic spaces of dissemination is a powerful privileging of often excluded perspectives.

Similarly, as a literary device or tradition orality is often associated with postcolonial literatures of the Caribbean. As Brathwaite argues in *History of the Voice*, this tradition is linked to the particulars of voice and the replication of voice in performed poetry and performance to page poems. Janet Neigh, similarly, explores these themes in her case studies of recitation in the Americas, particularly her study of Jamaican recording artist and poet Louise Bennett. In these analyses, performance allows for a de-colonised approach to literature.

The expansion of poetry into online spheres is perhaps a 'natural' evolution, as Foley suggests (*Oral Tradition and the Internet* 5). With the advent and ever-increasing popularity of Web 2.0, social media has become a growing field in which to connect with others. Christian Fuchs, in his critical survey of social media, defines this realm of culture as "opposed to the mass media and broadcasting model typical of newspapers, radio and television" (65). It is important, then, to consider the ways in which internet culture intersects with literature or literary studies. My research is focused on a new strand of poetic expression, one which has its origins in social media sites such as Instagram and YouTube, among others. Literature, like almost everything else, is discussed, shared and read online, as indicated by Kristen Roupenian's viral "Cat Person", a short story originally published in *The New Yorker* which became a viral sensation, provoking discussion and a similar back lash to that faced by poets such as Rupi Kaur (see Grady). Fuchs' book, although published as recently as 2017, includes little sustained analysis of the Instagram platform, although this is surely one of the most discussed arenas of the internet in the present moment and is one of the central locations for poetic dissemination,

with poets beginning and sustaining their writing lives on the site. The rise of poetry in online discourse is exponential, in part because online journals and magazines provide established poets with an unprecedented readership and, as a result, print poetry is replicated online. However, the poetries which are chiefly created for an online audience are perhaps less well received critically, albeit that these poetries have generated their own online discourse and a wide readership (see Leszkiewicz, Tsjeng, Watts). The production of poetry on social media is a logical development of the "participatory culture" of Web 2.0; in common with aspects of oral literature, "in the online world, culture and society are becoming more democratic because users and audiences are enabled to produce culture themselves" (Fuchs 65). Equally, these poetries are more accessible to an audience, since "the main characteristic of "social media" is that they are spreadable media", embedding the acts of sharing and discussing into the very fabric of these poetries (Fuchs 66; see Turkle, see Lee).

While Insta-poetry is the most frequently discussed of these new media poetries, becoming almost a shorthand for any kind of online poetry, it is far from the only social media platform on which poetry thrives; YouTube, Tumblr and Twitter have all to varying degrees become sites for poetic dissemination in recent years. Instagram, however, has developed a particular renown, provoking discussion of the aesthetic quality of Insta-poetry and provoking "the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft that characterises their work" (Watts). As non-academic studies and surveys suggest, the dynamics and demographics of the readership of insta-poetries, and e-poetics, and of their creators, has a considerable impact upon the critical reception of the poetry itself. For instance, as Anna Leszkiewicz asserts in her article "Why are we so worried about insta-poetry?", which examines the phenomena of insta-poetry and the backlash against it, there has been a shift in the identities of poetry

readers, as well in the identities of poets themselves. Citing Insta-poet Amanda Lovelace, who argues that "people call us 'Instapoets' as a way to differentiate us from 'real poets' – aka dead white, straight, cisgender, males", Leszkiewicz examines how the demographics of both the creators and readers of Insta-poetry influence the critical reception of the form (Leszkiewicz). As this poetry is innovated primarily by a cohort of young women of colour poets, its craft and the tradition from which it springs trouble our assumptions and understandings of what poetic craft is. An audience, then, is able to find comfort and commonality in the identity and experiences of poets like Lovelace, in particular those who share the poet's identity. This argument is supported by the ways in which women of colour use the internet, in particular social media; Keisha Edwards Tassie's *Women of Colour and Social Media Multitasking* shows that women of colour tend to eschew the "anonymity afforded by the online experience", instead "self-identifying and seeking other women of color" in online spaces (Tassie xiii). As a result, both the expansion of poetic form and the use of Web 2.0 have changed perceptions of this poetic subgenre.

Tassie characterises virtual spaces as having multiple uses: "locating professional networks, "safe spaces", resources for support, entertainment and relaxation and relatability" (xiii). At times, these multiple functions can coalesce, with entertainment and relatability merging, or resources for support intersecting with entertainment. For Insta-poetry, the online components of these performative traditions allow performance poetry to create meaning differently: one example is the creation of a new language and fluency of emotional transmission. Previously described in terms of embodied experience, this affective quality is furthered by a sense of what Penelope Kemekenidou terms "empathetic hyper-connectivity"; that is, the propensity for online and virtual spaces to be used as an emotional space for connection and bonding,

something which connects with Lauren Berlant's theories of intimacies (1). Kemekenidou examines the ways that women use the internet, in particular social media locations, in order to tackle issues of street harassment, reproductive justice and domestic violence, illustrating how the hyper-connectivity of a digital world can be used and harnessed. Leszkiewicz notes that many of the poets writing under the insta-poet umbrella tend to also highlight such issues as the above, as these poets use their work in different ways as a form of social engagement. I return to this point in the following chapters in further exploring how these poetic communities tend towards activism.

The visuality that social media affords poetry is an important facet in analysing these poems. Soraya Roberts, writing for *The Baffler*, credits insta-poetry with "offering a filtered reflection of a generation scrambling for distraction", replete with "the minimalist curated aesthetic of lifestyle instaporn" ("No Filter"). While Roberts identifies a uniformity in the visual aesthetics of insta-poets such as Rupi Kaur, this hardly applies to all insta-poetry. Such performance entails "a rejection of the Western/classical emphasis on the performance of the critical form" (Somers-Willett 62). The current moment, and its connection between poet/performer and audience, offers a unique point of engagement for the reader. Such a phenomenon perhaps lends support to the idea of performance poetry as a "democratisation of verse", as suggested by Nuyorican Poets' Cafe founder Miguel Algarín. As such, this style of poetry is not an "unchangeable form" appealing "only to an elite" but rather one that is available to and appreciable by all (Harrington 163). That sense of engagement extends to the digital sphere, as "advancements in technology have made it easier for poets to circulate their work without relying on paper" (Neigh 177).

The public sphere allows poetry to both enact and work towards change on a socio/political/cultural level, a potential fostered by the online practice of poetry and by those creating with it. Kemekenidou, who interrogates the different ways in which women and men use the internet, establishes that the default internet (or tech) user is taken to be a male user – the most toxic areas of the internet, as outlined in Kemekenidou's article, are male dominated, and tend, too, to be spaces in which to further denigrate, insult and subjugate women, non-white people and queer people, whether by violations of privacy, verbal violence or at times physical aggression. These "digital technologies reproduce rather than subvert white, heterosexual, masculine cultures and hierarchies of power" (Daniels 102). As a result, the techno-public sphere is not immediately apparent as a female or even a femme positive space; yet, as Latoya Lee outlines, as with many real-life spaces, for want of a better word, women of colour in particular have carved out their own spaces and communities within a hostile virtual reality. Both Lee and Kemekenidou establish that female users tend to create more empathetic and more supportive spaces online, as a corrective and alternative to the perceived dangers of male-dominated online cultures. Jessie Daniels, in her article "Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment", echoes this sentiment in exploring cyberfeminist movements. Daniels explores a variety of cyberfeminist practices in digital spheres, ranging from social media activism to education to recreation, uncovering the "potentially transgressive" in these ventures (103). In incorporating these analyses of digital technologies into my methodology, I am able to better understand the way that the locations of these online engagement impact both the creation and culture of poetry in performance in its contemporary form. Female identifying users of the internet tend to a more collective, empathetic approach to the digital sphere, an approach which is

exemplified, too, by the sharing and connections made and sustained in digital /online poetry publishing.

In a similar manner, the upsurge in social media activity, as well as the different ways in which we use social media in the present day, has allowed social media activism to develop, as evidenced in the preponderance of hashtag campaigns and the plethora of online social critics and activists who are enabled to comment and contribute to online discourse. This discourse crosses paths with digital poetries, spurring poets such as Kaur, Daley-Ward and Dominique Christina to marry their poetry with various forms of socio-political engagement. Janet Neigh identifies how postcolonial poetries in their very existence constitute a challenge to "historically entrenched bias", prompting "intellectual inquiry" through the use of vernacular language (175). I have previously established how oral performance and technological performance may be linked, but the propensity for both modes to address political/social issues and act as "a form of social action" is an important additional factor to consider, the more so since the move into the technological sphere make these texts easier to circulate and consume (Neigh, 169).

The crossing of the boundaries between poetry, politics and activism is not unique to performance poetry; the connections between poetries and political engagement extends at least to Percy Bysshe Shelley's essay "A Defence of Poetry" through Audre Lorde's "Poetry is Not a Luxury" to David Orr's "The Politics of Poetry", all of which comment on the close imbrication of poetry with the politics of the world in which poetry is created (and, by extension, the politics its creator wishes to espouse). As noted above, political engagement is not exclusive or unique to the current poetic cohort; indeed, earlier poets such as Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and Patricia Smith engage with socio-political discourse in their work. The Black Arts Movement, for example, is one

of the most explicitly political poetry movements of the 20th century, while performance poetry, as defined by Alix Olson, allows its participants the opportunity to actively participate in a discourse from which they have traditionally been excluded: "women [. . .] have *verbally* passed down individual stories, [. . .] ensured survival of what might otherwise be lost or suppressed in a male dominated world" (xi). This idea – of a poetry which offers its practitioners the opportunity to engage directly in political commentary and discourse – is taken further by a new and emboldened generation of poets. As slam poet turned Insta-poet Yesika Salgado identifies, these platforms for writing allows her (and other poets) to write for an audience with whom she has an affinity, rather than publishing "in poetry journals to get fellowships and grants", describing her audience as collegiate "millennial Latinas" (Castaneda). This sociological aspect cannot be separated from either the genesis of the new performance poetries nor from criticism of the same. When considering the creation and the impact of this poetry, and the ways in which poets engage both with their readership and with the world around them, the new politicisation of poetry is a vital consideration.

The public sphere shapes both the creation and the reception of 21st-cetury performance poetries. As outlined in Mark Morrison's exploration of Australian performance poet Geoff Goodfellow, the locations where poetry is performed are also vital to our understanding and interpretations of these poems. As I have suggested with reference to gender theory, women's writing has tended to be considered within the private sphere, concerned with interior lives and domesticity, rather in than the public sphere, which engages with 'big 'ideas' and is typically associated with men's writing. This may be a false binary, but the public nature of performance poetry by women is noteworthy. Critics of insta- and slam poetries often cite performers' navel-gazing or ranting as

negative aspects of their practice. Yet the performance and enactment of gender in such poetries and the ways in which women publicly perform what in other media are inward reflections, should be valued and explored, not summarily dismissed.

Morrison identifies the “public function of poetry”, noting that poetry means different things when performed or broadcast for different audiences. In relation to the poets discussed in this thesis, poetry has a “public function”, too. For example take Kae Tempest’s performance of their work across prisons in the UK, or similar outreach efforts by BreakBeat poets in the US. In removing the often “elitist” assumptions many of us have about page poetry, and performing poetry in different contexts within the public sphere, these poets allow the very act of performance to add a layer of meaning to poetry.

Each chapter of this thesis engages specific methodologies to assess the primary texts discussed. As noted, there is a dearth of research which deliberately collects or traces the contribution of women poets to performative traditions, in particular as this tradition expands via digital means. As such, my methodological application is a 'bricolage', melding elements of performance, postcolonial and gender theory, as well as drawing on theories of the internet and social media to inform the reading of digital poetics.

Summary of Chapters

The chapters of this thesis explore aspects of performance enacted by a range of poets. Building on one another, these chapters establish the continuum of performance upon which individual poets draw in their work.

Chapter One: Reading Orality in In-Person and Digital Performance: the first chapter examines orality as a quality in performance poetries, exploring the ways that this is figured in the work of both in-person and digital

performance. Beginning by exploring the histories of orality in poetry by exploring its histories and legacies in the Americas, I examine the poetry of Louise Bennett, Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni, as well as the specific contexts of oral literature. Extending from this, I explore oral performances by slam poets such as Tracie Morris, Patricia Smith and Rupi Kaur, considering how orality can be used to centre the poet in their work. Finally, this chapter extends Foley's theories of orality and the internet in the context of insta-poetries, exploring Kaur, Warsan Shire and Yesika Salgado under that e-rubric.

Chapter Two: Intersections of Verse: Performing Music in Poetry: here, I focus on exploring the links between music and poetry. This exploration moves this particular, intertextual aspect of the history of poetry in performance into focus. I connect the cultural exchange between blues and jazz and poetry, extending the rendering of this exchange into performance, as well as examining the specific blending between poetry and music in Dub poetry and hip hop. I consider the crossovers between poetry and music in the work of Gwendolyn B. Bennett, Diane di Prima and Jayne Cortez, as well as Dub poets Jean "Binta" Breeze and Lillian Allen, before moving to consider the overlap between poetry and music in the contexts of hip hop and BreakBeat Poetry, in the work of Tracie Morris and Jamila Woods. Finally, I consider this aspect in the context of digital poetics, exploring the interpolation of Yrsa Daley-Ward and Warsan Shire's poetry in Beyoncé's digital albums.

Chapter Three: Bodily Representations, Embodiment and Gendered Bodies: this chapter examines embodied performance, considering how certain representations of identity are drawn into focus through performativity. Performance poets such as CC Carter and Porsha Olayiwola as well as rappers Roxane Shanté and Wanda Dee allow for the exploration of representations and performances of femininity in their poetry, capturing such aspects in their

embodied performance. I consider how feminine and trans-embodiment are influenced by societal understandings of abjection, looking to the work of poets Rupi Kaur, Dominique Christina, Kae Tempest and Danez Smith. Expanding on this gendered conception of performance, I look to how poets Blythe Baird, Patricia Lockwood, Kaur and FreeQuency depict and perform sexual trauma in their work. Finally, this chapter considers the connections between embodied performance and gender in the reception of digital poetries.

Chapter Four: Intimacy, Authenticity and Public Spheres: Performers and Their Publics: the fourth chapter of the thesis considers the specific relationship between poet/performers and the public spaces they occupy, exploring how performance contributes to these contexts. This chapter considers the specific reactions that performance poetries provoke, as well as the objectives poets have in moving their poetries into counter-public spaces, as is the case for slam poetries, BreakBeat Poetry and indeed insta-poetry. Continuing on from this, I consider the concept of the persona in performance poetries.

Chapter Five: The Personal Political and Publishing as Praxis: this final chapter considers how both performance poetries and women's writing have been held as political traditions of expression, examining how these poetries espouse or interrogate specific politics. I examine the historical contexts of performance poetries in this regard, as well as how the digital space of performance functions to further this aspect. In examining the work of poets Rupi Kaur, Nikita Gill and Warsan Shire, I explore how these poets utilise political expression in their poetic, contrasting this with the poetics and politics of BreakBeat Poets.

This thesis discusses a wide range of performance poetries but it is inevitably circumscribed in its remit. The digital poetries I discuss, in

particular, are ripe for further critical assessment. My conclusion suggests some of the ways in which both performance poetries and digital poetics may further be explored, with reference to such issues as mental health, the performance of motherhood and the depiction of self-care as a practice in insta-poetry.

Chapter One: Reading Orality in In-Person and Digital Performance

This thesis explores performance poetries and performativity from a number of perspectives, demonstrating that seemingly disparate strands are woven together in the rich tapestry of techniques which constitutes performance poetry as an aesthetic. This is a tradition which is accessed again and again, and is adapted and explored in notable ways by women poets. To appraise women's use of this practice, it is necessary, first, to trace the histories of performance and performance poetries. This chapter therefore begins with a discussion of performativity in the context of oral literature, considering the place of orality in performance poetry, and the resonance of voice and agency in work by women. The significance this mode of expression takes on as performance poetries expand from live performance to digital platforms is assessed by John Miles Foley, who, in *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* connects oral literature with the new avenue of the internet. This chapter expands that assessment in considering the practice of performance and creation of a particular aesthetics of oral performance in both live and digital spheres of expression.

It is crucial to define what orality in poetry, and oral poems, mean. While there is much debate about what constitutes an oral poem or a voiced poem, we can understand oral poetry to encompass a body of poetic writing which manifests across continents, cultures and eras. Describing the genre in terms of the components that construct oral poetry as a mode, Foley defines it as technically comprising "complex arrays of rhyme, alliteration and other sound play, formulaic patterns of speech and intonation; coded gestures of all sorts; electric and continuous exchange between poet and audience; and not least, the withering force of silence" (*How to Read an Oral Poem* 5). This

description, however, as Foley acknowledges, is a basic recipe rather than a prescriptive list of ingredients. Oral poems may contain all of these components, or may pick and choose any number, or, as in the case of poets such as Tracie Morris, may further complicate extant definitions of oral poetry. Ruth Finnegan, in *Oral Poetry*, intimates this, too, warning that "[o]ral poetry can take many different forms, and occurs in many cultural situations; it does not manifest itself only in the one unitary model envisaged by some scholars" (*Oral Poetry* 9). While it is impossible to categorise all oral poems as following a set of formal conventions, as in the sonnet, there are nonetheless certain similarities between different eras or iterations of oral poetry which help us to define and understand the mode or genre.

Oral poems and the poets who write, perform and recite them feature in almost all cultures, both those pre-dating and continuous with written literature. Oral poetry is more than the forebear of a newer technology, as is evident when one looks at the connections between oral and digital poetries. Here I want to expand on Foley's suggestion that these forms are linked due to a compositional dynamic which is "dependent not on static products but rather on continuous processes", positing that the digital arena is more a new frontier for the voice than a textual field (*Oral Literature and the Internet* 5). It may be tempting to apply a chronological timeline to the history of literacy, but oral poems continue to be composed and performed alongside written work or page poetry, with many stage poets experimenting with "new ways to publish and transmit their work, from lyrics to poetry collections, from Instagram images to clothing" (Trévien 1). There are no simple pre- and post-literate divisions between eras; oral poetry is not "the ancestor of the written language" but rather a method of creating poetry that has continued to evolve in tandem with it (Brown 27). The perception of orality as inferior is shaped by the primacy of

the written word in the Western cultural milieu, as argued by Boenisch and Novak, where the "spoken word is frequently associated with nature, primitivity, presence and authenticity, writing conversely, has often come to be considered more artificial; yet is privileged as the more advanced, cultured, and refined means of communication" (Novak 25). As such, while oral poetry constitutes one of the largest creative bodies in literature, one which is being continually added to from historic or pre-historic poetries to modern oral poetries, it is deemed lesser than the written word. In spite of this long history, methods for the capturing, recording and documenting of oral poems and poets are relatively new, notwithstanding the innately ephemeral nature of oral poems. As such, despite being a longstanding practice in Anglophone literary cultures, the body of research concerning oral poetry remains scant in comparison to the volume of commentary on page poetry, despite its much shorter history. More scant still is research focused on women's oral poetry, a surprising omission given that the "oral tradition has been integral to women's experiences since the beginning of recorded time" owing to the historical lack of access to both literacy and the ability to widely disseminate their work (Olson xi). Yet oral poetry is ripe for new consideration, given the contemporary resurgence in spoken word poetries, and indeed, print poetries which are influenced by the spoken word. As Novak suggests in her consideration of live poetry, "[poetry] is experiencing a renaissance through the spoken word", as well as a "willingness to concede to live poetry an aesthetic value independent of print" (11). My aim in this chapter is not to contextualise women's oral poetry from time immemorial through to the present day, but rather to examine how oral poetries inform and inflect a particular strand of performative poetic expression.

Finnegan, in her comprehensive guide, sets up oral poetry as a common cultural practice across the world, from Zulu praise poems, to Japanese work

songs to filí in Ireland. These traditions span both ancient and modern times, encompassing shifts in form, content and execution, and co-existing with written literatures. Finnegan's work was published in the 1970s, and reflects her own study of oral poetry from an anthropological standpoint. Her research thus bypasses (and predates) some of the post popular iterations of oral poetries both in the Americas and in the 20th century, like the work of poets in the Black Arts Movement and Beat Generations, as well as the sustained popularity of Slam poetry in the 1980s and 1990s. Much of my argument in this chapter will focus upon how women poets in these arenas utilise aspects of older oral poetries, as well as innovating new methods and poetics in their work. In feminising an approach to the canon of oral poetry, I examine how women's iterations have subverted what have been dominantly masculine arenas.

The historical significance of identity in oral poetry is particularly prominent in American iterations. With oral poetry, and even in the extension of oral poetries into digital literature, the identity of the poet is clearly centred, as they stand before an audience and speak, rather than being shrouded behind the veil of the text. A poet's gender identity, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation prove invaluable in reckoning with or reading an oral poem. This thesis, like the oral tradition it addresses, is not confined to African American traditions, yet the influence of African American and Afro-diasporic poets and performers on the American contexts of oral poetries has been established by Javon Johnson and Fahamisha Patricia Brown, and is richly attested to by the wealth of Black performers in genres such as Slam poetry. I examine how these poets carry on a legacy in the style of signifyin'(g)[3], as well as considering how

3 Signifyin'(g), a term coined by Henry Louis Gates in his seminal text *The Signifying Monkey*, is a rhetorical practice which is evoked particularly in African American literature. Signifyin'(g) is a form of wordplay, one which utilises techniques such as irony and indirection to express ideas. Word games such as the dozens are an example of signifyin'(g), but it can also describe the ability of African American writers to experience a "double-voicedness" which allows them to write both the language of the dominant culture alongside that of the subordinate and results in "the penchant of the

this legacy has been adopted and appropriated by other poets of colour, as well as by white poets. Additionally, I explore how the very act of performing poetry, rather than creating page poetry, is itself an affront, in its ephemerality and democratic dissemination, to the concept of written literature as an elitist and white Western medium or mode. By continuing to create poetry in which orality is emphasised, poets reject the presumption that literacy is supreme, challenging the ideology that, since the Enlightenment, has viewed oral culture as a lesser form of communication. Poets working within the oral tradition today draw upon the frameworks of resistance offered in such forms, as suggested by Maryam Navabi, exploring how "the use of orality has been employed as both a mode of cultural survival and an expression of resistance within an anti-colonial framework" in remaining rooted in performative and oral traditions, or incorporating the same within one's work functioning as a powerful act (175).

Finally and following on from the last point, this chapter addresses and expands upon Foley's hypothesis in *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind*, published in 2012, before the internet was as ubiquitous as it is today. I develop the connections he posits, highlighting through close reading both the connections and overlaps between oral poems and oral poetry on the internet and the ways in which these diverge, while also examining the work of poets who are innovating this particular aspect of oral poetry in the present moment. I explore the work of poets Tracie Morris, Patricia Smith and Dominique Christina, considering how slam, as a popular subset of oral poetry, carries the oral tradition forward, influencing the e-poetics of poets such as Warsan Shire and Yesika Salgado. The chapter will consider the performative

black tradition to theorize about itself in the vernacular" (Gates 16). Equally, within *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates examines how this can be evoked in literary texts as they reference one another, with works by African American writers revealing connections and interconnections which echo through time.

aspects of spoken word and oral poems, as well as the characteristics that track through these iterations of poetry, utilising close readings of this work in order to do so.

Orality and e-poetry: History, Contexts and Form

As is often noted by scholars in the field, oral poetry is a term that is often misapprehended or even denigrated by the casual reader[4]. Even in more nuanced examinations of the craft, oral poetry is often defined as an ancient practice, one which predates print literary culture, or as a practice associated with 'primitive' communities and cultures still extant in the modern world, while written literature is a more modern and advanced style of communicating. Yet, as Foley, Brown and Finnegan have established, this is a mistaken judgment of a particular strand of art. Much research into oral literature has had an anthropological framing, which does not fully reckon with the literary history and contexts of the work itself, or the formal qualities of such work. In surveys of earlier Anglophone examples of oral literature in particular, there is a tendency to ignore the potential performative aspect of such works. Of course, there are scholars who *do* contend with the literary and performative aspects of such literature, bridging the modern and the ancient, and here I want to expand on that work, focussing on both the performativity and literary bent of oral poetries, and paying particular attention to the conjoining of these qualities as a defining aspect of oral poetries by women. In this section, I explore the shared global histories and interconnections of work in the e-agora[5], or digital space, as well as exploring how the cultural

4 Throughout this thesis, I use the term "reader" when discussing oral poetry; while this may seem like a contradiction, I do so with respect to Foley's discussions of reading. Foley's definition of reading posits that this is a pulralistic term, with many forms of reading concurrently taking place, rather than only textual reading. (*How to Read an Oral Poem*)

5 This is the term Foley coins for the sphere of poetry that oral poems orbit. Text, Electronic and Oral poems all occupy different agoras, abbreviated to the t-agora, e-agora and o-agora respectively. I will use this shorthand throughout the remainder of this chapter to discuss these different spheres of poetic expression (*Oral Tradition and the Internet*). I equally utilise in-person/audio-text and digital

conversations and contexts surrounding these iterations have come to be defined. In this exploration, I pay particular attention to United States contexts, examining how oral poetries from this cultural background have come to dominate our expectations of oral poetry in the English language, although it is telling that this dominance is less prominent in the digital space. In exploring these histories, the aesthetic and formal choices that have come to constitute a standard for such poetries will also be considered.

To begin to investigate oral poetries, it is necessary to track back through time, excavating some of the features and ways that this mode has developed through time. While I will not attempt to synthesise the entire history of oral poetry, I do want to examine a modern history of oral poetry, focussing on Anglophone and American contexts in particular, as well as the transnational and international implications of such poetics, implications that follow through to current iterations of spoken word poetry. As an example, one could look at the transplantation of African forms of oral poetry to the Americas as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, an historical trajectory that explains the dominance of African American cultures in oral poetries in the Americas. This portion of the chapter will contextualise the rich history of orality in cultures whose poetry forms a key part of this thesis, from Caribbean poetic traditions to spoken word poetry in the US. As Brown suggests, "[j]ust as there is no such thing as American popular music without its African American presence, so there is no such thing as American literature without its African American presence", emphasising the importance of this vernacular tradition in the formation of present-day American literature (5). As such, the influence of the "Black Aesthetic" on the culture of orality that exists in the Americas cannot be understated.

performances to discuss this distinction in later chapters.

As I have outlined, oral poetry is not simply a forgotten art-form, permanently replaced by the growth and development of the written word, but rather a rich and living tradition existing in many cultures, across many ages, in both historic and modern contexts. These oral poetries are, at times, stylistically similar, albeit that their subject and delivery take many different forms. Foley's book offers a "how to" for readers curious as to how an oral poem might function and this primer will be utilised in constructing some of the close readings to follow in this chapter, alongside my own critical paradigms. Before analysing primary materials, I locate the origins and contexts of oral poetry with particular attention to the American/western contexts of such poetry. Particularly in modern contexts, the relationship between orality and literacy is often fraught, with components of each tradition impacting upon the other as they evolve in tandem. In *Performing the Word*, Brown addresses such a relationship in the context of African American poetry, which describes the "duality" or "double consciousness" that is at the core of much African American writing (28). This perspective is relevant throughout this chapter, as the influence of African American and diasporic techniques of orality is persistent in oral poetries of the Americas. Brown describes the way in which "the African American writer centers a speaking voice in a written text", offering an example of how orature can be preserved even in transmedial representations of poetry, as evoked in many of the "talking books" which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses in his critical overviews of African American literature (28). In considering how orality in poetry has changed and transformed through time, it is important to consider the interconnections of orature and literature, even as we move online, to what is equally a talking space.

Anthropological studies demonstrate that oral and performance poetries have a range of functions across the globe. One role is that of the griot or historian in African oral traditions, who preserves stories and happenings of a particular tribe or culture. In other cases, an oral poet might relay more generic stories or may seek simply to entertain, without historical and social functions and responsibilities. In yet other cultures oral poets perform a spiritual role, offering praise and prayer through performance on behalf of their audiences. In its present iteration, in American society, oral poetry is often associated with the voice of political resistance. Instead of being a monolith, or an easily definable style, oral poetry is a genre of its own and the oral poet often occupies a revered position within a culture, responsible for such significant functions as praise, historicity and protest. In particular, the political consciousness of oral/digital poets, a focus of this thesis, is a potent commonality between many poets.

Poetries of the Americas are influential and often dominabt in terms of cultural assumptions, public consciousness and pop cultural institutions, such as Slam Poetry and *Def Poetry Jam*. While oral poetry in the Americas certainly did not begin in the 20th century, Janet Neigh, in her exploration of poets E. Pauline Johnson, Louise Bennett and Langston Hughes, establishes that although the oral tradition has historic and indigenous origins, 20th century technologies have brought oral poetries into closer focus; i this is the focus I adopt here, in examining a range of American poets whose work is to be considered in such contexts.

While recitations and readings of print poetry were in vogue in the early 20th century, with poetry readings functioning as "an esteemed but ancillary activity, something an established poet might do spurred by vanity, ambition, or a shortage of funds", it was not until later in the 20th century that oral

performances of poetry came into their own, much like poems composed to be performed. Performance poems were popularised in Caribbean literatures by poets such as Louise Bennett (Gioia 39). Bennett, a Jamaican spoken word poet, popularised the writing of poetry in patois, pioneering a poetic movement based around "nation language", "the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean", "the language of slaves and labourers", rather than the rigid speech or metre of the Queen's English or the form-bound page poetry of many of her contemporaries (*Nation Language* 5). Kamau Brathwaite defines this use of the vernacular as "nation language", a term he utilises to describe vernacular literary cultures in place of 'dialect', a word which carries negative connotations of backwardness. Bennett's work has transnational implications, too, influencing the poetry of poets across the Caribbean and Jamaican diaspora, providing an example of the social functions of oral poetry – her poetry, alongside that of her contemporaries, such as Brathwaite and Jean "Binta" Breeze, captures the sounds and the rhythms of a specific culture, but equally has a resonance across cultures. on. As Ramazani states,

> [p]ostcolonial poets emerge from local cultural worlds, but they are also dislocated by their education, literary inheritances, class status, geographic mobility, and cultural function, as Kwame Anthony Appiah indicates, as intermediaries between First and Third Worlds (149). This in-betweenness both vitalizes and vexes their poetry, which often mediates between alienation and communal solidarity
>
> "Louise Bennett: The National Poet as Transnational?" 53

As such, though the orality of Bennett may be rooted in her status as a Jamaican national poet, her work is influential beyond this. Regarding Bennett (and other poets) as transnational "is not, in short, to erase her difference from other poets, but to crystallize the contours of those differences without limiting

her to cultural nativism" ("Louise Bennett: The National Poet as Transnational?" 60).

Even a cursory examination of Bennett's work reveals the formative impact of orality in her poetry and its ability to convey qualities and an aesthetic which may not be easily replicated via the page. As suggested by the use of Nation Language in her poetry, one of the most notable aspects of Bennett's work is her celebratory and defiant use of the "'corruption of the English Language'" that is Jamaican creole, eschewing standard English in its favour ("Jamaica Language"). Throughout her poetry, with a particular focus here on live performance (as captured on the album *Yes M'Dear – Miss Lou Live* (1983), Bennett vocalises the difference with which she speaks her poetry, rejecting the idea that she and her compatriots should have to express themselves in ventriloquised standard English. In her poem "Colonization In Reverse", for example, Bennett confronts the importance of language, as she explores the emigration of scores of Jamaican people to "de seat of de Empire":

> Wat a joyful news, miss Mattie,
> I feel like me heart gwine burs
> Jamaica people colonizin
> Englan in reverse.
>
> By de hundred, by de tousan
> From country and from town,
> By de ship-load, by de plane-load
> Jamaica is Englan boun.

By creolising and reclaiming the English language in her performance, Bennett furthers the thematic premise of her poem; the titular "colonisation in reverse". In a similar vein, Bennett uses tone of voice, as well as her laughter, to

punctuate her poem, tonally marking the poem in a way that would be difficult to create in page poetry. The "audiotext" of such poems is an important factor, differentiating them from the implied aurality of a page poem, and equally, offering more to analyse than a voiced text alone (Bernstein 5)[6]. Moreover, throughout this poem and others on the album, audience reactions are key elements of the performance, offering excitement, amusement and appreciation in response to Bennett's words; the audience's role in Bennett's performance emphasises the collective function of oral poetry, as both Bennett's use of patois and the story told connect directly to her audience. Bennett emphasises the reclamation of speech and the importance of language in the spread of culture. Just as the imposition of standard English across British colonies functions as a method of control, the rejection of the colonising language has political ramifications. In using Jamaican patois as the linguistic medium of her work, Bennett emphasises the ways in which oral performance indicates cultural markers and celebrates nation language as a valuable cultural artefact.

Turning now, in a roughly chronological manner, to continental America, poets affiliated to both the Beat Generation and the Black Arts Movement utilise aspects of vernacular poetry, respectively incorporating the voices of the counterculture and of African American Vernacular English into the speech and in the performance of their poetry. While the impact of such performance techniques is perhaps less pronounced in Beat poetry, which translates jazz improvisations into the spoken word, Black Arts Poetry is often performed to music, with poets such as Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez

6 As Bernstein suggests, this is one of the ways that performance poetries can lack proper critical appraisal: "Since the 1950s, the poetry reading has become one of the most important sites for the dissemination of poetic works in North America, yet studies of the distinctive features of the poem-in-performance have been rare (even full-length studies of a poet's work routinely ignore the audiotext), and readings—no matter how well attended—are rarely reviewed by newspapers or magazines (though they are the frequent subject of light, generally misin-formed, "feature" stories on the perennial "revival" of poetry)." (5)

heralded as influences by younger generations of spoken word performers who take inspiration from these poets as well as later spoken word-influenced techniques, such as Hip Hop, as well as Slam Poetry more broadly. While some poets, Sanchez among them, reject the moniker of oral or performance poet, the impact which Sanchez's work has had upon generations of performance poets cannot be overestimated. The consigning of oral arts to a lesser category has had an impact on the way such poets are received in the public sphere, informing the that Beat and Black Arts poets are discussed. The cultural status of orature impacts the ways that poetries are received; "a white poet like Allen Ginsberg who often "chants" his work" is not "marginalised as "an oral poet" in the same way that [Sanchez] or Amiri Baraka, whom [Sanchez] claims Ginsberg based his delivery style on [. . .] would be" (Hoffman 11). The late 20th century was perhaps a period of renaissance for the oral poetic movement in the US – from the 1950s onwards, multiple oral poetry movements emerged, utilising the aesthetics and practices of oral poetry in diverse ways. Orality serves as a marker for such poetries, allowing for this "ritualized theatre" to retrace the communal steps of poetries of the past, connecting too to a sense of "powerful presence and resistance" (Hoffman 127).

Such ideas are carried through in oral poetry to the present day. In recounting the influence of spoken word poetries in the US, perhaps the most pop-culturally enduring example is Slam Poetry. A cousin of kinds to hip hop, itself a descendant of the Black Arts Movement, Slam Poetry adds a competitive edge to the spoken word poetry culture of locations such as the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe. Foley, in his study of four oral poets, focuses on this moment in modern oral poetry, describing Slam Poetry as "a serious, full throttled up-from-the-belly wail about what it means to live in America" (*How to Read an Oral Poem* 5). Popularised by cultural moments such as the televised spoken

word event *Def Poetry Jam* and documentary films such as *SlamNation*, this is one of the most resonant oral poetries of the United States, and remains a cultural force in the present day. Although the origins of this movement have been disputed, this type of oral poetry has been advanced by marginalised communities within the US, coming to represent a vibrant and non-canonical vernacular poetry.

Taking these accounts and examples of oral poetry in an American context, it is important to consider the historical circumstances and influences that impact upon these poetries. As noted, there are certain points of overlap between different styles and eras of oral poetry. The dominance of page poetry has marginalised performing and oral poetries: the poetry of the Beat Generation was contemporaneously marginalised due to the oppositional politics and openly gay sexuality of this countercultural subgroup, though these poets have been rather quickly assimilated into canonical poetic culture. While the Beats may now receive a more positive critical reception than other oral or performing poets, there is an unhelpful association between Beat poetry and parodic representations of oral poetry per se, although, few Beat poets are branded solely as oral poets.

No less troubling is the dominance of Beat poetry as stereotypical oral poetry in the US. As I have outlined, and as Patrica Fahamisha Brown, among others, has elucidated, in the New World oral poetries have a long-held association with Black and African American writing. "Nation Language", referenced in my discussion of Louise Bennett's work, is intrinsically linked to the specific morphing of language as a result of the abuses of slavery/colonialism, and this iteration of oral poetry is almost immediately racialised as a result. This same idea is evoked in the vernacular styles of African American writing, which in turn connect to oral poetry cultures.

Historically, traditions of oral poetry do tend to be populated by poets of colour, with a particular emphasis on the sounds of language evident in the Black Arts Movement, the Nuyorican Movement and Slam Poetry. Yet, in spite of all this, the Beat Generation are often credited or remembered as the pioneers of performance poetry in the United States; indeed, in contrast with the legacy of oral poetries which I trace within this chapter, Christopher Carmona asserts that "slam, spoken word, performance poetry, all of which are probably the most popular forms of poetry today were popularised by the Beat Generation", a legacy which is at best problematic, given the ways that the Beat Generation appropriates Black cultural forms like bebop jazz (84).

Before addressing issues of race and gender in the writing and orality of the Beat Generation, it is necessary too to explore the Beats' connections to oral poetry and performance poetry, and to consider how these aspects situate themselves in the wider context of oral poetries in the United States. The Beat Generation was a movement posited as countercultural, outside the mores of mid-century American society; over time, this has come to be understood as a movement that is characterised by an "iconoclastic, freewheeling, community and dissent from both literary convention and conformist 'lifestyle'" (Grace et al 1). While the poetry of the Beat Generation was not solely composed to be performed, there is a connection between Beat and performance poetries in the United States, particularly in the public memory. The poetry of the Beat Generation is often composed with recitation in mind, the oral component key to a sense of spontaneity within a poetry which subscribes to a "first thought, best thought" compositional mode. In Beat poetry, there is a close relationship between the printed text and the performance, de-centring the supremacy of printed texts in much the same way as oral poetries. Yet, in spite of this, much of the writing and central figures of the Beat Generation reveals troubling

attitudes towards race, appropriation and gender, particularly as we examine the origins of oral literatures in the United States and the particular nexus of inspiration from which Beats draw.

Among the many sources from which Beat poets draw their inspiration are jazz and blues music, with Beat poems often appropriating the mode and language of jazz poems, for instance, altering their course from that of the racial uplift pioneered by poets such as Langston Hughes to an improvisation of African American cultural forms which creates a looser association with 'freedom'. These appropriations are one of the myriad of ways that Beat poetry and indeed spoken word forms problematise a connection to Black America; Chelsea Stripe, writing about the presentations of race and gender in the writing of male Beats like Jack Kerouac, notes a tendency to trivialise the issues of racial difference and oppression by "'blurring [...] the difference' between African American and the voluntary 'outsiderism' of the Beats" (Stripe 2). Though often retroactively considered as progressive in light of their willingness to associate with African American writers and within African American spaces, many Black writers, such as James Baldwin and the one-time Beat poet Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) were critical of the propensity of Beat poets to reduce African American experience to essentialist understandings: the very concept of "white rebellion relies on the very privilege these hipsters purport to eschew, and their failure to acknowledge race power relations perpetuates the real danger of this design" (Stripe 4). This is reflected in the use of African American cultural products such as jazz, blues and bebop in Beat language and performance: though the Beats may use subaltern forms, and exist outside of much of mainstream culture white male Beats are simultaneously enabled to "re-enter white mainstream society whenever they deem it beneficial" (Stripe 8).

Although Black poets such as Baraka and Bob Kaufman did write from within Beat culture, Black voices are often marginalised.

Moreover, women writing within the Beat moment are now all but forgotten. The contributors to *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation*, address and redress the neglect of female Beats in critical appraisals. Ad the Introduction states, "many of the male Beats were no more sensitive to the needs of the intellectual women in their midst than many other males of their generation were to the needs of women they worked and lived with", although this issue is hardly confined to the women of the Beat Generation (Charters x). Charters comments on poet Diane Di Prima, focussing on her poetry itself and its reception by her male contemporaries; although one of the few female poets Ginsberg counted as a friend or as a writer of equal prowess to Kerouac or Burroughs, Di Prima has not been given the critical attention accorded to her male contemporaries. As Eftychia Mikelli establishes in exploring the depiction of the mixed race character Mardou Fox in Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*, the Beat Generation was often typified by "patterns of assertive masculinity", with women, in particular women of colour, treated not as individuals but as "an object of cultural observation" in Kerouac's work (32, 31). The Beats created what has been deemed a revolutionary space for both poetic formalism and practice as well as social attitudes, yet women have routinely been denied entry to that space. Poets such as Di Prima write on topics and in a manner similar to many male Beats, yet her poetry is not seen to typify the Beat Generation, reflecting the problematics of gender in the movement, as within media conceptions of performance poetry more broadly.

As suggested above, despite being "radically diverse and tolerant for the Eisenhower era", the gender and racial blindspots in both Beat poetry and its critical reception are important to consider when excavating the historical

contexts of performing poetry in the 20th Century (Weiss). As elaborated earlier in this chapter, the use of oral forms in literature is a tradition primarily associated with Afro-diasporic populations in the Americas, a versioning of the oral tradition of the African continent as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. While the Beats may have popularised the performance of poetry, as suggested above, oral forms were influenced by and very often derived from Black idioms. The poets of the Black Arts Movement expand and innovate on that legacy, for example in poets re-introducing the social role of the poet/griot. Although Baraka broke from the Beats, and would later denounce his early poetry as being composed under the "sway of 'a white aesthetic'", there is clearly cross-pollination between Beat and Black Arts poetries, in their uses of orality and in the political consciousness of their work in oral modes. (Reed). Baraka, as founder of the Black Arts Movement, emphasised the value and social functions of art and literature as a tool for Black empowerment, prioritising the creation of Afro-centric styles of expression. Emphasising the perspective and experiences of Black Peoples and interlocking the artist and their community, the Black Arts Movement emphasises the cultural and community functions of poetry, art and history. Many Black Arts poems are composed to be performed, featuring musical accompaniment as well as the qualities I have discussed in relation to oral poetry. The Black Arts Movement continues within the long-established oral tradition in with African American writing, its writers performing poems in the vernacular speech of their own time.

Yet, like the Beat Generation, the Black Arts Movement has hardly been untouched by uneven attention or opportunity. Javon Johnson notes in *Killing Poetry* that the Black Nationalist Aesthetic adhered to by many poets of the Black Arts Movement was "knotted to patriarchal and homophobic performances of masculinity (16). Equally, as many critics have noted, Baraka's

own writings from this era have been criticised for their misogyny and homophobia, as have those of many of his male contemporaries, an attitude which poet Sonia Sanchez depicts in such poems as 'to a jealous cat'. Women poets of the Black Arts Movement, such as Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and Jayne Cortez, as well as associated poets like Gwendolyn Brooks, have long been neglected in appraisals which designate the Black Arts Movement as macho, or vie Baraka as the sole practitioner of a Black Arts aesthetic. As such, just as the Beat Generation's performances of poetry and appropriations of oral cultures reveal problematic attitudes to race and gender, so are the Black Arts Movement's female poets sidelined in favour of masculinist aesthetics.

The Black Arts Movement, although a short-lived cultural moment, has had a lasting impact on the ways that poetry is/was performed in the United States, for example on the Nuyorican Movement, a cultural alliance of Puerto Rican writers and intellectuals. It was from this movement that the Nuyorican Poets Café became a key cultural institution, and one of the locations most closely associated with Slam and spoken word poetries. Similarly, poets such as Gil Scott Heron and the various voices of the collective The Last Poets, brought the performance of music and poetry together to create a sort of proto-rap, a precursor to Hip Hop music and a key influence on conscious emcees of the 1980s such as Sha-Rock, and Lisa Lee and Roxanne Shanté. The connections between Slam Poetry and Hip Hop are also important to note, as these separate moments in oral literatures come together both culturally and thematically, offering an outlet for those under or unrepresented in both American popular culture and literature.

Slam as a poetic style has become something of a punchline in much cultural comment on American poetries, and is synonymous with shouting and finger clicking as well as deeply personal dirges. Both Javon Johnson's and

Susan Somers-Willett's books on the history and culture of Slam poetry describe the ways in which Slam constitutes an affront to conventional modes of poetry and its academic reception. focussing on the critical reception of the genre, Johnson describes the ways in which Slam poets, no matter their laurels, have been reduced to the status of "non(sense) poets" by dominant scholars such as Harold Bloom, whilst simultaneously exploring the ways in which the perceived "death of poetry" brought about by Slam may be considered to be "generative", allowing these poets, through the oral form, to create poetry outside the confines of page poetry (Javon Johnson 2). Literary histories of Slam Poetry have identified Marc Kelly Smith as its sole progenitor, but that attribution has been queried. Susan Somers-Willett, for instance, locates Slam's genesis, like that of Beat poetry, in poetry readings, but readings attuned to performativity in "the bars and cabarets of Chicago's white, working-class neighborhoods" (3). Formed according to the tenet that "the poet should compel the audience to listen to him or her", Slam Poetry emphasises the need for a poet to perform and not merely to speak, with the audience partaking in the performance too (Somers-Willett 5). Smith's Poetry Slams, as described by Somers-Willett, attracted audiences and participants from a range of backgrounds, experimenting with many modes of performance until eventually settling on the "mock competition" that typifies Slam Poetry as we now understand it (4). Yet, in spite of this acceptance of Smith's identity as the father of Slam poetry, there is, again, some disagreement as to whether Smith, as a white man, is in fact the creator of a movement which has been popularised, innovated and contributed to by, primarily, poets of colour. Somers-Willett, in describing how Smith created the movement, attributes the origins of Slam to Smith "[i]n collaboration with other local artists" (3). This idea is further explored by Javon Johnson, who, in *Killing Poetry*, explores the role of

Blackness in the making of spoken word communities, as he recounts how Smith has been mythologised as the grand leader at the opening of every Slam competition (4). As Johnson points out, Smith "got the idea of competition poetry from the poetic boxing matches that were taking place in Southside Chicago", reminiscent of Gates' discussion of the dozens as a verbal game of signifyin'(g) (23). Poets such as Patricia Smith, as well as "a number of nonwhite, working-class men" aided in making slam recognisable as the poetic movement it is today (Johnson 23). In many appraisals there is a romanticised vision of slam poetry as "utopic", or a democratising force in the elitist world of poetry (Johnson 7). Given the openness of Slam and Spoken Word communities, there is an accessibility and egalitarianism often absent from page poetry, although its democratising limits are also tested and contested. Whatever the countercultural intent of the practitioners, the systems in which they operate tend to privilege male visions of the world, with other identities forgotten and underserved even within this poetic community.

At this point, having illustrated the histories of poetic movements with a significant oral/performative component in the Americas in the 20th Century, notwithstanding the gender bias often illustrated in such contexts, it is important to note that many popular e-poetries (particularly Insta-poetry) have tended to be shaped primarily by female practitioners[7]. Many of the women writing poetry through these mediums, such as Lang Leav, Nikita Gill and Rupi Kaur, began their poetic careers in Spoken Word communities, translating these performances into the digital sphere, potentially pioneering a movement within which female practitioners are ceded a larger degree of agency, though not without a negative critical reception. There are popular male insta-poets,

7 Although, in the case of *ButtonPoetry*, hough the vast majority of the poets shared by the platform are poets of colour, and many of these again are women, the most popular videos uploaded are disproportionally white men.

such as r.h. sin and Atticus, yet this is an arena where female poets dominate, in sharp contrast to previous iterations.

Historically, the formal aspects of oral poetry have proved difficult to document, in part because the ability to record and access a repository of oral poetry has existed for a fleetingly short period in comparison with the longevity of oral poetry itself. Nonetheless it is possible, and even productive, to posit those aspects and qualities of oral poetry which are less simple to reproduce in page poetry. For instance, in oral poetry, tone of voice, pace of expression and accent or dialect are all instantly registered by a reader/listener, in contrast to page poetry, where these aspects are more difficult to access. Similarly, the live nature of oral poetry impacts upon the performance of a poem, acknowledging the temporary or ephemeral nature of the form. In addition aspects of the oral tradition may be infused into print poems; in African American literature, for example many print works are presented as speakerly text, incorporating the oral tradition formally into the written word. Yet it is important to note, other than the translatable aspects of oral poetry, aspects that refuse to be represented on the page.

One example is the paralinguistic features of oral poetry, a quality which is immediately apparent when "reading" an oral poem as opposed to a work from the t-agora, as outlined earlier in this chapter. In oral poetry, the tone of voice in which a poem is spoken, or the pacing of the poet as they perform, immediately conveys meaning to an audience, whereas on the page, these qualities are less effectively or immediately evoked. Take, for instance, the remarkable sonic range of Sonia Sanchez – in performances of poems such as '[Middle Passage]'[8], Sanchez is able to use that vocal range, performing guttural

8 Where possible, I have included a hyperlink of performances upon which I base my close reading, making use of the digital submission of this thesis.

sounds throughout the poem reminiscent of the auditory experiences recreated by musician Abbey Lincoln and discussed by Fred Moten in *In The Break*. Here, and in Sanchez's poetry, the performance moves "inexorably in a trajectory and toward a location that is remote from – if not in excess of or inaccessible to – words" (22). Sanchez's vocalising is able to access performative traditions that have long been invoked in documenting a shared history, accessing aspects of meaning and understanding through performance that is less accessible via the page alone.

The paralinguistic features of orature are demonstrated, as in Bennett's poetry, as emotions, sensations and tones are conveyed fluently through oral performance, as well as featuring the recorded reactions of the audience, again as in Bennett's performance. In other cases, as with the sound poems of Tracie Morris, the performance of a piece such as "Slave Sho' to Video aka Black is Beautiful" would be impossible to replicate on a page. As a sound poem installation, the looping of her voice becomes almost a beat in itself, creating a musical effect as well as playing with how the reader comprehends the poem. Repeating words so that the end of one idea catches and runs into the beginning of the other, Morris' poem encourages the reader to play with meaning. Although performance poetry tends to be connected to the author and their identity, there are also vocal and performative signifiers which connect a poet and their work to specific traditions – take, for example, the aesthetics of slam poetry, which often includes rhythmic crescendos and decrescendos at a pace which coincides with the intensity of the subject matter. Oral performance, as illustrated by these examples, privileges the understanding of poetry through multiple senses.

As well as formally incorporating qualities of the oral tradition into their work, many poets and performers are also charged with transferring or

translating their work into text. This sort of transformations may be described as "versioning", but there is also a tradition of voiced texts, connecting with a number of sources and traditions, but in Western and Anglophone contexts most commonly associated with Caribbean and African American literary traditions. While these speakerly or talking texts such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, tend to be novels rather than poems, the formal conventions that occur in writing as the spoken utterance is translated to text persist. Here, again, the difference between Bloom and Gates' interpretation of intertextuality comes into view; as Allen suggests,

> Bloom' s vision refuses to accept social and cultural contexts as relevant intertextual fields of meaning for literary texts. For Bloom, literary texts can only have other specific literary texts as inter-texts.
>
> 137

However, as Gates and others establish, these texts expand their reach further, particularly drawing from social and cultural contexts in their reach. Allen's meditations upon intertextuality in the digital context is useful to consider in discussing these texts, too, as digital performances are "a new form of textuality which is infinitely more flexible, manipulative and – given the appropriate hardware and software – accessible", continuing this expansive understanding of text (194).

Finally, it is important to consider how the formal aspects of oral poetry and orality are changed again in online arenas. The transformation of the slam space into a digital sphere, while not necessarily an alteration of form, does change how oral poetries are consumed. Venturing into the e-agora, oral poetry brings aspects of its o-agora self into such an arena: for instance, the ways in

which an oral poem is performed for a live audience versus a piece explicitly created for the o-agora, although both carry aspects of the oral tradition.

As Foley suggests, while the difference between e-literature and o-literature might seem like a gulf, the two medias may have more in common than first appears. The open and democratic nature of both, in comparison to the inaccessibilities of print culture, is notable, as is the fact that both are continuous processes. This excavation requires closer focus, however, and I expand upon this in a later stage of the chapter.

Enacting Poetic Voice and Agency

While the historical contexts of orality in poetry must inform research in the field, it is no less important to examine the aesthetic aspects of the form, in particular the ways that poets utilise threads and tropes of orality in the composition of their poems. The texts with which I am concerned here are also impacted by the identity of the poet, as identity and performativity are closely enmeshed and close reading must therefore consider the ways in which orality and identity converge. Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni write as members of a movement, for example, that in its practice and critical reception has been male-dominated. It is all the more important, therefore, to emphasise the ways in which gender is evoked and performed in Sanchez and Giovanni's work: indeed, these poets are foundational in understanding gender representations in traditions of oral poetry in the United States. Following my discussion of Sanchez and Giovanni, I turn to the work of Spoken Word/Slam Poets Tracie Morris, Dominique Christina and Patricia Smith, emphasising the ways in which the aesthetics of Slam Poetry embrace the qualities of oral poetry, and

considering the poet's voice[9], and her audience, as vital components in the meaning of this poetry. In the work of these poets, identity is enacted through poetic expression: the physicality of speaking an identity is often a key component in Slam Poetries. Finally, I examine the continuation of the legacy of orality in the work of contemporary poet Rupi Kaur, who also pioneers a path for poetry via social media which echoes the qualities of oral poetry cast onto the web. This section, drawing on the historical and theoretical contexts of oral poetries, brings the work of a number of poets into closer focus. Using such examples, I create a framework that examines the embodiment of voice in women's spoken word poetry, while not isolating its place within the broader tradition of oral poetry that includes male and non-binary voices. In looking at the work of female poet/performers I focus on a tradition that has tended to be sidelined in favour of the work of male poet/performers, examining how female performers develop their own style of performance, somewhat in the style of signifyin'(g) or specifying, as Susan Willis suggests, in considering a tradition of African American women's writing. Both modalities allow for the development of a parallel tradition of performing and speaking such identities, with Willis identifying the ways that this is enacted with difference by woman writers.

Identity is an essential part of both the composition and reception of oral poetry. One of the successes of Slam Poetry is the "democratising" power of the performances, whereby the voices of Black and Brown poets are received by a public of a similar identity, removing the exclusionary or elitist associations that page poetry may have. Significant to this survey of performance poetry and oral literature is the way in which the poetic voice is enacted through spoken

9 Throughout the thesis, I use the term poetic voice to describe the unique conditions of performance, particularly oral performance, signifying both the spoken words of the poet *and* the persona or perspective of the poet, unless otherwise specified. I do so as I posit performance poetry creates a clear connection between these concepts, with each informing the other, as the poet is centred in such work.

word poetry. As suggested by scholars from Kamau Brathwaite to Fahamisha Brown to Janet Neigh the act of speaking a poem aloud, in the particular rhythms or sounds of one's community, may be regarded as a challenge to colonial domination. In essence, oral poetry resists capitalist and colonial expression because of the way it is consumed. Reflecting on this, poet Yesika Salgado describes her "mango mafia" of readers, evocative of Lorna Goodison's "The Mango of Poetry", as "'the hoops, lipstick kind of girl' who are usually in college and looking for someone who reminds them of their 'homegirls and tías.'", emphasising how her own performance of identity connects to that and is important to her readers (Castaneda). As such, the identity of the poet, who they write for and who and what they write about, are key considerations in our readings of such poetries. I explore this idea of a practice as a mode of expression for women poets, specifically: the voicing of feminine performance exists in its own specific continuum, with a legacy that both connects with and is separate from the wider legacy of oral poetry. In this section, I expand upon the ways in which gender, race and sexuality are mediated and enacted through performance, as well as the role an audience plays in such encounters, considering, too, how this connection may be preserved via digital means.

I want to expand on the idea of poetic voice as a particular technique in oral poetry. Voice, of course, is a part of page as well as of performance poetry, but it is the case that via performance and spoken word poetries the poet is more visibly and audibly centred, lending greater authority and agency to their presence and voice. In *Close Listening*, a number of poets and scholars explore the notion of voice and hearing in poetry, examining how this is impacted by different sociological and historical contexts. In his opening salvo to the collection, Charles Bernstein examines the idea that despite the critical emphasis on voice and persona in poetry, there is little to no consideration of

how voice is performed, or even, of to whom the voice belongs. In Anglophone and North American contexts the voice of the oral poet is of particular interest. Firstly, the ways in which oral poetry, and its public performance, opposes cultural and political hegemony, are intriguing. Secondly, the propensity of such poetries to be practiced by poets of colour, with a focus on the vernacular culture of such communities, is notable – even in the case of Beat poetry, there is the glimmer of otherness. From the Black Arts Movement to Slam Poetry, intention and meaning is closely connected to the way texts are voiced. Finally, the communal aspect of the reading and writing of oral poetry is too often neglected in western appreciations of art and culture. The spoken word poet, in contrast to a poet who speaks or enacts their voice through page poetry, is visibly, audibly, and appreciably present in performance, their voice the authority. Equally, when an oral poet's performance is preserved, a clear imprint of the poet's voice remains, whether it is in the recording of their performance or its reproduction on the page. Poetic voice, and the explicit authorship of such a voice, is explicitly enacted though the embodied speech of the poet.

That aesthetic of embodiment is the more significant in light of the cultural and authorial constraints placed upon the female writer. As suggested throughout *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, the voicing and embodiment of female performers is a vital component of feminist performances, enabling the centring of female authorship and expression through spoken word performance. However, while my focus is the performance of femininity, in particular, it is not only the female voice, crafted and controlled by these poets, that is of interest. In her discussion of Tracie Morris, Kathleen Crown states that the "materiality of the speaking body" is a factor for assessment in oral poetry, as the identity of the oral poet is centred,

immediately demanding a different reading in ways that a page text may not (217). It is not only what is being said that we should consider, but also who, in all the facets of their identity, is speaking. As a mode, oral poetry has, in the US, tended to be vanguarded and dominated by Black and Latin poets, many of whom have been institutionally excluded from traditional and print avenues of poetic expression. Similarly, spoken word poetry has also found a resonance with gay and trans poets, such as the queer spoken word group Sister Spit (Olson). In both cases, the centring of marginalised identities through the explicit action of speaking one's experience and understanding is a powerful example of how oral poetry furthers and is shaped by factors such as the race, gender or sexuality of the poet/performer.

As suggested in the first section of this chapter, in past iterations of spoken word poetry in the United States, the focus has fallen on male poets and performers. Critical examinations of groups such as the Beats all but erase the contributions of female poets and performers, noting their absence more often than examining the work of di Prima and others.. Likewise, popular conceptions of the Black Arts Movement focus on Amiri Baraka and the "macho" (or focus on Black Masculinity) associated with the movement he founded, at the expense of the women poets and writers who were closely involved in the movement, among them Giovanni and Sanchez. But both poets have had a continued impact upon spoken word poetries, perhaps to a comparable extent to Baraka, from their contributions to *Def Poetry Jam,* to Giovanni's collaborations with rapper 2Pac to the incorporation of work by both poets into poet/performer Jamila Woods' album *LEGACY!, LEGACY!*. Both Sanchez and Giovanni write explicitly from their experience as Black women, centring this aspect of their identity in their voicing of poems.

Both Sanchez and Giovanni enact their voices in performances of poetry. Performing poetry and theatrical arts are valuable and vitally relevant forms within the Black Arts Movement, and both Giovanni and Sanchez employ aspects of AAVE and vernacular speech in their performances, engaging an aesthetic of poetic language which veers from the classically lyrical into a newer, realist lyricism. Both Sanchez and Giovanni write explicitly from their perspective as Black women, their poetry imbued with their identity in the ways it is performed and vocalised. Sanchez and Giovanni write from within the Black Arts aesthetic while simultaneously feminising that aesthetic, continuing an oral tradition that is carried forward by women's voices.. Much like criticisms of performance and spoken word poetries which take such work at surface value, as Cherise Pollard notes, "[m]ost critics assume that women poets such as Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez were silenced and objectified by their black male counterparts as they stood in the men's shadows". Such an evaluation neglects the numerous female poets and visual artists, such as Betye Saar, who "worked both within and against the men's assumptions about the relationships between race and gender and art and politics" (Pollard 173).

The composition of Sanchez's poetry lends itself to oral performance rather than to the printed text but here I will examine in further depth the ways Sanchez uses words and sounds to create certain emotions and responses in her poetry. The pace at which Sanchez delivers her poetry allows an audience to further experience the distress or intensity which is the experiential focus of the poem. Sanchez's work is replete with features which may be less easy to access or recreate via page poetry; her later poem "Middle Passage" makes particular use of sound quality. Sanchez's poetry is replete with the features of orality – melding the use of vernacular language, tone of voice and the aforementioned sonic range in such a way that is difficult to imagine

certain poems transcribed to the page, yet which simultaneously highlights the performativity of her work, as revealed on the record *A Sun Lady for All Seasons Reads Her Poetry*. Sanchez performs her poetry, moving from poem to poem in an almost continuous conversation, fluently alternating between introducing and commenting on her work to performance. There is a clear shift in cadence[10] from these reflective interludes to the performative utterance; in poems such as "Blk/Wooomen/Chant" and "A Black/Woman/Speaks", poems which are easily paired, Sanchez reflects on the very necessity to speak as a Black woman, employing aspects of vernacular language as well as embodying aspects of the gender relations previously discussed with respect to the Black Arts Movement: "We stand before you / Plain, ol' black women / And whatchu gon' do with us, black men?" ("Blk/wooomen/chant"). Throughout both poems, Sanchez uses the oral form to elongate and add to the temporal sensibilities of her work, repeating "waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting" in the former and "deep, deep, deep, deep" in the latter to create both urgency and add rhythm to the poem, emphasising those aspects most effectively evoked in the oral form. This technique of elongation and repetition is common to much of Sanchez's work – in "Middle Passage", for instance, a poem which is frequently evoked as typifying her performative and compositional styles, Sanchez evokes the horrors of the titular Middle Passage while also moving through time, elongating and drawing out the word "baddddd" alongside other, quasi-nonverbal, utterances, seeking, through performance, to give voice to what is unspeakable. Sanchez embeds orality throughout her work, whether in direct performance or in the transference of oral aspects into voiced texts.

10 Unless otherwise specified, cadence refers to "[t]he rising and falling rhythm of speech", rather than referring to musical cadence (Oxford).

Giovanni's poetry, too, incorporates very specific aspects of the oral tradition. She deploys a specific rhetorical style in her performances which stylistically prefigures the style used by many Slam poets; rhythmic and controlled phrasing paired with the crescendoing and de-crescendoing of the poet's voice to emphasise the words they perform. Like Sanchez, there are numerous recordings of performances given later in her career, but Giovanni's poetry is also committed to LP records, with earlier work featuring on the album *Truth Is on Its Way*. Here, much of Giovanni's work is performed with a musical accompaniment, to which I will return in the following chapter; it is interesting to note, given Giovanni's vocal cadence, that this accompaniment is primarily gospel music, interludes which often occupy as much of the track listing as Giovanni's own performance. Like Sanchez, Giovanni foregrounds the experiences of women in her work – much of her work here focuses on her own life and experiences, such as the poem "Nikki-Rosa" which employs the speakerly rhetorical cadence paired with this gentle backing track to explore her childhood. Giovanni's performance style foregrounds oral features – the use of vernacular language, the vacillating rhythm of speech, the auditory fluency of enjambment – in a way that will be echoed as I explore the poetic technique of Slam poets. Giovanni's work does not employ the same breadth of sound as Sanchez's, but rather appears to embody the gravitas of an orator or preacher, echoed by the allusions employed in poems such as "Ego Tripping" and "The Great Pax Whitey". The performative impulse here is tied to these rhetorical traditions as in the staccato rhythm in which she recites lines such as "I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal / I cannot be comprehended except by my permission" ("Ego Tripping"). This cadence has proved influential on the performance of Slam poets, whose work frequently echoes such techniques of

the oral tradition in the evolution of the stylised "slam voice" that is heard in performance.

Given the Black Nationalist poetic movement of which they were a part, that both Giovanni and Sanchez's poetries foreground the Black American experience is unsurprising, as they centre such an identity in their poetry. However, this is far from the only example of identity emerging in oral/performed poetry; as previously suggested, this is one of the qualities of oral poetry that particularly aligns with the tradition of women's writing, perhaps in contrast to the default assumptions of writing whereby who the author is or identifies as is either extraneous to the materiality of the text or ought not be considered in our readings of such work. Oral poetry, perhaps more than any other mode, eschews this notion, centring the poet as authority: their voice, their identity, even their body as much a part of "the poem" as any poetic technique.

I now turn to close readings of the work of two poets – Tracie Morris, and Yesika Salgado – to investigate how each poet performs identity as part of their spoken word poetry, and one poet, Patricia Smith, who plays with this idea of identity in oral performance. In these examples, we can see how the ideas of identity I have explored are made visceral in poetic performance. I turn first to Morris and to the role identity plays in her more experimental poetry, in particular her sound poetry. Although her beginnings as a poet have their roots in the spoken word community of the Nuyorican Poets Café, her work as a sound poet is perhaps more widely known. In poems such as "Project Princess" and "Slave Sho' to Video aka Black is Beautiful", Morris performs a poetics which centres her identity as a Black woman. Morris' "Slave Sho' to Video aka Black is Beautiful", for instance, places an emphasis on the meanings and layers created by performance, engaging with the different sonic

aspects of the text in contrasting the refrains "Ain't she beautiful?" and "...but she's too Black". Morris loops these contrasting sounds around one another, creating an engaging sonic performance, whilst also engaging with issues of identity, much as she does in "Project Princess". In both poems, Morris engages with mantras and stereotypes, but offers her own nuance to the matter through her performance. "Slave Sho' to Video aka Black is Beautiful" captures a specific nuance of oral performance, revealing how a poet can engage and disengage with ideas in their manipulation of the voiced text, much as Morris does here. While also a writer of page poetry, Morris' oral poetics are almost a genre unto themselves, an experiment with poetics, sound and music, at home within the Black Radical Tradition within which the avant-garde is very much a Black tradition of composition. Morris, in both poems, utilises this tradition, as well as employing aspects of jazz performance, particularly in the scatting at the beginning of "Project Princess". Both poems centre Blackness as a key idea, much like the earlier poems discussed, but equally forge Morris' experimental prowess, emphasising how the continuation of a particular genre (in this case, the oral tradition) can also be made new.

As established, the embodiment of identity through oral poetry is a particularly important point to consider when examining the work of poets whose identities tend to be ignored and forgotten by the dominant culture. While the majority of the poets I have thus far examined have been Black or African America, other marginalised identities have experimented with oral poetries, likewise centring their identities in performance. Salvadorian American poet Yesika Salgado centres her identity as a "fat, fly Brown girl" in performance, emphasising the ways in which gender and race/ethnicity are signified within her poetry. One example is the poem performed at *TED Talk*, titled "What Happens After You Love Yourself". Here, Salgado performs a

narrative of self-acceptance, using Spanish words alongside aspects of the Slam aesthetic style to emphasise key points within her poem. Salgado foregrounds aspects of her identity – being Brown, being a woman, being fat – and celebrates them, the joy of such self-acceptance highlighted in performance and emphasised by her presence on stage speaking the poem.

By way of contrast, rather than looking exclusively at poets whose identity is centred in their work, Patricia Smith's appropriation of identity reveals an irony at the heart of performing poetry. Smith, a Black female poet and contemporary of Marc Smith, who "got her start in the early days of slam", subverts the role that the poet's identity often plays in such poetics in a poem titled 'Skinhead'. Adopting the persona of a white supremacist skinhead, Smith emphasises the powerful way that voice can be used in a performance (Johnson 23). The gulf of identity here between the performer and what they perform layers meaning upon the poem, with Smith performing what is, at least in the printed word, a sympathetic portrayal of the trials and tribulations of "a white boy who loves his race" (Smith). In Smith's performance of these words, her tone of voice alongside the bodily performance of such emphasises irony. Smith's performance offers a reading of the poem which appears imbued with a sense of double consciousness, while simultaneously negotiating the performance of identity. Take the poem's conclusion, for example:

> I'm your baby, America, your boy,
> drunk on my own spit, I am goddamned fuckin' beautiful.
>
> And I was born
> and raised
> right here.

Smith, in performing these words, complicates the relationship between orality and identity. Her poem is performed through a persona which is far removed from her own identity. Yet, in doing so, her poem is no longer simply an ironic take on the inner workings of a white supremacist. Here, Smith is enabled to tackle the white supremacist institutions of America. Her final statement emphasises the claim to ownership of America by both the persona and the poet herself, rendered in a dual perspective, enabled by the duality of the oral tradition and Black double consciousness.

Finally, I want to further examine the ways in which oral poetry is changed and remains the same in the digital sphere. Not all digital poetry performances are of explicitly oral poems, but there is overlap between the two agorae. Of particular interest in this crossover is the way in which the poet is able digitally embody their spoken words. Another point of overlap is the audience and the audience's interaction and reaction to the poetry, an aspect vital to many forms of oral poetry and to slam poetry in particular. Audience and readers are still enabled to play a role in the poetry, interacting directly with the poet and the performance. Equally significant is the way in which poets adopt and adapt the metrics of social media sites and Web 2.0 more broadly, ostensibly talking platforms, but arenas in which identity is inherently performative.

Digital Literature and Orality

Following on from the discussion of voice and the digital poetry sphere, I now focus more explicitly on the connections between oral literature and the internet. While the examination of both Warsan Shire and Yesika Salgado's work exposes some of the ways the poet continues the oral tradition through digital literature, it is necessary too to examine the technical and technological innovations that are furthered and shared by the two forms of poetry. Drawing

on Foley's scholarship, I explore the qualities shared by oral literature and digital literature in examining and comparing the two as "continuous processes", examining how digital poems have mutated aspects of orality to create their own techniques and aesthetics. Following these explorations of primary texts and form, I assess the cultural considerations that have resulted in the two sharing a space – the crossover of oral poets to the e-agora, and the use of the internet as both a compositional and a dissemination technique. While insta-poetry is perhaps the most discussed form of digital poetry, it is far from the only form. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, while digital literature takes many forms, the primary focus here is poetry disseminated via social media, connecting the performative traditions of oral poetries to the performative arena and nature of social media sites. The oral form is often at the forefront of such poetics, from the sharing of oral work via recording, or mediated texts, to the incorporation of vernacular and oral poetic techniques via digital texts, to the use of micro-blogging platforms, such as Twitter, which allow poets such as Melissa Broder and Patricia Lockwood to perform poetry in a minute, seemingly conversational form.

The connection between poetries of the o-agora and e-agora is not so simple as to state that Spoken Word poets make use of digital means in order to disseminate their work – this is a causal link, one that brings other, deeper similarities to the fore. Foley explores these interconnections in his *Oral Literature and the Internet* in which he describes methods of reading and consuming and creating literatures as existing in different "agoras", with each sharing a set of qualities and tendencies which differentiate them from the other. For instance, while the "o" agora thrives on instantaneous speech, the "t" agora of page literature has a different set of values. While the "e" agora does not simply replicate the o-agora, it does share a number of similarities with the

"original" o-agora, perhaps in light of the innovation or beginnings that both share.

What, exactly, is meant by the concept of 'continuous processes'? Oral literature and digital literatures such as insta-poetry, for instance, share characteristics: each allows for a continued process of editing, without this being an explicit endeavour. I briefly explored the idea of versioning earlier in this chapter, and it holds true, too, in considering the similarities between the two agoras. Another commonality is the way that the author in both agoras shares their work. The ability either to speak and connect directly with an audience, or to post a poem and have it instantly received by an audience, as can be done through social media, immediately alters the dissemination process. Rather than having to undergo rigorous revisions through the print publishing process of say, a printed chapbook or even a small poetry journal, poets have a much more immediate access to their audience, as audiences have to poets. Similarly, both oral and digital poetry cultures resist time and the supposed permanence of the printed text (in oral literature, for instance, once spoken, the performance ceases to exist, at least in its original iteration). As such, the practice of performing one's poetry offers a challenge to many of the systems of production and reproduction in the literary world, yet such a performance continues to exist for those able who witness them. It could be thus considered that both oral literature and digital literature challenge the very notion of "consuming" literature, subverting capitalist systems of reproduction, as Peggy Phelan argues that all performances does, though such a conceptualisation favours the utopian vision of spoken word communities which Javon Johnson challenges.

Foley's *The Oral Tradition and the Internet* is itself a testament to the ways that texts can entirely change shape when moving across agorae, and, in

fact, the failings that may occur in the attempt to republish what is designed or composed for one space in the same manner in another space. Foley's book was originally created as a website, comprising loosely related nodes rather than chronologically organised chapters. As a result, the published, physical book is intentionally difficult to read – as Foley himself states, it "emphasises the disorientation necessarily involved in abandoning the default medium of the book" (*The Oral Tradition and the Internet)*. For readers and academics, books are a comfort zone insofar as there is a guaranteed set of expectations of what the object before you seeks to do as you set off on a journey of reading. Arguments are summed up by a blurb on a book's cover, an order of consumption is presented within the pages of the text and there is a control which you, as reader, have over the text before you, even if it is only to know how many pages are left before the end. These expectations are disrupted by the other agorae: the t-agora is "more likely to enervate than entertain", whereas those browsing a poem via social media or attending an open mic may be deemed frivolous by comparison (*The Oral Tradition and the Internet)*. In similar a vein, because of the ways that western cultures have striven to "convert knowledge, art and ideas to an item-based economy", we may experience discomfort when faced with an oral text or poem: oral poems, which can be performed one way one day and another the next, or a digital poem which can, as is the case for "my face is up here" by Yrsa Daley-Ward, change shape before our very eyes, or poet Nayirrah Waheed's work, which has now been entirely removed from Instagram (*The Oral Tradition and the Internet)*. Although print work can also be removed from publication or fall out of print, the temporal nature of performance alters how this process is enacted; Waheed's work now exists only in reproduction, its original "performance" displaced and the

original poem now lost, comporting with the ephemeral quality of such poetries.

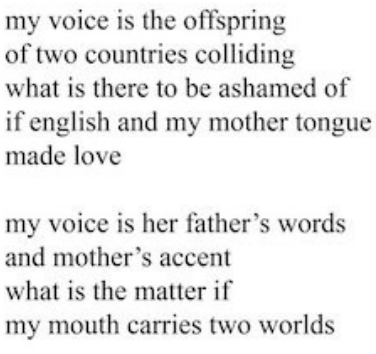
The links between the o-agora and e-agora comprise something more than the recording of oral performances of poetry and replication of such performances on social media, although this is a common way in which orality is evoked on the e-agora. Rather, in conjunction with these practices, much like efforts to recreate aspects of the oral tradition on the printed page, aspects of the oral tradition are instead replicated via the transference onto online arenas, as well as other digital mediums, for instance mixed media and video or musical methods, like the interpolation of digital poets Warsan Shire and Yrsa Daley-Ward's poetries in Beyoncé's visual albums *Lemonade* and *Black is King*, respectively. Many of the online spaces where poetry is disseminated tend to be social media sites, which ostensibly exist to platform and generate space for conversation, replicating the social and speech functions of "irl" spaces.

Like many of the poets discussed thus far, Kaur's work is frequently concerned and associated with aspects of the oral tradition. In a performance, recorded and shared via YouTube, of her poem "broken english", somewhat reminiscent of Bennett's exploration of creole, as Kaur delves into the sounds of language, tying this quality to identity, much as Bennett's performances do. Documenting her family's arrival and assimilation into Canadian society, Kaur's poem narrates her own discomfort with her parents' "discombobulated" use of language, as well as exploring how her own poetry is influenced by her Punjabi heritage, a point she echoes in discussing her visual poems, too: "so infinite that they can never use a full stop" ("broken english"). Kaur, like many of the poets mentioned previously, foregrounds orality and the use of language in her work, negotiating a space of tenuous boundary for many. Kaur's spoken word, in its elegiac reference to her parents' and her own "one mother tongue that was

broken now", is equally compelling – in what becomes an almost distinctive oral cadence, not dissimilar to the "slam voice" previously discussed, which is replicated across Kaur's performances. This cadence differs from slam voice quite noticeably, perhaps in part due to the differences in practice in the forms of poetry, with insta-poetry privileging a softer, more nurturing approach to such poetics, as explored in the final chapter of this thesis. Kaur's voice takes on a dream-like cadence, vacillating tone as she memorialises her parents' journey through the oral medium:

> papa looks at his woman's eyes
> And sees loneliness living where the iris was
> Wants to give her a home in a country
> That looks at her with the word
> "Visitor" wrapped around their tongue
> On their wedding day she left an entire village to be his wife
> And now she left an entire country to be a warrior
>
> "broken english"

The sense of speech extends through Kaur's work, echoed by her visual poem titled "accent" and published through her instagram profile; her poetry explicitly centres such linguistic complexities, as identity is enacted through oral expression:



Warsan Shire's poetry, too, charts something of this diasporic orality, captured in her performance of exile. In considering Shire's poetics, the spatial terrain of the Black Atlantic and the transnational boundaries implicated in such are apparent – Shire's poetry stems from a vernacular that is inflected by East African, British and American contexts and traditions, melding each of these influences together. Yet, her work is also given a reach beyond this by virtue of its digital dissemination – she is a poet of this new terrain, too. Shire's poetry has a distinct sense of community in it, foreground by the role of storyteller that she occupies. In particular, her poetry appears to write a composite sketch of her fellow refugees, documenting the vernacular texture of this diaspora. She often focuses on the sense of a feminine tradition, too, in her work, depicting the passing down of stories in a matriarchal lineage. In creating this tapestry, Shire pays special attention to language, focussing on the ways the act of speaking is a particularly valuable one:

> Maymuun lost her accent with the help of her local Community College. Most evenings she calls me long distance to discuss the pros and cons of heating molasses in the microwave to remove body

hair. Her new voice is sophisticated. She has taken to dancing in
front of strangers. She lives next door to a Dominican who speaks
to her in Spanish whenever they pass each other in hallways.

"Maymuun's Mouth"

In drawing attention to the meaning of voice, Shire underscores the legacy and specific histories of orality – its importance in telling and preserving these stories, but also as a marker of a particular history of cultural identity, much as Shire implicates. The act of speech figures in much of Shire's work, as poems such as "Conversations About Home at the Deportation Centre" and "The Birth Name" suggest an interest in the act of speech. In the latter, for example, Shire explores how speech acts as a facet of identity, reflecting

the hesitation on the other side of
the phone. the way they would replace my name with
'baby'. give your daughters difficult names. give your
daughters names that command the full use of tongue.
my name makes you want to tell me the truth. my
name doesn't allow me to trust anyone that cannot
pronounce it right

"The Birth Name"

Like Kaur, she ties the oral form to this performance, something which she returns to in the poem "Tea With Our Grandmothers", dedicated to "my ayeeyo, the woman / I was named after, Warsan Baraka,". In this poem, an imagined tea with these maternal figures, Shire also implicates the idea of a nurturing, female tradition that spans across nations and eras, recalling her grandmother "nursing her husband's / stroke, her sister's cancer and / her own bad back with broken / Swahili and stubborn Italian". As such, like Kaur, Shire ties these linguistic performances to a sense of verbalised identity, tying together the oral

form and the creation of mythologies or indeed a storytelling legacy of female resilience.

This association of the oral form with this transnational linguistic interventions is replicated in Salgado's insta-poetry, too. Much like her live performances, here she too centres identity in oral expression, writing in a vernacular that runs English and Spanish together, suggestive again of how poets can centre these factors into their performances:



Figure 4: @yesikastarr

Suggesting the limits and potentials that exist in oral expression, Salgado explores these boundaries, while equally reinforcing her identity in performing this expression. Salgado also implicates a new aspect of orality through her digital poetry, engaging with a digital vernacular of expression and the associated cultural boundaries of the digital space. Just as the oral form can signal and reinforce a particular identity or background, there is a fluency and

language to the digital space, too, conjured by both Salgado and Kaur in short, snappy sentences and with a frank, relatable conversational tone:

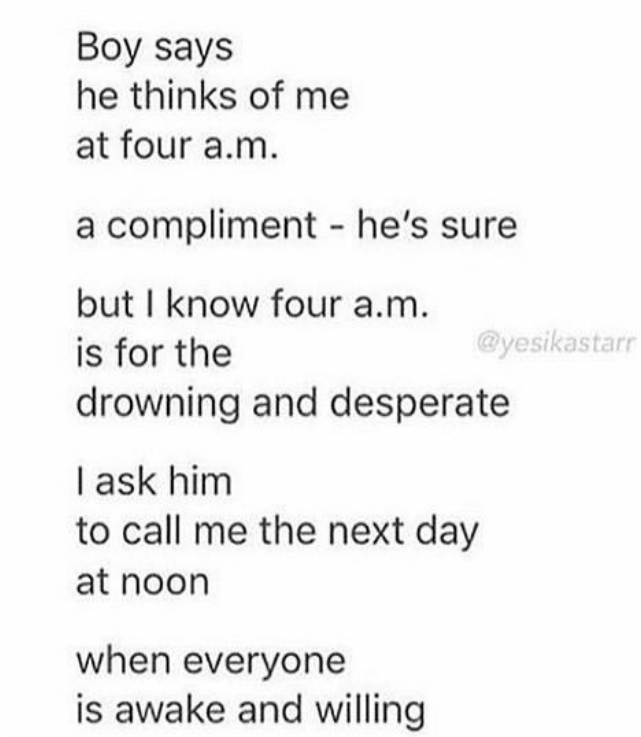


Figure 5: @yesikastarr

Posited by Ann Vickery as a potential successor to the "gurlesque" poetry, this digital orality does perform a similar function to the oral forms previously discussed. While it is easy to dismiss such forms as artless, poets such as Salgado, Shire and Kaur instead assume a digital orality in their poetry, clearly legible to an audience familiar with such arenas. This practice functions to highlight their digital fluency and illustrating how the oral form of their work can be pushed into new arenas.

Orality in the form of digital poetry, then, presents an interesting quandary. In the past, many critics of oral and performance poetries have emphasised one-off immediacy, the inability to be recorded, as a staple quality of performance poetry, arguing that live performance does not lend itself well to preservation, which clashes with the capability of the internet to maintain and

preserve even that which its creator may not want to be preserved. Of course, there are ways to limit or create a more temporally sensitive piece of work in the e-agora, via YouTube live or and Instagram story, for example, which poets do utilise. These are viable ways in which poets perform their work for the e-agora, and viable ways of reproducing aspects of orality more traditionally.

For instance, as analyses of performance poetries via YouTube have argued, the site rarely features poems designed to live on this medium, but rather acts as an archival source for diverse performance poetries, from Diane di Prima and Louise Bennett to clips from *Def Poetry Jam*. Channels such as *ButtonPoetry* and *Get Lit – Words Ignite* share performances by a variety of Slam Poetry performers, as well as documenting National Poetry Slam competitions. Few poets appear to have created their own channels on which to disseminate their work (and, given the monetisation of YouTube channels, there are interesting conversations to have about the ownership and commodification of creative practices), yet some, such as Kae Tempest (*KaeTempest*) and Dominique Christina (*Nyarloka*), have launched their own channels.

In more recent years, websites such as Tumblr and Wattpad have been utilised by writers to cultivate their own following and community, although the former has been abandoned by many creatives of late. These sites experience ebbs and flows of popularity, with their user bases and communities changing continually. More recently still, Instagram has become the dominant location online for disseminating poetry, and has also dominated conversation more generally about poetry in recent years. Here, poets are enabled to share their work via their own Instagram profiles, whether it is poetry evoked via video or sound or oral recording, as discussed in this chapter, or the bodily aesthetics expanded upon in forthcoming chapters. While the body is centred in live performance, the visual focus of Instagram adds a further layer of emphasis

to the ways that poets incorporate their body into the aesthetic considerations of their poetry. Practitioners of Insta-poetry tend to be spoken word poets who have turned to the digital sphere, such as Yrsa Daley-Ward, Yesika Salgado or Elizabeth Acevedo, or those who have crafted a more visual than aural style of performance, as with some of the work of both Rupi Kaur and Lang Leav.

This chapter has identified and tracked a tradition of oral poetry in the 20th and 21st centuries, paying particular attention to the heretofore neglected tradition of women's oral/performance poetry as a chain or lens through which to study. In establishing the contexts of oral poetry, I have also examined how the genre has mutated in response to changes over time, up to and including a recent mutation into digital spheres, exploring the ways in which digital poetries replicate aspects of the oral tradition, as well as the similarities in form between oral and digital modes of expression. Examining these aspects, the cultural implications of oral poetry and orality in poetry have emerged as a dominant force with the agency, authority and voice of the poet explicitly centred through performance. In equal measure, the expansion and continuation of the oral tradition via digital means of dissemination adds a further dimension to this survey, in particular in its foregrounding of the voices of women poets, in comparison to the ways that many studies and artistic movements of oral poetries have tended to sideline such perspectives.

Chapter Two: Intersections of Verse: Performing Music in Poetry

While the links between spoken or oral forms and poetry have long been established, there is also a link between poetry and musicality, with many early forms of poetry performed with musical backing or accompaniment, or infused with a musical quality. Lyric poetry, one of the dominant modes of modern poetry, has its origins in music, too, as its etymology stems from "'pertaining to or adopted for the lyre or the harp,' hence 'suggestive of song or musical effect'". As John Miles Foley notes in his case studies in *How to Read an Oral Poem*, these links have endured into the modern era, with music incorporated into and accompanying performances of poetry. This chapter approaches this history and continued legacy from a number of different angles, from examining the interconnections between music and poetry, to examining the musical sensibilities of a number of poets. Music as a technique or influence in performance poetries is particularly relevant when examining poetries of the Americas, where many modes and genres of performance poetry are directly connected to musical genres. Indeed, the intertextual or intermedial links between these media are often foregrounded in the poetics of performance. In my analysis of poetico-musical inter- or transmediality, I draw again on the African American tradition of signifiyin', with a particular emphasis on the womanist version of that tradition in the work of female writers and artists.

In the previous chapter, which focused on the function of orality as a textual and performative technique, jazz and blues-inflected poetry was invoked as an example of how poetry connects to performance. This chapter more fully explores the continuum between poetries—those performed and those with a cadence of performance—and musicality. I examine the specific ways in which musicality is itself a technique in performance poetries with reference to the

work of such practitioners as Jayne Cortez, Jessica Care Moore and Jamila Woods. This survey ranges from jazz and blues poetics to Jamaican Dub poetry to the interpolation of poetry into music and of music into poetry in the work of hip hop musicians and poets of the "hip hop generation". In each case, I examine the ways in which poets utilise the sensibilities and sounds of music and consider the ways that music and politics continue to interact in the 21st century.

In appraising the different ways that music connects and cohabits with performative modes of poetry, I begin with the textual use of musicality and music as a mode of expression in jazz and blues music and poetry and in Dub music and poetry. Hip hop music connects with these genres in its cross pollination of music and poetry. I consider the direct connections between the textual use of music and the use of music as an accompaniment, as in Dub poetry, examining the ways in which music is used in this manner to heighten and add to such performances, through close reading of poets Lillian Allen, Jean "Binta" Breeze and Mother Moor. Expanding on the exploration of Beat and Black Arts Poetry in the previous chapter, I again examine the use of jazz in the poetry of both the Beat Generation and Black Arts Movement, further exploring how such poetics prove influential in both hip hop music/poetry and in spoken word poetry. I also explore the in tandem legacies of music and poetry with reference to the work of poet/songwriter Jamila Woods and Jessica Care Moore, who samples and interpolates poetry in her song writing. Here, I reckon too with the ways *Def Poetry Jam* directly links music and poetry in the public consciousness. Finally, in considering musicality and poetry in the digital age, I track the ways in which poetry continues to be interpolated into music and music video, including the ways poets adapt poetry into music. Exploring two pioneering insta-poets and the use of their work in Beyoncé's

digital albums *Lemonade* and *Black is King*, I consider the ways that public forms of poetry—which garner widespread attention through their connections to music – are altered and adapted through performance.

Music and poetry have deep-seated links and connections which become further pronounced in performative modes of poetic expression. Orality has often been connected to musicality as a form of both composition and performance in such poetries. Fahamisha Patricia Brown examines these connections in an American context, showing that orality and musicality combine as poetic utterance and explicitly examining the ways these modes coalesce in the creative expressions of "New World peoples of African descent" (7). The vernacular of Black American literature takes its inspiration from both oral and musical traditions, with blues and jazz and, later, hip hop informing and forming much of the poetry in the Black canon.

Music and poetry's coexistence is not unique to an African-American context, of course: as poet-critic Barry Wallenstein points out, "poetry has always craved the company of music", from "ancient minstrels" to "the troubadours and trouvères of Provence" (142). Wallenstein acknowledges Eurocentric tradition of poetry and music, manifested in, for example, jazz poems, an explicitly Black form of expression, as the primary mode in which American poetry finds its footing in musical traditions. Stating that jazz poetry is the result of "the two arts physically combin[ing], when poets, collaborating with music in performance on stage or on record, merge language and music into a highly personalized synergism", Wallenstein celebrates their union as a "Twentieth-Century Wedding", to cite the title of his article. In the 21st century, poets draw upon hip hop music, but jazz is the legacy upon which the poets considered in this chapter most often draw, with Jayne Cortez and Jamila Woods directly

calling upon this tradition, while others, such as Jessica Care Moore, adapting and expanding upon it.

Langston Hughes is the poet who is best remembered for the translation of jazz and blues aesthetics into poetry, but blues has long been seen as a female tradition too, as both Baraka, in *Blues People,* and Angela Y. Davis, in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, point out. Women writers have always been a part of literary and performative traditions, although their contributions have historically tended to be sidelined and minimised; here, I reckon with the female musical tradition of poetry, considering it not as a distinct but as a parallel and under-examined tradition.

In some ways, blues and jazz poetries are perhaps the most enduring forms which have a musical legacy: these forms have been continually reinvented and reinvigorated throughout the 20th century. These poetic forms are a mode of expression which Baraka and others trace back to African-American blues work songs and further back to the poetic practice of the griot. Blues, as musical expression, has its origins in the mid to late 1800s in the southern United States, its roots reaching back to West African musical traditions and African American work songs. Incorporating various forms of expression from the oral tradition, such as call and response and chants, blues itself is a marriage of orality and music which melds the unaccompanied vocal music of West Africa and the rhythmic sounds of African drumming traditions with European musical traditions. As noted earlier, many of the most successful blues singers in early eras were women, among them Ma' Rainey, Mamie Smith and Bessie Smith; Mamie Smith's voice is on the first Black blues record produced. This chapter is not intended as an analysis of the ethnomusicological impulse of the blues tradition; rather, it traces the translation of musical to poetic expression with reference to blues and adjacent forms of musical

expression such as jazz, which itself has a point of origin in the fusion of African and European musical styles in the New World. Jazz is a broad church and is difficult to categorise, but like blues has a number of characteristics that are frequently evoked in descriptions of performance poetries: improvisation, audience interaction, focus on the individual voice and the affective qualities that this voice enables. As such, the figures, characteristics and emotion that are evoked in both jazz and blues clearly carry through to poetic expression, particularly in performance, as a source of inspiration and interplay. As musical genres and as Black cultural forms, blues and jazz have profoundly influenced poetic expression in and beyond African-American contexts. Performance poets from all continents borrow from and integrate music into their poetry, while page poetry forms such as the ballad are adaptations of musical forms. Blues and jazz, however, and the poetries inspired by these modes, have been deemed as "folk" and so as less worthy of critical attention than high cultural forms, though there are, of course, pioneering scholars such as Aldon Nielsen who have explored the links between Black music and Black poetry (86). In examining these links, the legacy of both blues and jazz poetries in page poetry is revealed, highlighting how musical genres have had a sustained and long lasting effect upon poetic writing.

Blues songs, and the poems which inspire them and are inspired by them, stem from the oral tradition and often feature a narrative of struggle, hardship and resilience. Such poetic expression has been previously innovated by poets of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly Langston Hughes. Hughes, in his seminal essay "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain" outlines something of the importance of such a union:

> But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom

> of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it, The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind.
>
> 4

Such a formal tradition continues to evolve as a form utilised by poets through the Black Arts Movement (Nikki Giovanni, Jayne Cortez) and the Beat Generation, through to today's poets like Kevin Young, Wanda Coleman and Jamila Woods, who take the tradition forward both in print and in performance. The rhythm and the emotional heft that is implicated in blues are replicated in blues poetry, both on page and on stage, its performative potential enhanced by its proximity to the performed tradition of music. Forms which hybridise the music and poetry have a performative sensibility, replicating the sound quality of the blues on page.

Blues poetry was not the only form of poetry with a musical bond which came to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance, however. Like blues poetry, jazz poetry is a formal and spiritual adaptation of a musical form, with jazz music being credited and lauded as a distinctly African-American form of self-empowerment, although of course jazz was quickly adopted by white Americans like F. Scott Fitzgerald, who named the 1920s 'The Jazz Age'. Both jazz and its poetic counterpart are directly connected to the oral tradition, a form of expression that is also a recognisably an outsider form. Blues and jazz poetries originated as Black cultural and performative forms, but jazz poetry in particular has been appropriated, for example in the use of bebop in the poetry and performance of Beat Generation writers, whose adoption of a Black cultural form as a medium of white countercultural expression is troubling and

prefigures white appropriations of hip hop and of rap culture. Black Beat poet Bob Kaufman has been praised for mastering the art, however, as Baraka also did in his earlier poetic identity as Beat poet LeRoi Jones. As Amiri Baraka, one of the founding poets of the Black Arts Movement, he continues a tradition of jazz poetry as a form of Black pride, a tradition which is shared by the female poets of the Black Arts Movement. This branch of jazz poetry has proved influential in the interpolation of jazz music and jazz poetry in performances of hip hop poetry.

Many of the key figures of early blues music were women; as such, the enduring legacy of blues music stems from such a tradition: as Angela Davis states, "though the period of ascendancy of black women blues singers was relatively short, these women nonetheless managed to produce a vast body of musical texts and a rich cultural legacy" (xii) Connecting to this, historically, blues (and later jazz) have had long established links to Black "intellectual independence and representational freedom" (Davis 3). Equally, as Davis states,

> blues contain many layers of meanings and are often astounding in their complexity and profundity. Precisely because the blues confront raw emotional and sexual matters associated with a very specific historical reality, they make complex statements that transcend the particularities of their origins. There is a core of meaning in the texts of the classic blues women that, although prefeminist in a historical sense, reveals that black women of that era were acknowledging and addressing issues central to contemporary feminist discourse."
>
> 24

As a musical form, blues frequently evades the morality or the established cultural discourses of its time, enabling women such as Ma' Rainey, Mamie Smith and Bessie Smith to express through their own voice a variety of issues,

themes and styles. Davis and Brown both identify the reasons as to why these strands of expression are so resonant. Blues indicates the creation of a mode of expression which ties back to pre-colonisation, but is also cognisant of the inaccessibility of print texts for the formerly enslaved and working class Black communities in America for whom literacy was long criminalised and denied. As such, these texts reveal the ways in which musicality relates, too, to the democratisation fostered in the performance of blues music and poetry. Each of these women, through their use of a blues idiom, performs the concerns of Black women in the early 20th Century, indicating that blues, as an aesthetic, is a medium for social change and for the representational potential which is echoed in performance poetries. Though early blues lyrics may have been written by men, they were most frequently performed by women, and spoke directly to the issues and concerns of women. Such a tradition belies, too, the transformational power of performance, as the voices of people such as Rainey and both Smiths came to represent "The Blues" for a great many people. Songs like "Crazy Blues", "See See Rider Blues" and "Empty Bed Blues" express the emotional power focus on interpersonal relationships and indeed the sexual politics with which the blues would become indelibly associated. Such a focus has at times allowed for this figure to be sidelined – as Davis elaborates, the blues woman "presented and embodied sexualities associated with working class black life" and as such, the genre was considered too lowbrow to be of consequence for intellectual architects of the Harlem Renaissance like Alain Locke (Davis xiii).

Hughes, and after him Sterling Brown, is a contemporary chronicler of the figure of the blues woman as described by Davis His "Song for a Dark Girl" mimics and adopts aspects of blues expression, focus ing on feminine expression and its ties to blues music. Reminiscent of the call-and-response repetitions of

blues music, Hughes echoes the lament practiced by these blues women: “Way Down South in Dixie/(Break the heart of me)/They hung my black young lover”. Hughes here adopts the position usually occupied in the female expression of the blues idiom, mourning a lost lover in a manner perhaps more recognisable as a feminine mode of expression. Nonetheless, Hughes unites the musical genre with the poetic form, capturing the mode and presence of blues performance through his page poetry. Although the practice of blues poetry is often regarded as being popularised by Hughes, who himself regarded the relationship between Black music and Black America as an important, transformative one, with “music a social catalyst” as much as it was a compositional method, Hughes is far from the only poet, from this time and through time who is inspired by such formal practices (Davis 151). Hughes may have popularised the poetic use of blues and jazz expression, but female Harlem Renaissance poets Gwendolyn B. Bennett and Hélène Johnson also adopt musical modes of expression. Bennett’s poetry often foregrounds the importance of music to her work; implicitly linking in with the concept of racial uplift of the time: “Where hymns keep company / With old forgotten banjo songs. / Abandon tells you / That I sing the heart of race” (“Song”). Bennett’s work likewise links musical form and vernacular language, replicating this performative aesthetic as she repeats deviating from the standard presentation of English via page poetry:

A-shoutin' in de ole camp-meeting-place,

A-strummin' o' de ole banjo.

Singin' in de moonlight,

Sobbin' in de dark.

Singin', sobbin', strummin' slow...

Singin' slow, sobbin' low.

Strummin', strummin', strummin' slow...

Words are bright bugles

That make the shining for my song,

"Song"

Johnson, too, incorporates the performative idiom of music into her poetic, tying the use and connection to music and musicality back to an almost epigenetic memory:

And he'd be dancin' black and naked and gleaming.

And he'd have rings in his ears and on his nose

And bracelets and necklaces of elephants' teeth.

Gee, I bet he'd be beautiful then all right

"Bottled"

Her poem titled "Poem" renders these motifs in the syncopated rhythms of what is recognisably a jazz idiom: "what do I know / About tomtoms? But I like the word, sort of, / Don't you? It belongs to us" ("Song"). Johnson links music, particularly jazz, to the history of Black Americans, telling her "jazz prince" that "I think you're wonderful. You're / All right with me, / You are" ("Song"). Like Hughes and Bennett, Johnson uses the language of music to create a poetic that preserves the cultural value and history of musical performance. Adapting her lover's music to her own purpose in her poetry, Bennett also affirms the ways that such musical interpolation can be used "in drawing parallels between male and female desire, between their similar inclinations toward intoxication, dance, and sex, launch [ing] a brazen challenge to dominant notions of women's subordination", much as the women of the blues did (Davis 24). Formally, tonally and thematically, these print poetries seek to capture the idiom of African American expression as well as the rhythms and tone of black music.

Expanding on this, in the same way that jazz expands from blues, jazz poetics, too, shows that formal experimentation and representation are rooted in an African American performative tradition. Hughes lauded jazz as "one of the inherent expressions of the Negro life in America", nominating jazz and blues as uniquely African American art forms and cultural artefacts which resists, through the rhythms and forms, the homogenising hegemony of white America ("The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"). Poems like Hughes' "Jazzonia" or Johnson's "Song" celebrate the sounds of jazz, embracing and celebrating a new form of expression. Hughes is received as the father of jazz poetry but the practice has many mothers, too, among them Johnson and Gwendolyn Brooks, whose "We Real Cool" is often regarded as the a key example of jazz poetry. The expression of jazz as a uniquely American form of performance seeps easily into this poetic mould, a poetic stemming from the United States which fits with the "violent discovery and re-creation" that typify American culture and is perhaps shared throughout performance cultures, too (Young 11). Yet, in spite of this specific point of origin, this is but one of the ways that music is tied to performance – such dynamics are recreated and shared globally, with music and poetry often sharing an artistic field.

Baraka has critiqued the ways in which Black cultural forms are appropriated and distanced from their origins in service of an aestheticised "non-conformity", but there is nonetheless a noteworthy use of jazz in the work of the Beat Generation, with a relevance to the conceptualisation of performance poetics per se, an issue to which I will return. Both Baraka and, more recently, poet Hanif Abdurraqib, encounter the use of Black culture in performance as they explore such legacies. Both explore how this cultural legacy in the Americas has been seen as a nexus for difference, displaying, as in the case of the Beats, a poetic and an idiom which challenges the very notions,

mores and values of "mainstream" America. I posit that, in such a context, the texture and cultural history of performance, regardless of the performer's own race or cultural belongings, *is* connected to Black cultural forms and idioms, a connection which comes into focus as we come closer to the present moment. In the case of the Beats, jazz, Carmela Ciuraru suggests, creates a poetic for "disillusioned (but not cynical) young people struggling to redefine themselves, to discover sexual and political liberation", one which jazz, as the music that perhaps typifies the creation and recreation at the heart of the New World, would seem the perfect vehicle to express. However problematic, such appropriations still have a radical aesthetic and ideological potential in generating a "rebellious, taunting cry against bourgeois intellectualism and repression" (Ciuraru).

Notwithstanding the predominance of white males in the Beat canon, Black poet Bob Kaufman is recognised as the most adept practitioner of the Beat jazz poem. Kaufman's poetry is aware of the cultural memory and load of the musical forms it carries. In "War Memoir' Kaufman evokes "screams" and reminiscent of those suggested by Fred Moten. In describing musician Abbey Lincoln's recording of "Protest", Moten describes the sonic memory created by such an act in music; "[y]ou cannot help but hear the echo of Aunt Hester's scream as it bears, at the moment of articulation, a sexual overtone, an invagination constantly reconstituting the whole of the voice, the whole of the story, redoubled and intensified by the mediation of years, recitations, audiences" (21). Kaufman explores the workings of the jazz idiom to unsettling effect, cautioning the reader "listen to it [jazz] at your own risk / At the beginning, a warm dark place", figuring jazz as the generative beginning of life but also hinting at its sedating potential. Kaufman complicates his own point, however, when he utilises both the rhythm and the transformative nature of jazz to proclaim a

radical message: "What one-hundred percent redblooded savage / wastes precious time listening to jazz / with so much important killing to do?" ("War Memoir"). Here, he implicates jazz in a lineage which both challenges and resists hegemony, conveying an anti-war poetic through the musical medium. Kaufman also approaches the sonic and performative quality of jazz, as demonstrated by a poem such as "Crootey Songo", which in its attempts to replicate the verbalisations of jazz on the page emphasises the need for poetry like this to be spoken in performance.

Kaufman's jazz poetics enabled fellow Beats to access the revolutionary energies of its idiom. Di Prima, for instance, reflects on how her own compositional and performative style is tied to jazz: "my work did that kind of melody line on syncopation that jazz does. I don't know what it does. I just get it and it just happens. And I love to perform with music" (qtd. in Obenzinger). Influenced by the milieu of jazz musicians, di Prima's poetic is performative and radical; her performance of the "Revolutionary Letter" suite of poems draws out and draws upon the syncopated sonics of jazz. Connected to this is the revisiting of the jazz poetic tradition by poets of the Black Arts Movement, such as Baraka, Cortez, Giovanni and Sanchez. The links between Baraka and the Beats are clearly established, including his work with di Prima on the magazine *Floating Bear*. Within the Black Arts Movement the re-appropriation of jazz constitutes a compelling return to the musical form borrowed by the Beats. Contrasting the use of jazz or bebop as the idiom of the countercultural, majority white, Beat generation, Baraka and others within the Black Arts Movement take this performative utterance and re-endow it with the empowerment and racial pride that is typically associated with jazz and blues expression. Baraka is most closely associated with this reinvigoration of jazz poetry, theorising the links between Black music and the Black community at

large, and identifying the expressive links between poetry and music, pre-empting Henry Louis Gates' identification of a literary tradition of vernacular Black modes of expression. Baraka is also most closely associated with the push towards jazz poetics in Black Arts poetry, but women poets have in equal measure contributed to the creation and continuation of jazz and blues poetics on the page and in performance. Cortez, for instance, harnesses a more sonorous musicality to perform her poetry. Examining the poetics of Cortez, Giovanni and Sanchez reveals the ways in which these poets contributed to the development of an aesthetic of performance which incorporates jazz poetics. Their music-inspired poetic enhances the sense of radical possibility offered by jazz and blues, bringing gendered perspectives, too, to jazz-inflected poetics and performances.

Cortez most clearly reveals the ways in which jazz poetries connect to performance. A musician as well as a poet, she frequently performs her work to a backing of jazz, particularly with band The Firespitters. Though much of this work postdates the Black Arts Movement, its connection with her earlier work under the Black Arts aegis is apparent. Inspired by the work of many blues and jazz musicians, and by Bessie Smith in particular, Cortez adopts and adapts their musical expression in her poetics. In "Rose Solitude", for instance, Cortez replicates a sloping, easy jazz rhythm, dedicating her poem to Duke Ellington, memorialising the jazz musician and, by extension, jazz itself: "i cover the shrine of Duke / who like Satchmo like Nat (King) Cole / will never die because love they say / never dies". Cortez's poem calls back to the "Solitude" of Ellington's jazz standards, perhaps most famously sung by Billie Holliday and Ella Fitzgerald, figuring herself as "Essence of Rose Solitude". Jazz is intrinsic to her performance and her poetic: "i throw my neck back to floorshow on bumping goat / skins / in front of my stage fright / i cover the hands of Duke".

Although this is a page poem, like many of the other poets who incorporate jazz into their poetics, Cortez retains a performative utterance which, in her own performances, directly incorporates the musicality of jazz. Her work in albums such as *Celebrations and Solitude*, *There It Is* and *Bringing The Blues Back Home* pairs her poetry with musical accompaniment. Music, in her performance, is a form of cultural expression and a tool of resistance; "How Long Has Trane Been Gone" elegises another jazz great but also celebrates Coltrane's emancipatory potential:

> Mother with sons
> who need John Coltrane
> need the warm arm of his music
> like words from a father
> words of comfort words of Africa
> words of welcome

In examining the way poets of the Black Arts Movement incorporate music almost as backing or as a part of their performance, one can interrogate the enactment of historical musical legacies through performance. This is emphasised and enabled by the availability of such recordings and their centrality to the art and activism blend of the Black Arts Movement. In "There It Is", for instance, a poem realised as an original recording backed by The Firespitters, Cortez speaks her poem rhythmically, her voice and the music responding to one another. A call to arms of sorts, Cortez takes the sounds of the music to which she performs her poetry and melds it with revolutionary language, urging those listening to heed her words lest the "disappear into your own rage / into your own insanity / into your own poverty" ("There It Is"). Like Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets, Cortez represents and renders explicit the revolutionary potential of jazz poetry in performing her poetry to music, serving

as a precursor for later poets. Combining the aesthetic and rhythms of jazz with her radical message, Cortez also showcases jazz as a mode and idiom of experimentation and reinvention.

Sanchez, too, deploys musicality in her poetry, ranging from her odes to particular jazz musicians to the replication of jazz scatting in the sounds of her work. Her verbalisation in "Middle Passage", for instance, draws on a jazz aesthetic, as well as echoing Moten's descriptions of the connections between jazz and Aunt Hester's screams, suggestive of his description of how "[Douglass] describes and reproduces black performance" and "conflates his story [...] with the story of slavery and freedom" (2). Sanchez's "Middle Passage", too, echoes this performance, featuring shrieks and moans similar to those Moten attributes to Abbey Lincoln. In doing so, Sanchez connects to this sense of performance which Moten attributes to Saadiya Hartman: "the ongoing (re)production of that performance in all its guises and for a critical awareness of how each of those guises is always already present in and disruptive of the supposed originality of that primal scene" (4). Creating a rhythm with her voice, Sanchez's poetry responds, too, to musical accompaniment, acting as an instrument as much as a way of speaking to the topic which she explores. In "For Our lady" and "This Is Not A Small Voice", Sanchez reminds us that Black musical traditions have always been a medium through which women speak or sing. Sanchez further feminises these forms, in the latter poem explicitly referencing the Black aesthetic tradition within and to which she writes. In the former, a poem for Billie Holiday, Sanchez speaks to both a key figure of jazz, and the power of music as a Black cultural form. Lamenting the "kinds of songs / u wud have swung" had Holiday been loved or celebrated as a Black woman, Sanchez emphasises how Holiday's voice could have been enacted "'gainst this country's wite mind." or "wud have pushed us from / our blue / nites" ("For Our lady").

Here, she outlines the power and potential of music, imbuing her verse with this same quality. Similarly, in "This Is Not A Small Voice", Sanchez again connects her Blues-inspired poetic to the Black aesthetic tradition, and accents that tradition as the medium in which the voice of "Black Genius" is given a language in which to speak.

Individual poets give their own nuance to jazz poetics, all incorporating its musicality into their art but each also making it her own. In performing and writing a poetry which is imbued with the rhythms and sounds of jazz, each poet also strengthens the link between music and poetry in terms of performativity. To turn from the ways that musical forms are incorporated into page and hybrid forms of poetry, or indeed the ways that performance moves to page and back to performance, I now consider the ways that musicality and literary expression meld and coalesce. Here, I want to explore the use of music as a tool in performance. Through close readings of work from Dub Poets to Slam Poets, I examine the ways that these poets incorporate different sonics and musical styles. This chapter has demonstrated that music may be mediated through poetry: it now shows that these modes can also meld, as music and poetry fuse in performance. Looking first to Dub poetry and then to hip hop, I consider how these complex performances alter and aid our understandings of musicality in poetry.

Dub poetry expands my discussion into the oral and performative cultures not only of the United States but of the Americas and of the Black (British) diaspora. As a poetics, Dub evolved from Dub music: it is poetry performed to a reggae beat and is usually a rehearsed performance. Like many of the poetries and performances examined in this thesis, there is an overlap between Dub and social commentary in which poets are the voices of protest and advocates for social change. Dub takes its name from the recording

technique which altered both reggae music and music worldwide and spawned an accompanying musical style (Morris 1). Dub poems are composed to the beats and rhythms of reggae music and so performance is intrinsic to this mode, albeit that some Dub artists also publish their work in print. Like other Black poetries, Dub traces its origins to the ancestral figure of the griot, although the poet or toaster in Dub performance has contemporary parallels, for example in the MC of hip hop music and the closely related DJ of Jamaican dancehall. The links between Jamaican Dub and contemporaneous genres in the United States is striking, these modes sharing a common origin in post-slavery oral traditions and both appealing to a disaffected and marginalised demographic. Dub was popularised and the term coined by Oku Onuora, but may be traced back, as a performative idiom, to Louise Bennett, a pioneering poet of Jamaican Creole examined in the previous chapter. Dub owes a debt to Bennett and to other Black artists, from The Last Poets to Bob Marley to Langston Hughes, who has been described as the "godfather of Dub" by Onuora ('Dub Poetry'? 2). As Morris notes, Onuora was influenced to write in the style of Dub poetry by "Black American trends, including a proliferation of poet-performers who were steeped in the rhythms of Black music", revealing the closely interwoven connections between Dub and other performance poetries discussed in this thesis (2).

While there are a number of strands to the craft and the aesthetics of Dub poetry, my focus here is on women practitioners of the craft who are the closest inheritors of Bennett's legacy of poetry in performance. To that end, I consider aesthetics in the work of Dub poets such as Lillian Allen and Jean "Binta" Breeze. Connecting to this legacy in the continental US is Moor Mother, a contemporary practitioner and performer of Dub poetics. Each of these poet-performers blends musical performance into their poetics,

emphasising the influence of music as a component of the oral tradition and further revealing the intertextualities that extend between such poetics.

Allen and Breeze demonstrate the centrality of women's voices to their medium, combining the rhythms and sounds of Dub music with social and political messages in their performance of Dub poetry. Dub poetry gives voice to community, and is what Brenda Carr defines as "community-accountable art", which fuses musical rhythm with a political charge in ways which bear comparison to the poetics of the Black Arts Movement. Carr attributes that similarity to the "cultural-spiritual-political-historical matrix of black empowerment practices", but both Dub and Black Arts poetries also access ancestral practices through what Baraka identifies as the shared history of Black cultural forms (Carr 8, *Black Music*).

The Caribbean diaspora has made Dub a global practice. Lillian Allen, a Jamaican-born Dub poet who relocated to Canada, honours this transnational cultural exchange, with poems from her album *Nothing But A Hero* paying homage to African and Afro- diasporic icons such as "Mandela" and "Harriet Tubman (Nothing But a Hero)" in poems performed to reggae rhythms. While Allen's poetry covers a range of topics, with any political injustice or issue fruit of inspiration for the poet, her poetry is nuanced, too, by the performance of gender and the centrality of the female experience of Allen herself and of her "Sisters" ("Fight Back"): she feminises 'nation language'. A call to arms, her poetry is intentionally and of necessity accessible. Like Cortez, Allen blends radical thought with a popular performance style, replicating the community-serving role of the griot. "Fight Back", for instance, in documenting the experience of the speaker as an immigrant in Canada, urges the listener to "FIGHT BACK" in the face of being labelled "Law-breaker, Illegal, Minimum / Wager / ah no, not Mother, not Worker, not Fighter", again centring the lived

experience of women. In "Revolutionary Tea Party", Allen calls for action, imploring the listener: "Mek wi analyse / Mek wi strategise / Mek we work together".

Although Dub poetry's zenith was in the late 20th Century, as an aesthetic and in performance Dub continues into the present day, with artists such as American poet / musician Moor Mother taking up the Dub mantle and situating her performances within the continuum of Dub poetics but making Dub newly relevant to contemporary audiences with the introduction of different and disconcerting electronic sonics. Moor Mother's subject matter carries on the political engagement and protest that has always been a marker of Dub poetry. Her work blends poetry and musicality in a soundscape which is inflected with the influence not only of Dub but also of hip hop, and which looks back, too, to female poets of the Black Arts Movement such as Sanchez (Brown). Moor Mother defines her version of Dub as "saying your perspective and everyone's perspective in the moment", and that quality of immediacy is evident in her recent album and poetry collection, *Fetish Bones* (Brown). But if it is immediate in its message, this work is complex in its intertextual and intermedial sampling of musical styles. A soundscape of poetry, chanting song, recognisable jazz interludes and at times harsh, electronic sounds, her poetic ties musicality to the spoken word. Its use of noise innovates on the "echoes, repetitions, fades, and instrumental syncopation" of Dub poetry and of African oral performance more broadly. (Carr 12). In *Fetish Bones*, Moor Mother traces the history of Blackness in the US, reimagining through her poetry / music slave narratives and gospel spirituals and tracing the history of racial violence into the present day. In "DIY Time Machine", for instance, she signifies on the Black tradition by interpolating or sampling aspects of gospel music and spirituals ("something about swinging low sweet chariots"), combining these

with the churning electronic sound which is typical of her performances into a form of expression which is a way of speaking for others: "Get this death off my back / Sing it for me" ("DIY Time Machine"). Like many of the poets discussed in this thesis, Moor Mother creates a sense of a continuum of collective experience which is reinforced through the musical and historical allusions she knits into her performances, demonstrating the ability of music and poetry—and Black experience— "to travel throughout[...] / From 1866 to the present time" ("Creation Myth"). Mother Moor places her work in conversation with the poets and traditions on which it draws. In adopting and altering the tradition of Dub poetry, Moor Mother expands and updates this practice while still preserving characteristics which remain consistent in Dub poetry.

Emerging in parallel with Dub, hip hop may also be defined as an extension of poetry into the sphere of music. Although that definition is problematic—in the inference, for instance, that hip hop must be categorised as poetry if it has any merit—the through line of poetry to hip hop is apparent, as is the interchange between hip hop and hip hop-inspired subgenres such as BreakBeat Poetry, a term used by poets Kevin Coval and Nate Marshall to describe a poetic that bridges between performance and written poetry, incorporating influences from both. Hip hop incorporates musical beats infused with jazz, blues and Caribbean musical forms while emphasising the vocal performance of the emcee.

As with a number of the poetries discussed in this thesis, hip hop has been charged with presenting a hyper-masculinist aesthetic. Yet from its inception, hip hop has had influential women emcees, such as Sha Rock of The Funky 4+1, and, later, Roxanne Shanté and Salt-n-Pepa. Yet the gender dichotomy remains pronounced in hip hop: Tricia Rose gives over a great deal of her book *The Hip Hop Wars* to the issue in her assessment of women's role

in hip hop's subversive musical and cultural milieu. Female artists look to Cortez as a stylistic precursor who had her own struggles with the often sexist culture of the Black Arts Movement; in turn, Sanchez and Giovanny have embraced hip hop as an extension of or indeed new figuration of Black poetry, with both women reading the poetry of Tupac on the posthumous album *The Rose That Grew From Concrete.* Nate Marshall, in his description of BreakBeat Poetry, explores the interconnections between poetic expression and the musical genre of hip hop, an enduring legacy of exchange which continues in the work of a number of poets examined in the discussion which follows, from Tracie Morris to Jamila Woods to Jessica Care Moore.

Hip Hop as a musical genre has links to these previous musical poetic intersections. Equally, the influence of such a performative style is revealed across a number of poetics, perhaps most notably in the poetries anthologised as "BreakBeat Poetry". Describing BreakBeat Poetry in the introduction to the first anthology of the movement, poet Kevin Coval describes how its poets write for the present while calling back to writers of the past, not unlike the phenomenon that Alice Walker discusses in her seminal collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, although Walker establishes this as a firmly womanist tradition. Both Giovanni and Sanchez's connections to hip hop offer something of a break in this continuum, troubling the notion of a direct woman-to-woman line of progression. Coval states that "[i]n ways similar to how blues influenced the Harlem Renaissance or the ways jazz influenced the Black Arts Poets, the music and culture of hip-hop shape the movement of american letters and create a generation engaged in similar and variant aesthetic principles and experimentations" (xix). As a poetic which specifically ties itself to hip hop, and indeed, to the contemporary necessity for multiple methods of understanding and receiving a text, BreakBeat Poetry is aware too of the globalisation of hip

hop as a cultural product. As the influence of hip hop expands beyond its origins, the global perspective of the form sees the explicitly Black origins of this aesthetic form altered and reimagined through youth culture globally. Such a transformation comes about as a result of hip hop's complex relationship to both resistance and capital, with the origins of the musical form acutely aware of its revolutionary potential, but its later iterations co-opted by the mainstream, as in the case of Beat poetry. Exploring the link between poetics and music here, I examine the ways in which Jamila Woods, Jessica Care Moore and Tracie Morris incorporate a hip hop aesthetic and musical sensibility into their poetry, engaging poetry and music—and each other—in a constant conversation.

In the anthology's opening pages, Coval declares that "ciphers rise together", name-checking Baraka, A Tribe Called Quest and the Beat Generation as equal sources for inspiration for these poets (xv). As Coval states, the poets of this anthology are "young people reared on hip hop culture and aesthetics, inspired to pick up the mic (or pen) and enter into conversation with poets who have come before, newly revolutionising the poetics of performance. Highlighting hip hop as a central cultural reference for those born at "the end of hip hop's infancy", Nate Marshall further explores the impact of the genre upon this new wave of poet / performers, accessing the "multiple artistic media" generated by hip hop. As a genre, it plays with "the intersection between musical form and political / poetic speech", and such an intersection is more pronounced still in the practice of BreakBeat Poets who take up this revolutionary mantle. This manifesto emphasises the importance of performance; "the necessity for poems to live in multiple media". Both Coval and Marshall, like Jamila Woods in her introduction to the second of these anthologies, foreground BreakBeat Poetry as an expression of the legacy of

Black cultural forms, while acknowledging that hip hop has come to be embraced beyond this remit, celebrating a "multicultural and multiethnic canon", guided both by "Ezra Pound's charge to "make it new" and / or Andre3000's revelation that "you only funky as your last cut"" (Marshall). Acknowledging the "imperfect" nature of hip hop, particularly with respect to gender, both poets also view the musical genre and its poetic counterpart as offering a "weapon for life and against the wack, white supremacist" (Coval xxi). Hip hop has become an idiom for resistance, its performative utterance reflecting the potential for revolution, allowing for it to be adopted and adapted by poets across ethnic lines and indeed across borders, as a transnational poetic of performance in the contemporary world.

Morris' writing and performances reveal a close and clear connection to the world of hip hop, at the same time that femininity is centred in her poetics. "Project Princess", for instance, is an ode to young Black women, a celebration connected to specifically Black poetic and musical techniques. The title may refer to an often invoked figure of Black womanhood, the "welfare queen", one of the controlling images to which Hill Collins makes reference, but may in equal measure be a reference to the trope of video vixens frequently evoked in hip hop. Morris changes the narrative around this figure, however, celebrating and empowering her. Morris' tone throughout this poem is reverential, praising the titular figure for her confidence, self-assurance and beauty, while situating the poem within the vernacular of hip hop. Morris' performance of the poem recreates the sounds of beatboxing and record scratches that dominate hip hop of the time. Here, Morris feminises another tradition, claiming that space and the legacy of hip hop as her own. Her performance both centres and celebrates Black femininity, offering a challenge to dominant narratives, changing our preconceptions of who deserves to be the subject of an ode. Her performance

centres Black femininity in the traditions of performance poetry as well as in the culture of the US as a whole. Sound elements in Morris' poems are captured to an extent on the page, too: in "Untitled", a poem anthologised in *The BreakBeat Poets*, the staccato-like metre of hip hop and of early hip hop in particular, is recreated via the sharp punctuation and consonants of lines like "What the sister brother mothering making in the oven? Subtle shoulder / bounce comeuppance?" connecting particularly to early expressions of hip hop. Morris, even via the page, makes clear the performative legacy of her poetry, using print to render the sounds and rhythms of her chosen genre.

Moore likewise centres the aesthetic of hip hop in her poetry, for example in her published poem "mic check, 1-2", a piece which Moore has also performed (on *Def Poetry Jam*) as "I'm a Hip Hop Cheerleader". Moore feminises a space which, as noted above, is more often exclusively designated as masculine. Ironically figuring the role of women within hip hop as "screaming from the sidelines of a stage", Moore defines the space she reclaims while also challenging the marginalisation of women, particularly Black women, in that arena ("I buy all your records despite the misogyny / not looking for the blonde in me"). Acknowledging the ways in which women writers have tended to be sidelined in the poetic and performative tradition where "the microphone is just another phallic symbol", Moore continues to utilise that tradition as a medium for protest, calling out through her voice and through her incorporation of music injustices and contradictions. As with other poets I have examined, she foregrounds feminine expression and experience while also excavating the performative tradition, bringing into focus the ways in which a tradition of women's writing has always existed in such expressions as well as the ways that female poets specifically draw upon and re-render such traditions.

Woods, too, puts femininity centre stage in "Blk Girl Art", presenting her own manifesto which answers and challenges Baraka's poem "Black Art" and seeking poems that "my grandma wants to tell the ladies at church / about" and "make the body inside my body less invisible". Woods carves out a space for experience and representation which has more often been neglected and ignored:

> I want orange potato words soaking in the pot
> til their skins fall off, words you burn your tongue on,
> words on sale two for one, words that keep my feet dry.
> I want to hold a poem in my fist in the alley just in case.

At the same time, Woods' poem focuses on the artifice and craft of writing, emphasising the propensity for such poems to act as "remedies", an element which speaks, perhaps, to the transformative potential identified above as a hallmark of this performative / musical tradition ("Blk Girl Art"). Woods also incorporates the idiom of hip hop into her poem; just as Morris' poetry retains voiced aspects even on the page, so too the performative impulse of the musicality of Woods' poetry is legible or audible. Repeating sounds in lines such as "words you burn your tongue on, / words on sale two for one, words that keep my feet dry", Woods creates a rhythm that is evocative of the beats of hip hop which continue to underline the connections between poetry and musicality in the present day, something which is echoed, too, in Woods' musical exchanges.

Overall, the intertextual processes of music and poetry are key to the performance tradition. The two have a long, intertwined history, which comes most sharply into focus in the Americas but which has a global resonance, too, as I explore in the following section, as performances of the digital age continue and expand this interconnection.

Mediation and Sampling in the Digital Age

Building on the above discussions, this chapter now focuses on the persistence of links between music and poetry in the digital age. Here I examine the staging and interpolation of poetry in conversation with music, looking to the ways in which musicality and the cultures that surround it widen the reception and the readership of poetries, examining in particular how performance is enacted in the digital age. Putting the current digital era and the years which preceded it in direct focus, I examine the continued cross-pollination between music and poetry through to the present day. Connecting to and expanding on the exploration of Def Poetry Jam in the previous chapter, I consider how music and poetry converge at the beginning of the digital age, popularising and democratising poetry as an institution. Poets such as Jamila Woods, Jessica Care Moore and Kae Tempest have all, to different degrees, infused their recorded poetry with a sense of musicality, further blurring the at times hazy lines between music and poetry as they reveal their influences. the ongoing conversation between the world of music and the world of poetry is the focus of this chapter, which examines the interaction of these media in the recent cultural history of the Americas. The work of Moore and Woods brings this connection into closer focus: their work derives from and takes inspiration from the interconnected worlds of music and of poetry. This chapter will go on to consider the influence and interaction between poetry and music or musicality in Instapoets' work, which is often discussed in light of its visuals, but which has begun to converse with the work of musicians more broadly, as exemplified in the close reading here of the interpolation of insta-poetry in the work of musicians. While this area will continue to develop as we focus on embodied performance and visuals in the digital age, here we examine the interpolation of poetry and music through such mediums as Beyoncé's visual

albums. Across these recordings, both Warsan Shire and Yrsa Daley-Ward's poetry feature in as key moments within the lyric and narrative of the albums. Here I consider the ways that music and poetry continue to maintain links with the digital age, maintaining the performative tradition this chapter has tracked.

Poetry and music, or musicality, are brought together in direct focus in the programme *Def Poetry Jam*, which demonstrates the intertextual and aestheticised connections between poetics and musicality, allowing for more intimate communication between the two simply by placing poets and musicians on stage in the same context, providing a site of comparison between the two genres. Though *Def Poetry Jam* has clear connections to spoken word poetry and Poetry Slams, at least in the popular consciousness, garnering praise from figures such as Bob Holman, co-director of the Nuyorican Poets Café, it also offers a point of crossover between music and poetry, particularly between rap and spoken word. Throughout its tenure, the programme featured a number of culturally influential performers, from legendary poets (Sanchez, Giovanni) to legendary musicians (Jill Scott, Lauryn Hill) to contemporary Spoken Word and Slam champions such as Stacyann Chin and Suheir Hammad. Each episode features performances from a number of poets and performers, introduced by rapper Mos Def, performing their poetry before an audience in a way that draws on slam poetry performances. The programme is acutely aware of the resonance of and connections between musicality and poetry, with many performances, such as Giovanni's "Talk to Me Poem, I Think I've Got the Blues", inspired by musicality. The idiom of hip hop is particularly influential in this regard. In the case of the hip hop duo Floetry, music and poetry are directly intertwined, with one member of the group singing and the other performing poetry in response in their performance of "Fantasize". the programme has its detractors – including Marc K. Smith – and the "radical"

nature of performance is perhaps diluted on this platform, as the ways in which both orality and musicality suggest a resistance to the status quo is perhaps lost to the commercialisation of the medium itself. Crucially, though, that medium allows both hip hop poetry and music to be better understood and experienced by a wider audience. The programme also showcases women poets / performers, who have been marginalised in critical appraisals.

Moore's work reveals an interconnection between music and poetry which connects it to hip hop. Like Woods', Moore's opus spans more classic conceptions of Spoken Word poetry to collaborations with the hip hop mainstream, while incorporating a language of musicality into her work as a whole. Moore, in contrast to Woods' use of poetics in her own music, asserts a space for women's performance within her own poetry and the interpolation of her poetry in the work of other performers, including on rapper Nas' albums. Her own albums have consisted of spoken word performances similar to those of Sanchez and Giovanni's, pairing her poetry with the performance of a jazz band on *Black Tea: The Legend of Jessi James*. The poems on this album exemplify the ways that jazz continues to resonate with poets in performative traditions, with Moore's album focussing on the ways that women have been influential in the formation of such an aesthetic. Tracks such as "You Want Poems" commemorate "etta / abbey / whitney / billie / nina / phyllis" and their contributions to the intertwined languages of music and poetry. Equally, in the interludes of other artists' works in which Moore interpolates her poetry there is focus on Black womanhood. For instance, in an interlude titled "Eternal Reflection Interlude", from rapper Jeezy's album *Church in These Streets*, Moore's poetry serves to strengthen the ties between poetry and "conscious" hip hop, here particularly focussing and centring women in what is otherwise a record which typically aligns with the construction of masculinity in hip hop:

In the same breath cook poems
And write dinner with her left
Rock a mic with her right
And pray her own seeds will be able to
Exchange the heavens for a mirror
And see themselves as the greatest reflection of God

(Jeezy ft. Jessica Care Moore)

Moore, like many of the poets examined here, highlights the interconnections between her poetry and music, as well as centring femininity throughout the poem, and, in this example, motherhood. In "The Prediction", a poetic interlude from Nas' *Nastradamus*, Moore again performs through a hip hop aesthetic a vision of motherhood and femininity, feminising and reclaiming hip hop as a genre. Moore, like other poets, explicitly feminises the performative technique in her engagements with musicality, elaborating how the crossovers between poetics and music can offer and create a particular aesthetic and indeed site of performance.

As noted above, the multiple inspirations from which BreakBeat Poets' work stems include musical origins. This thesis posits a continuum in which women poets perform their work; Jamila Woods makes that female tradition explicit, both in her poetry and in the music she makes. This music, although it celebrates the Black Aesthetic tradition in general (as she does in poems like "Blk Girl Art", answering back to and feminising Baraka's "Black Art"), focuses on a tradition of Black Women's Writing and poetry in particular. Woods, throughout both styles of expression in which she works, marries musicality to poetic expression in a signifyin'(g) tradition which explicitly celebrates and connects to Black women poets who have preceded her. Woods' poetry is inflected with hip hop sensibilities, and poetry is infused into her music, too.

The songs “SONIA” and “GIOVANNI”, for instance, from her *LEGACY! LEGACY!* album are odes to Sanchez and Giovanni, celebrating them and their work by directly sampling from their poetry. Her music reimagines the ode, a genre in which poets have paid homage to Holiday and Coltrane and Tupac, among others. Woods, in her poetry and her music, continues such a tradition and alters it in equal measure, highlighting the ways that this performative impulse continues to be traceable through time. Celebrating the influence of Sanchez and Giovanni in her songs “SONIA” and “GIOVANNI” on *LEGACY! LEGACY!* further reveals this influence and the interconnections between female practitioners across such genres and modes of expression, highlighting the creative legacies of female performers in such a space, as well as the intertextual crossroads between music and poetry.

Describing the impetus for the album, Woods describes the various songs included on it as inspired by “looking through the lenses of these different people, their work, things they said” (qtd in Anderson). “GIOVANNI”, for instance, is a reply to Giovanni’s “Ego Tripping”, and in the same way that this precursor-text traces historical maternity, Woods’ reply celebrates Black womanhood. As in Giovanni’s poem, Woods’ song traces the lineage of the women in her family in particular, asserting the power and comfort such an environment provides: “Water is to oil, me to your aggression / I'm protected / Joycetta prayed on me, mama burned sage for me” (“GIOVANNI”). She describes too the arresting style of poetry which is often attributed to Giovanni in light of her status as both a poet and activist: “Giovanni, tea and honey / tell it like I see it”. “SONIA”, too, directly takes inspiration from Sanchez’s performance of her poem “Middle Passage”. The jazz inflection in Sanchez’s voice has been noted, but Woods adopts this inflection as her song reflects on the “intersectionality” of being both Black and a woman (Anderson). While

Sanchez adopts the persona of an enslaved woman in her poem, Woods resituates the meaning of what is "baaaad", focussing on numerous ways that Black women have been subjected to abuse, but zeroing in on abusive relationships, a thematic strand many instapoets pick up, too: "It was the blaming that was bad (It was the blaming that was) / The self-hating that was bad (The self-hating that was)" ("SONIA"). Adopting Sanchez's performative utterance, Woods' song takes on a greater meaning, allowing the weight of the subject matter to sit with the listener, the threads of both performances woven together. Hip hop and its adjacent literature thrives on intertextual references and interpolations; as suggested by Shusterman, "[t]hese devices of cutting, mixing, and scratching give rap a variety of forms of appropriation, which seem as versatilely applicable and imaginative as those of high art (617). Woods' song takes its inspiration and impulse from Giovanni's poetics, in a creative writing back to the elder poet's work. Woods connects her music to a poetic lineage, imbuing her R&B record with the voices of poets like Giovanni and Sanchez, extending the conversations and connections between musicality and poetry.

The ways in which Moore's poetry is utilised as interlude on hip hop albums is echoed in the use of a number of insta-poets' work by musical artists. Although Instagram as a medium is very much focused on visuals, many poets who use this space are spoken word artists, performing their work in a different way. Just as Moore's work as a spoken word poet is spliced into the music of other artists, so musicians feature insta-poets in their work, revealing the reach of musicality through to the present day, as poetry moves into a digital arena. Some poets continue to perform their work as poets of the BAM did, performing poetry over the soundtrack of a beat or an interlude, but digital poetries turn to new media to showcase the lasting connections between musicality and poetry, particularly with respect to female modes of

performance. Although the connections between insta-poetry and music may not be as pronounced as in other performance poetries, those connections amount to more than merely a slam poetry / insta-poetry continuum. One example is the use of both Warsan Shire and Yrsa Daley-Ward's poetries in the lyrics and music videos of R&B artist Beyoncé's most recent albums. Moving insta-poetry off the grid reveals these connections, as Shire's poetry, in particular, becomes a part of the vibrant whole of the album, her work interpolated and performed by the singer, weaving the narrative of *Lemonade* through these spoken word performances. The interpolation of poetry in music is not a new technique – as noted, Moore's work is used in this way, too – but the examples of *Lemonade* and *Black Is King* are noteworthy nonetheless. For the former, Beyoncé speaks Shire's poetry, both from her Bandcamp record *warsan versus melancholy (the seven stages of being lonely*) as well as original poems, integrated throughout the digital album as preludes to songs, pre-empting the content of the music. A poetic intervention, excerpted from Shire's "for women who are difficult to love", precedes Beyoncé's "Hold Up", performed in a segment of the album's narrative titled "Denial"; here, the singer appears in homage to the goddess Osun, with her song emotively calling back to Shire's poem. Shire's poem here is altered from its original, viral appearance, with the "you" of the original integrated in the first person and the poem altered in various ways: "and you tried to change didn't you? / closed your mouth more / tried to be softer / prettier / less volatile, less awake" versus "I tried to change, closed my mouth more / tried to be softer, prettier / Less awake" ("for women who are difficult to love", "Denial"). Both Shire's poem and "Hold Up" approach a similar subject matter, concentrating on the potential dissolution of a relationship and the self-empowerment the female subject of both can seek instead: "you are terrifying / and strange and beautiful / something not everyone knows how to love", "I hop

up out my bed and get my swag on / I look in the mirror, say, "What's up?" / What's up, what's up, what's up" ("for women who are difficult to love", "Hold Up"). Shire's poetry adds to the musical texture of the album, one of the many artists interpolated and sampled throughout, the performativity of her work utilised in order to suggest or access an emotional quality in almost the reverse of the use of Blues interpolations in earlier poetry. The work of insta-poets, in light of the associations of the form with the instantaneous and the affective, would seem to link closely to such a concept, with the sampling of this work revealing the enduring links between music and poetry.

The integration of these poets work in the music and visuals of one of the biggest recording artists of the 2010s, emphasising the continuation of this performative tradition. The enduring tradition or lineage between poetry and music is perhaps emphasised particularly in the Black literary tradition. In the recent past, this tradition has become more expansive, particularly as Black musical forms and traditions spread globally to become integrated into youth culture, further cementing such expressions as a way to express and counter oppression. The performative impulse that drives expression through music is also channelled through the poetries which derive an influence from such expressions, ranging from jazz and blues at the beginning of the century through to Dub in the midcentury and hip hop through to the current day. In both page and performance poetry, the connections between the musicality and poetry allow for a dialogue, whereby the performed utterance is explicitly preserved. These expressions form a mode of performance which challenges societal status quos, which preserves Black forms of expression, and which has been shaped and mentored by feminine forms of expression. as we move into the digital aspect of performance in greater depth, the maintenance of such an

impulse reveals the continuing connections between the two, a legacy of conversation and of craft. Having explored and established the sonic legacies of performance poetries in the Americas, often rooted and expanding from those of the African diaspora, I move now to look at the ways the body is rendered in performance. In my next chapter, I focus further on identity as an important component in the creation of a poetic performance, exploring how poets utilise embodied performance in their work, often foregrounding aspects of their identity as they do so.

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Please note that Chapters 3-5 (pp. 120-245) are unavailable due to a request by the author.

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