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C H R I S T I N E H U M E

Improvisational Insurrection: The Sound Poetry
of Tracie Morris

Tracie Morris conceived her first sound poem while walking down the street. Imagine: the rhythm of walking replicates unwilling rhythms of her body—breathing, beating heart—and paces a limbo between being and doing, idling and vigilance. Walking home drives her outward. A sentence catches the rhythm and repeats itself as the sensorimotor connectivity of walking repeats. Each city block is an imbrication of familiar terrain and unscreened encounters that the sentence strides through, shifting with minute perceptions and their thresholds. Language walks itself out of habitualized routes. Sounds pace through the body; the body paces through landscape. Walking makes a single chord of mind-body-world out of which Morris makes oral poetry in tour-de-force performances that send language-as-we-know-it out for a hike. Her sound poems strip language down to its acoustical-rhythmic potencies and potentialities to engage with the world while traveling in it corporeally.

Morris made her artistic debut in the spoken-word scene of the 1990s—garnering championship titles in the Nuyorican Grand Slam and the National Haiku Slam—where the premium is on performance, especially “authenticity” of emotion and tone, and improvisation, especially audience responsiveness. Her poetry’s musical influences run deep, though in style, technique, and attitude, rap has cleared a definitive space for the spoken-word culture on which Morris cut her teeth. Both antecedents are predicated on a paradigm of improvisational (re)iteration and autobiographical narrative that gravitate toward themes of cultural and physical

abuse. "Project Princess," one of Morris's signature poems, packs a fools-not-suffered political audacity; inventive rhyming; vernacular swagger and playfulness; amphetamine-driven, balladic rhythm; and mobile facial expressions and bodily gestures that we might expect from a winning slam poem.¹ The poem is an ode and rallying cry addressed to young black women, like Morris herself, from Brooklyn's housing projects. In this, as in Morris's later sound poems, which tend to be more explicitly protest poems, we hear an effusive jocularity and a delight in pleasurable pathos that bolsters the confidence of its political power. "Project Princess" hints at the half-spoken, half-sung recitative style that will go on to inform her sound poems, yet the intonational patterns and rhythms exist so fully within a predetermined slam style that the work comes close to feeling commodified. If it's true, as Icelandic singer-songwriter Björk says, that "every genre has these mechanical clichés that get implanted in the voice and start to hide the power of words" (qtd. in Ross 50), then much of Morris's accomplishment in sound poetry is to break away from those clichés while retaining the riveting intensity and renegade virtuosity of her earlier feats. And "Project Princess" provides a good measure of just how much pressure she has put on ratified modes of expression in order to fabricate entirely new ones. Though her spoken-word poetry in many ways anticipates her sound poetry, the latter amplifies the techniques and goals of the former to such a volume that it now travels in "experimental" and high-art venues. By existing between easy definitions and within a wealth of osmotically integrated sources, Morris's new work swims in the wide ocean of sound poetry. This work bypasses the more programmatic features of the two poetic praxes she has been associated with, slam and contemporary avant-garde, by standing against reified notions of authenticity and sincerity as well as ready-made loopholes of indeterminacy and alienation.² It also,

1. This piece can be heard at www.worldofpoetry.org/usop/land4/htm and www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Morris.html. It may also be heard on the following recordings: *Our Souls Have Grown Deep Like Rivers*, Rhino Records, 2000; *United States of Poetry*, Mercury Records, 1996.

2. Morris's performance on September 16, 2004, at Eastern Michigan University takes us through a chronological development of her poetics; the performance ends with two

as Harryette Mullen laments, strains critical narratives of representative identity: “‘Formally innovative minority poets,’ when visible at all are not likely to be perceived either as typical of a racial/ethnic group or as representative of an aesthetic movement” (28). No matter how far her work cuts across the twilight zone of poetic alliances and artistic disciplines—Morris has collaborated in theater, dance, music, and film as well as written books—we want to stay within earshot.³

In a series of sound poems that she performs live and records for museum installations, Morris fuses illocutionary and theatrical aspects of performatives to create spells of somatic and social impact. “Illocutionary performatives,” as defined by J. L. Austin, are statements that perform, rather than describe, an action: *saying* is in effect *doing* (5). Usually Morris’s sound pieces begin with an illocutionary performative that quickly gets restless and distends—amending and appending itself—into a theatrical parade of mobile meanings that leaves behind any empirical descriptives or expository elaborations. By inhabiting and improvising within one sentence, Morris releases the physicality of words, plays with sonic associations, and funnels the referential residue of language into more visceral, more estranging and ethical functions. Familiar speech sets in motion something close to glossolalia by way of accent, slur, stutter, backtracking, striation, and telescoping tempo. Performativity in the piece “The Mrs. Gets Her Ass Kicked,” for instance, renders the effects of the title true the way a judge levels convictions. As a protest against domestic violence, the poem might seem at odds with the title’s cynicism, but it’s that very shock—one that uses humor to show horror—and disjuncture that drives the relentlessly visceral work. Expect no familiar or flinching treatment

sound poems I discuss in this essay, “A Little” and “Chain Gang.” To view the performance, go to www.emich.edu/public/english/creative-writing/readingarchive/morris.html. For the most extensive archive of Morris’s work, including several poems discussed here, go to PennSound: www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Morris.html. These performances offer testimony to the improvisational nature of Morris’s work.

3. Some of Morris’s collaborators include Ralph Lemon, Sudha Seetharaman, Trey McIntyre, Arthur Jafa, Xenobia Bailey, Donald Byrd, Graham Haynes, Kevin Bruce Harris, Michael Hill, Jean-Paul Bourelly, Cecilia Smith, DD Jackson, Uri Caine, Ela Troyano, and Badal Roy.

of this social ill. The title provides the narrative context and brutal tone; the words are recycled from the Irving Berlin song “Cheek to Cheek”—“I’m in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak”—lending an ironic counterpoint. From this linguistic minimalism, the piece uncorks an excess of mind-carbonating expressivity, eschewing semantic strategy in order that aural alterity might regain the texture of spousal abuse. That is, words decompose into chokes, hyperventilations, and galloping chest and throat slaps. Morris’s riffing dismembers “describe” into “scratch” and remembers “heart beats” as “hard beats.” These words magnetize and pull together recombinatory sounds, carried by the force of their own impulsive impetus, in a process that fuses emotional speech with syntactic elaborations usually associated with its opposite, propositional speech. Morris’s shifting intonations of the “same” words reverberate multiple codes that feed off each other’s feedback. Compare Paul Dutton’s formal technique in his sound poem “Reverberations,” in which Dutton seems to be playing verbal catch with the words “gong” and “going.”⁴ In differing pitches and tones, he lobbs the words back and forth. Their phonetic likeness exploits subtle performed differences and sets up a resonant field between the two.

The power of reiteration forces each next moment in language, yet Morris takes advantage of the interstices between these moments, as if she were showing us a CAT scan of how language gets generated, including the parts usually kept invisible or inaudible. She makes a three-dimensional experience out of reiterating restless reinscriptions. The torrential cascading of a single moment creates the felt time of a protracted and panicked present tense. The slight variations in repeated phrasing—what Gertrude Stein calls “insistence” or “emphasis” (“Portraits”), Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls “play of differences” (*Signifying Monkey* 46), and Amiri Baraka calls “the changing same” (197)—in which language is troped and transformed, *propel* Morris’s language within an illusory stillness of one spinning sentence. As in Samuel Beckett’s short play “Not I,”

4. For a selective archive of Dutton’s sound poetry, including the poem discussed here, go to PennSound: www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/dutton.html or UbuSound: www.ubu.com/sound/dutton.html.

fragments ceaselessly added to and subtracted from the interior of a phrase break open otherwise imperceptible understandings. In Beckett's and Morris's pieces, cinematically fast cuts are strung together with ellipses (in Morris's case, *heard* ellipses) that syncretically concoct an identity without contextual props; isolated segments allow for unexpected adhesions and apertures. All of Morris's pieces to date exploit the gaps in speech in at least two ways. By conjuring word constellations based on alliteration and assonance, the poet provokes memory and emotional narrative without recourse to time markers or hypotaxia. In doing so, she trains the audience to listen within patterns of rhythmic phrasing. We then learn the gestalt listening of Morris's endlessly concatenated and abridged new language.⁵ As we complete phrases and register half-heard words, we are loaded into the rhythm, where we live as her most important collaborator.

What Morris's presentational vocal mode—performing, rather than representing—makes clear is that minimalism, at its most astonishing, tightly contracts an excess of ideas, be they intellectual, spiritual, or emotional. Exactitude and procedural dissolution are the front and back side of her style. This is a coup of exhaustive, minimalist performative poetics, one that is based on a commitment to continue to upset social codes in more confrontational ways. All of Morris's sound poems reference, echo, mirror, revise, and respond to some scrap of common cultural currency, such as a "found" line of speech, a name, or a song lyric. This kind of intertextuality—"signifying" in the tradition of African American art—takes a radical turn (both moving forward and looking backward) in its formal innovation. According to Gates, "The more mundane the fixed text ('April in Paris' by Charlie Parker, 'My Favorite Things' by John Coltrane) the more dramatic the Signifying revision" (*Signifying Monkey* 64). This is certainly true of Morris's work at the Whitney Biennial in 2002, which uses deceptively simple sentences, in language often so familiar as to

5. "Gestalt listening" might also be termed "peripheral hearing," after Freud's concept of peripheral consciousness, a level of subconscious awareness such as subliminal perception, where we register information below the threshold of awareness. The degree of involuntary participation and registered cognition is arguable; we both fill in unfinished phrases and register half-heard words when listening to Morris's work. What I'm tagging "gestalt listening," Morris calls "the almost heard."

sound ritualistic, as departure points. "A Little," which begins, "I am just a little girl," works through a synecdochical process of remotivation in the implied context of an extreme social power imbalance. The girl narrator digs her teeth into the vocabulary available to her, granting it an omnipresent and somological capacity to mean, making it perform actions beyond semantics.

The initiating text might be compared to the mask—described by Gates as "the essence of immobility fused with the essence of mobility, fixity with transience"—encoded with meaning through rhythm (*Figures* 168). By putting on a mask of ritual identity, Morris dramatizes a girl's trauma of sexual abuse: extreme mutation and disarticulation of the original language, guided by a nearly mystical rhythm, evoke an ecstatic state of anguish. Given the situation, the poem's tonal range—from playful and celebratory, to pissed off and terrified, to demanding and pleading—brilliantly challenges convention and infuses the piece with psychological astuteness as it builds a narrative of abuse. As "I am just a little girl," the galvanizing statement, is put through a series of spooked and spooky intonations, the words become so simultaneously loaded with and bankrupted by the force of their apparent intentions that they explode into a rhythmic spray of screams, grunts, rasps, throat-clearings, unexpected enjambments, and stammered phonemes, which act as even sharper instruments of perception. The initial strict illocutionary performative (where saying is doing) migrates to and merges with the theatrical performative (where vocalizations enact saying), compounding effect and affect. An audible breath begins the piece. The iambic performance quickly fibrillates into a jagged isochronicity, a derangement of the refrain, as it evolves and dissolves in our ears as language dwelling in the crisis of communicating beyond its usual means: "Just a little. Just a little. I am just a lit-it-ittle girl and. I am just a little and I am just a. Just a little. It-tle."⁶ Morris's nimble voice punches holes in the surface reference, creating a kinesthetic texture and depth. Extremities of sensation overwhelm word boundaries, which become like the girl, violated objects. The girl's objectification, her imposed "itness," resounds as

6. This is my transcription; there is no printed source. To hear this piece, go to www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Morris.html.

Morris extracts “it” from “little” and scats “it” into its most concrete incarnations. At another point, Morris works the word “leet-tle” into a siren sound, alerting us to the dangers of littleness—of mind (adult perpetrator’s) and body (child victim’s). “Leet-tle” is a call to awaken language’s resources and rally them in the service of the girl’s ethical and epistemological quest. The oxymoronically loud assertion of the girl’s littleness signals an untenable juxtaposition between her childhood age and her “adult” situation. The performance of “little,” belittled into “it,” then extended into a siren sound, emblemizes the gamut of conditions and comprehensions expressed as the girl searches for ways of being heard, even by herself.

Morris does violence to the words, so performing the girl’s visceral reactions in an extensive mimetic process operating phonologically, morphologically, and syntactically. The piece’s shifting tempo often kicks into a barely audible, rapid-fire delivery that actualizes a pulse gone faint but furious. Intense fragmentation and condensation elide narrative into an enactment of the girl’s isolation. The pressure Morris exerts on the sentence to account for complex modalities of identity forces a palimpsestic text to emerge. With each listening, new sounds and words leap out at us, as if auditory ghosts were spilling from the wounds of words in search of inoculative knowledge. Crypt words, or elliptically heard words—such as “sex,” “unjust,” “injure,” “undress,” and “night”—subliminally persuade us to understand the context without quite knowing why.⁷ This puts us in a situation similar to that of the girl, who comprehends the facts of her abuse but is stymied in her ability to articulate it conventionally. Instead, a language invents itself as it goes, defamiliarized enough to instantiate a forceful materiality. This defamiliarization alchemizes an almost hallucinatory listening experience, drawing our own hearing into question and disrupting the boundary between orality and aurality. Morris’s sound work encourages mishearings that dilate our engagement with its ideological imperatives. As listeners, we hitch a ride on a slurred, speedy phrase repeated with differing intonational insistences to hear a simulacra

7. For a discussion of “crypt words” as a tool for modernist writers to engage in racial and gender politics, see DuPlessis.

of new language. "I-am Just" might distort into a near hearing of "Aunt Jemima," icon of black female exploitation and servitude, furthering the frequencies of the piece's political pitch.

According to linguist Reuven Tsur, when we hear a sound, our minds categorize it and process it as either speech or nonspeech: "We seem to be tuned, normally, to the nonspeech mode; but as soon as the incoming stream of sounds gives the slightest indication that it may be carrying linguistic information, we automatically switch to the speech mode" (11). Poetry, in Tsur's theory, usually relies on some "pre-categorical sensory information" that stimulates an attention to the mystery of sound, the nonspeech mode (47). Though Tsur's account might be somewhat oversimplified, listeners to Morris's sound poems will recognize the cognitive stuttering of trying to double-process. With both auditory and phonetic centers perked up, a neural crosstalk concentrates the richness of active listening. By immersing us in pre-linguistic and extralinguistic dimensions of sound and sublimation, Morris draws the listener into an intimacy of immediate experience, one that is co-extensive with improvisation. We track allomorphs tumbling into anagrams. We startle as noises of dissent (*unt-ugh*) and surprise (*ut-oh, egh*) break out of haplogy. Nonreferential sounds and phonetic substitutions blot out words in the radical cacophony of a mind caught in cyclic rhythms that seem arrested in time as they break down mechanistic traps of conventional language use.

Morris foregrounds the epistemology of vocalizations here; the girl's sounds, like those of anyone, constitute a piece of autobiography, the interior life stealing in on the public. Though not strictly formulated, the piece first refigures the predicate "little girl," then attends to the first-person subject; this inversion of the inaugural script indicates a movement from identification with a category, "little girl," to an investigation of the self, the "I am." Repetition establishes the equivalences of these terms but motivates an essential ungrounding of received identity. This shift in the course of the piece is reinforced by a vibratory sibilance that introduces self-consciousness in the form of "I was just" and "I said," phrases broken off and synonymous, as slips into past tense, where deed ("I was just . . ." [minding my own business]) and word ("I said . . ." [no]) are equally ineffective defenses. The sentence—in both senses of the word—cannot be contained. In and through it, the phonetic intensive *i* proliferates in "ice," "Isis," "is,"

“lit,” “eyes”—words suggestive of self-assertion, witness, and rage—and “nice,” “quiet,” “quite”—words suggestive of diminutive girlishness. Sound symbolism splits into competing networks, though Morris’s voice is anything but limited to chiaroscuro delivery. These words take up a multitude of relationships and codes that play with notions of escape and discovery; the “I” seesaws between absence and presence in an elaborate game of self-naming. The rich, volatile tradition of naming in the African American vernacular is turned inward, spinning out a taxonomy of improvisational figurations and impersonations that rely on irony to mobilize identity.⁸ Morris’s quicksilver tonal changes—from gleeful to grave, tough to vulnerable—show the deeply psychotic ravages of child abuse and Morris’s ability to convey pathos through the concatenation of syllables. Not only do the runaway mood shifts *show* these effects, they make us *feel* them physically and psychologically. Sounds drift into words and words into cognates as if the speaker were in a fugue state, trying out modes of national, neighborhood, and private broadcasts, testing alliterative ramifications, in search of herself or a way out of “herself.”

There’s no sidestepping the corporeality of Morris’s voice. Her pitch and dynamic ranges display merged subjectivities of expression with culturally informed iconicities of sound. High vowels, usually associated with littleness and belittling in English, are delivered often at full volume, compacting the effect of the piece’s mixed messaging. Before we come to our intellectual senses, a Western association of high vocal pitch with untrustworthiness and hysteria has its way with us. Morris drives the upper registers to compound the sense of the girl’s disturbance and to expose a possibly sexist response. Crash gutturals, raw lower vowels, and syncopated throat noises punctuate those flights. At other moments, the piece demands intense concentration from listeners, who must strain to hear the almost whispered syllables. The effect arrests our capacity to respond in the familiar passive way: both critical and transcendent listening habits compete for full engagement as the audience oscillates between a stiff-arming distance and gut identification. Each is a relief from the tyranny of the other.

8. Rhetorical tropes subsumed under “signifying” include naming, marking, testifying, sounding, rapping, and playing the dozens.

When Morris performed "A Little" at Barnard College in 2002 and at Eastern Michigan University in 2004, some audience members found the piece funny—a response that encourages self-reflection but that also betrays the piece's power to suspend the listener between deep empathy and defensive discomfort. After all, the diction might catch in our ears as absurd given the excesses of outrage it has been grafted onto and the adult it is being performed through. This is precisely the position of the girl, being enormously little: her boast shoots down powerlessness by aggressively claiming it. If surprise and incongruity are at the root of humor, then our first impulse just might be gallows laughter. Think of Kurt Schwitters's *Ur Sonata*, which strikes listeners as funny because the rigorous formal structure seems wildly incongruous with the carnal play of pure sound. By flaunting vulnerability, the girl exposes and denaturalizes violence and also suggests that her helplessness is likewise our own. The girl's voice possesses us: the voice bleeding its repository of the body's memory, the voice that grinds between child and adult, the voice threatening to subsume our own.⁹ Conversely, we might also feel the urge to titter nervously at our own position as audience for the implied accusation. Witnessing puts us in a position of responsibility, allowing a vague, confusing guilt to creep in. The boon in this kind of jaded humor is that it can do the work of resignification. The dynamic of name and named thing is a prophylactic against paralysis, where irony is the rhetorical form of self-reflexiveness. "A Little" ends, almost under the breath, with the initiating sentence boiled down and its ethical imperatives siphoned off: "I am just; I adjust." Yet how might the speaker adjust? Given the ambiguity of her prospects, this uncertain resolution leaves us reeling out of the poem's mighty momentum into the air of our own naked inquiry. The unfinished quality of the sentence, Morris's refusal to cinch the point, frustrates the telos of hearing in favor of irresolution. What we lose in the satisfaction of knowing, we gain in the impact of the scandalized friction. Morris revitalizes the postmodern cliché of dwelling in impossibility by infusing it with real stakes and real risk.

9. Yet we can never voice the poem; no one can read the poem aloud, because it exists only as a dynamic performance.

As “A Little” demonstrates, reiterating a small pool of words in the process of repetition and revision draws our attention to subtle distortions and slippages. This open display of the procedural nature of language allows a rare simultaneity of intricate apprehensions that seem more available to the ear than to the eye. Consider an unscored “transcription” of the first thirty seconds of “slave sho’ to video a.k.a. Black But Beautiful,” which uses motivated repetition to volley between two ready-made discursive universes, both riddled with syntactic and lexical ambiguities that allow Morris to expand their reaches. Morris begins with a call (“Ain’t she beautiful”) and response (“She too black”), then moves quickly into a rhythmic echo chamber of erasure and expansion, sounding out a spectrum of emotional shadings. One typographic rendering, albeit provisional, might run:

Ain’t she beautiful / She too black / She too beautiful / boot-booty-ful / she too black / aint she aint she boo-boo-beauty-ful ain’t she / she ain’t beautiful she too black / too too beautiful tutu tu-tu / beautiful / she ain’t ain’t she she ain’t ain’t she she ain’t / is she ain’t she beautiful / e-sh-she too black too beautiful ain’t she / she ain’t she ain’t / anxy she too black / too beautiful too b-b-beautiful butt-beautiful butt booty full booty too black

Once beached on the page, the words flatten and forget their flexibility. They no longer bodily manifest all the symptoms that Paxil wants to save us from. The sounds are full of decisions that one need not make while listening: “tutu” or “too too?” “But” or “butt?” “Bootyful booty” or “booty full-booty?” In addition, many of the sounds hover between two words in their actual articulation, so that a composite listening is the only accurate experience.

This piece animates and mobilizes contradictory cultural discourses loaded into the words “black” and “beautiful.” The subject “she” is posited at the crossroads, poised between an under-the-breath assumption that “black” and “beautiful” are antonymic, or mutually canceling, and a self-conscious assertion that “black” and “beautiful” are synonymous or twin categories. Each term is used to judge the other. The historical auras around words become part of their schema—here designing a false binary that Morris restages and ultimately reverses, as well as a false tautology that Morris references and ultimately rewrites. She takes up Sonia Sanchez’s challenge from within the Black Arts movement:

who's gonna take
the words
blk / is / beautiful
and make more of it
than blk / capitalism.

(19)

Morris animates psychological dimensions and synaptic firings as she becomes a vatic mouthpiece through which language splits apart and spits back. She rescripts "black is beautiful," mindful of the often masculinist and materialist agenda of the organization responsible for its genesis. The Black Power slogan of the sixties and seventies, though never uttered in the piece itself, is on trial, as its words participate in a sentence that gets a good rehearing. Not only is the slogan "on trial," but this metaphor also reminds us that key members of the Black Power movement were subject to unjust sentencing and state-sponsored assassinations. Morris may be challenging the sexism of the movement and commodification of the slogan as much as she is challenging the forces it was protesting. To listen to the piece is to be swept into a hypnotic process that eschews product, a performative dialogue opposed to empirical descriptions or discursive authorizations. Morris makes that internal dialogue audible as she moves from the initial conflict—"Ain't she beautiful / She too black"—through a proliferating rhythm of sonic associations that uncover tangled semantic liaisons, to the final statement, "beautiful and black." By talking out the triggering citation, she performs a ritual chain of resignifications that break down oppositions of mind/body and matter/language.

"Slave sho' to video a.k.a. Black But Beautiful" is built entirely on the pyrotechnic repetitions of the sounds of the opening five words, letting the sounds of these words slip into what Morris calls "sonic puns" and the "almost heard" (qtd. in Singer 5). One of the most illuminating slippages in the piece moves "ain't she" to "anxy," literally infusing the question with "anxiety." The neologism "anxy" then evolves into "and she," allowing the introduction of the positive conjunction "and," which effectively replaces the negation "ain't" by the end of the nearly four-minute piece. This process—question, crisis, affirmation—finally fosters a Boolean marriage of

the two terms (“beautiful *and* black”) that began as “opposites” (“black *but* beautiful”). Conjunctions and connective words figure largely, creating out of sound itself a new syntax, and out of syntax, an unforgettable music. “Beautiful” fractures into “but” and “but too,” reinforcing the titular tension (“Black But Beautiful”). This conjunction also puns on its homophone, *butt*, in order to explore the objectifying force of beauty itself. Butt, of course, is the fetish body part often cited in rap songs, indicative of its special place in the black urban psychosexual pathos. Notice that Morris’s alliteration, like the best of rap, uses two warring strategies: staccato syllable pileup and a delayed, teetering elongation of syllables. This device compounds the time of rhyme as it cuts our expectations both ways: uncertainty about whether rhyme will materialize in a predictable manner ballasts uncertainty about where its arrival will throw the meaning. Words in this piece hatch into hearings and peripheral hearings of “booty,” “bait,” “butterful,” “booby,” “bound,” “bounty,” “sheep,” “ample,” “Bantu,” “tutu,” “Tutu,” “cute,” “tootable,” “chichi,” “ain’t shit,” and “taint.” These words explore the faintly diabolical machinery of “beautiful” and “black” as static cultural categories.¹⁰ Morris combs received messages about black women’s bodies and endemic bifurcated constructions of “black woman” as object of repulsion and appeal.

The subject “she” is a symbol so powerful as to be eligible for the conceptual absorption, containment, and representation of the collective body of the African American woman. Morris speaks for, through, and to this subject. Signifying here starts with the title, “slave sho’ to video a.k.a. Black But Beautiful,” which foregrounds race, self, and presence—and its own history, its own revision. The work is a sound portrait of a woman made vivid to herself through contradictory historical messages about her body as

10. Some questions the piece might provoke include, Is she beautiful because she’s booty? Or despite being booty? Is she beautiful because she’s bound to blackness? Or despite being black? Is she beautiful because she’s bound? Is she beautiful because she’s chichi or in a tutu? Is she beautiful because she’s Bantu? Because she’s sheep? Because she’s ample? Because of her ample butt? Because she’s tooting her horn? Or his horn? Is she beautiful because she ain’t shit? Is she bait? Is she bounty?

spectacle—slave-auction capital, breeder, worker; music-video dancer, singer, performer—and builds into a critique of that objectification.¹¹ The title signals the ensuing investigation of how speech acts out on its subjects. Judith Butler speculates: “I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially. The self-colonizing trajectory of certain forms of identity politics is symptomatic of this paradoxical embrace of the injurious term” (1). Morris has given us a release from this embrace of internalized racism, one that goes beyond “blk / capitalism” by way of deliberately flaunting the injurious idea and employing a linguistic jackhammer to crack open its words, whose sounds will find their way to alternative meaning. Racist speech, as Butler argues, works by invoking convention, one that lives in and through language itself and repeats the trauma through signs that both obscure and restage the subjugation (36). Directed repetition and reverse citation here not only repeat the anguish of racist speech but rip it away from the historicity that keeps it alive. Morris’s rechanneling of injurious speech works like a spell, “translat[ing] experience into meaning and meaning into belief” (Gates, *Figures* 176). As words scratch and reverberate they retune language and the consciousness of that language. Meta-English intersects with para-English, creating an acoustic conundrum that underscores language’s propagation of corrupt power dynamics.

Morris employs the kind of fierce, active repetition that might make even veteran Stein readers dizzy, but she does so with electric phrasing, lightning-fast tonal shifts, an uncanny sense of time, and a stampede of ligatured sounds that provides a vocal bridge between musical improvisation and poetry. In this regard, “slave sho’ to video” clearly draws from rap and jazz traditions, both of which foreground the musical physicality of words. Morris’s piece also plays on the jazz-inflected sermon in the prologue of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*; both polemics ride on rhythmic repetition and elliptical phrasing directly linked to an African American musical tradition. Ellison’s narrator, absorbed fully into Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue,” hears a call-and-response-style sermon

11. Elizabeth Alexander, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Deborah Richards also interrogate the Venus Hottentot construct.

that swings between contentless assertions of “black is . . .” and “black ain’t . . .,” “it do . . .” and “it don’t . . .” The heavy ellipses in Ellison’s text suggest both the emptiness of these propositions and the given nature of what and how “black will make” or “unmake you” (9–10). Morris also banks on aural ellipsis to suggest words and encourage the listener to imagine connections. In the work of both Ellison and Morris, racial essence is the target of a parody that mocks the logic of essentialism itself, that “black” can be signified in any transcendent way. However, in “slave sho’ to video,” of the two verbs employed, both marking epistemological status, “ain’t” by far outnumbers “is,” which when it is used always comes in the form of a question. “Ain’t” functions doubly, flip-flopping as a stand-in for “is” as well as its negation. This flickering circuitry underscores the struggle to be seen, to be present at all, ironically set against the struggle to be seen as something more capacious than a sign. In this sustained ambivalence, the collocations of “is” and “ain’t” as well as “black” and “beautiful” perform the crisis of linguistic limitation. Listening to the piece, we confront the mental contortions of double-talk and the rhetorical arabesques of circular reasoning necessary in the cultural persistence of race as an oppressively defining trope. The high-pressure scrutiny Morris applies to inherited structures of thought and feeling pushes language to unsettle the totalizing myths of language and blackness.

As a consolidated portrait, “slave sho’ to video a.k.a. Black But Beautiful” deploys puns, intonational fluctuations, and syntactic play reminiscent of Stein’s sound-driven portraits. Stein’s “If I Told Him. A Complete Portrait of Picasso” begins by holding a mirror up to the first sentence, reversing the dependent clauses: “If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.” Morris uses this mirroring strategy prolifically, reversing the syntax of “black” and “beautiful” as well as “ain’t” and “she” in exhaustive, percolating scats. So doing, she holds up a mirror to interpellation, enacting the necessary “double consciousness” of inhabiting white culture (Du Bois 2). Chiasmus here is not only structural but conceptual, verbal, and phonetic. For both Stein and Morris, words live inside other words. Released and multiplied, words become self-regarding and, rather than superseding their components, enter into dialogue with themselves. The repetition as such is never blind or mechanical but metonymically

suggests and sounds out other words that act as “portals of discovery” (Joyce 190). Simultaneously conflicting and cooperative assertions about beauty call its definition into question. They rattle any sense of its objective status and unravel a sure sense of identity. With its ontological status of project and postulate, identity behaves in a verblike manner, morphing from one permutation in Morris’s language to the next, crosscutting between erosion and vexation. Morris reorders syntaxes—rewiring language and identity—until the words evacuate their signifying functions. Instead of maintaining delight in a pleasurable chaos of echoes and linguistic destabilizations, she moves us through the wreckage to reconstitute language and thus identity into a state of nonessentialist inclusivity. The poem’s final words, “beautiful and black,” cannot be heard in isolation, but rather packed with the dialectical performance of their interpretation and reinvention as they update the famous Black Power dictum.

Morris effectively valorizes somatic experience to dispossess and repossess the language of identity. This is no hairsplitting intellectual argument, nor is it political sloganeering; it’s music forcing itself into articulate spoken magic. Morris’s approach departs from those that *point out* that language teaches violence and self-hatred; her language use is a theory in living practice.¹² Signifying, in her mouth, is an analogue to the verbal actions of charms or spells. According to Andrew Welsh, a charm (like Austin’s performative speech act), is a magic incantation, a vocal staging of an efficacious action: “At the roots, the words of a charm are themselves magic actions” (136). With the charm, however, words carried on a rhythmic vocal pattern generate their own irregular, internal rhythm; the charm-rhythm, “developed by the assonances, alliterations, rhymes, and word-repetitions in the language of the poem” (145), is dictated by the rhythm of the words themselves as they recur and reorganize in the

12. This practice might be patterned on Antonin Artaud’s theater of cruelty, which aims to affront audience members, to engulf them in violence that rattles their moral and emotional tracks. This technique differs for writers like Sonia Sanchez who use a dual approach of direct, normative grammar and syntactic defamiliarization to emotionally confound the directness of the former.

course of the poem. Welsh contrasts this rhythm with that of a song or chant, in which the words are subordinate to the external, regular music. As in Morris's sound pieces, most charms involve unusual phonological and grammatical forms galvanized by "repeat[ing] a few words or a single line over and over as often as is necessary for the charm to work its effect" (140–42). The melopoeia that engineers them directs the bearing of their meaning. By harnessing the rhythmic shape of language, Morris transforms the voice into an alchemical enchantment, where sound is kinetically apprehended. When we hear Morris's works as spells, we are not engaging in magical thinking but recognizing the persuasive force residing in rhythm, a language-derived rhythm that communicates before it is understood.¹³

Welsh discusses charm as a global, ancient form that charges language with the power to drive away an evil force by naming it or to superimpose good by way of renaming. "Slave sho' to video a.k.a. Black But Beautiful," like all of Morris's sound poems, is propelled by a necessity of incantatory webs of textured sound that invoke, work over, and then dismantle cultural curses. Instead of ignoring stereotypes, for instance, Morris acknowledges them, injecting a small amount of their disease into the listener's ears to produce an inoculation against franchised identity and habitualized consciousness. The antidote to venom is venom; the injuring name is deployed against its user. The spell's double articulation provides us with synchronously valid etymologies: as we adopt our mother tongue, our individual feeling for a word evolves alongside historical linguistics. Performed by Morris, sentences like "I am just a little girl," "I'm in heaven," and "She too black" atomize a fecundity of implicit and explicit meanings. In Renaissance incantation, spells were thought to be words ejected by the imagination to form themselves as solid things. In Morris's work, a recovery and a manifestation are equally present. Some of the undoing of language sounds like an effortful

13. I prefer the word "spell" to "charm" because its connotations are much more forceful to my ear, given the latter's use in formulations such as "lucky charm" and "charming personality." Morris's work doles out that other, historical kind of charm in acid droplets.

recovery of words momentarily suppressed on “the tip of the tongue” and trying out ad hoc vocabularies, as if the body were offering up its own speech. Though the refrain might be an echo from the world, the echolalia that ensues reanimates and subjectivizes the reiteration.

Morris infuses improvisation into the somewhat predetermined sound patterns of traditional spell: “Stuff comes out that I am not prepared to utter. . .,” she says. “Almost all the time, sounds come up that never have presented themselves [to me] before” (qtd. in Crowne 221). Morris produces a sound embodied—and bound to exceed the body—with memory, prophecy, and rapture. As in the blues, the music generated by verse is a pan-rhythmic “explanation” of the words, meant to extend and to problematize them. There’s simultaneously a trust in the inherent intelligence of language itself (as alliteration, assonance, and rhythm draw out latent meanings) and in her own individual ethical and aesthetic intelligence which may “correct” or expose language’s less admirable cultural baggage. Language acts as an inspirer and irritant, unraveling a repertoire of purposes that gather new intensive folds of Morris’s own excitement. The work’s improvisational nature ties it to musical traditions such as jazz and hip-hop, and to spiritual traditions such as speaking in tongues and African diasporic ritual possession. All of these cultures embrace the rapture of inspiration that manifests as possession at a metaphoric or literal level: something beyond the pale of consciousness, and almost beyond containment, enters and speaks through the host. By entering a rhythm-induced trance, the medium accesses cultural memory—evoking synesthetic spiritual, metaphysical, and emotional states that produce an urgent surfeit of responses. In Morris’s sound poems, the mesmerizing, muscular rhythm becomes a force that distracts the listener from a frustrated sense of the language and lets it exist between consciousness and sentience. By unsheathing meaning to a state of sensations and drives, the rhythms sensitize our awareness of the moment; we are both asleep and awake in its lulling monotony and arousing variety. When improvising, the mind is liberated from the demands of the will. The eroticism of giving ourselves up to another’s authority—here that of the character who is speaking through Morris—is predicated on and intermingles with our own anxieties about self-control and power.

As listeners, we are transported into Morris's trance, tapping into what Julia Kristeva calls "chora," or "a rhythmic space" that precedes spatiality, temporality, and verisimilitude; it is a prelinguistic rhythmic language, untranslatable and anterior to judgment (25–27). In psychoanalytic terms, language regresses in order to be translated. Through "linguistic overcompetence," an "experimental psychosis" emerges to reach into "the hazardous regions" where the writer's sense of psychic unity degenerates (30). As it moves through the mind and body without fixed orientation, language triggers the improvisational nature of memory and imagination and becomes pathologized: an oral disordering symptomatic of a psychic one. A compulsion for repetition brings a spontaneous rhythm to the fore. Spontaneity doesn't necessarily guarantee, as Kristeva wants to claim, access to the primal, authentic, unexpected, or subversive; our ideas about what's "authentic" are often just as culturally engineered and rehearsed as that which we name "artiface." However, in Morris's work, rhythm *moves* us to access otherwise incommunicable realms of experience. It is the organizing system in a theater of correspondences that forces a trust in elliptical and peripheral perception. Language germinates rhythm; thereafter Morris relies on the stringencies of the simultaneous. That is, language and rhythm exist in a carnal stereophonic relationship, each motivating and investigating the other.

In the symposium "What's African about African American Poetry?" Morris claims that her investment in Africanized words has "become a form of ancestral worship." Most of her sound poems harvest Africanisms in both African American English and standard American English—"bad," "boot," "boo," "boogie," "Bantu," and "tote," for instance, from "slave sho' to video." The word "boot," for example, might reference the contemporary idea of being under the boot or being given the boot, as well as its slang meanings, circa the Harlem Renaissance, "to give," playing on the stereotype of woman as service provider; "to explain or tell or listen," and "the making of exciting music," culling out self-referential emphasis; and especially "a black person," a definition that comes from the black color of boots (Major 56). The lexical genealogies here channel origins and authoritative meanings at the same time that they violate those historicizing tendencies by insisting on temporality and contextuality.

Not only does Morris compost phonemes to hothouse new meanings, but she breathes multiplicity into words and phrases. They “gesture toward an anarchic and generative meditation on phrasing” and “mark the generation of or from a lost language,” a limbo, a gateway, a threshold.¹⁴ The word “bounce” wells up in “slave sho’ to video” like a sonic aftershock. Clearly the word resounds with context-appropriate expressions, both as a verb (to bully or bluff, to recover from a blow, to scold, to boast, to expel, to walk with a springy step, to dismiss) and as a noun (resilience, verve, a style of jazz). These definitions, from *Webster’s Third International Dictionary*, overlook one of the most obvious meanings in the urban black vernacular of Morris’s piece—that is, to fuck. The contraction of “bounce” into “bow(n)” provides a basal link between sound and sense, if we hear the contraction as vocal impersonations of bass notes that anticipate heated scenes in pornographic movies. The word’s euphemistic power and its pandemonium of inflections marshal visceral effects and psychosocial resonances that make it impossible to hear singularly. Yet Morris isn’t simply celebrating language’s interpretive branchings. By relying on clustered reduplications that spiral into abiding uncertainty and auditory ephemerality, words seep into our consciousness and assume unpredictable powers there. These words are at once provisional and whole; their cross-purposes, repressed identities, and secret narratives emerge, thereby connecting linguistic practices with social formations. Her designs arouse questions about power and memory and their relationships to language’s regulatory function. In this poem, Morris destabilizes assumptions about objectification and delivers the concepts “beauty” and “black” into a matrix of complex states and attitudes.

Paul Miller’s notion of sampling as a harnessing of the uncanny gives us another way of reading Morris’s use of language and rhythm. Samples invoke memory at the same time that they drastically recontextualize it, seamlessly reprocessing it to create a sense of

14. Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* provides a rich meditation on improvisation and black American avant-garde’s blurring of music and poetry (42–44). Moten stresses the importance of erasure in improvisation and uses Nathaniel Mackey’s phrase “that insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion” as a touchstone.

estranged familiarity. Out of preexisting recordings, sampling orchestrates a new music; the stolen sound returns as a hallucinatory presence, haunting the current sound with associative histories. Sampling becomes an enactment of metaphor, yoking the known and the new in a dialectical process that never resolves: each import maintains equal reference to the original and to the new composition. Miller's syncretic reading of sampling and dub suggests that its invocations and quotations extend the ancient traditions of improvisation and possession: "Dub speaks from erasure, the voice fragmented and left to drift on the shards of itself that are left when its [original] body is taken away" (53). The soundscape encourages play reminiscent of the griot's wordplay, the Jamaican dub master's "versioning," and the "archive fever" of the era of live jazz and blues sessions (54), "where everyone had access to the same songs, but where they flipped things until they made their own statement" (29). Though the current smackdown on sampling—the copyright cordons are tightening around the legal use of samples—suggests that all samples are implicated in Fredric Jameson's postmodern pastiche, Morris (as well as anyone who uses sampling well) demonstrates that her use of samples is not just another capitalist co-optation, but rather a citation and transformation of the original. Compare her version of Sam Cooke's 1960 song "Chain Gang," for instance, with the rapper Shinehead's contemporary rendition or most of the nearly one hundred borrowings of the song found on Napster.com that are clearly fueled by a desire to cannibalize the song's cultural prestige.¹⁵

In vocal ecstatic traditions, the tongue might be thought of as sampling equipment—with five connective points to the nervous system and an innate rhythm—that channels found texts into collaborative context. This lineage becomes direct in Morris's sound piece "Chain Gang," which borrows a line from Cooke's song, which itself was the result of heavy improvisation in its origin and in the studio (Guralnick 10). Morris summons the restiveness and physical toil embedded in Cooke's refrain, "That's the sound of the

15. To hear Morris's piece, go to <www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Morris.html>; Shinehead's song may be heard at www.mp3.com.

men working on the chain gang," and adrenalizes it to signify alienation, exhausted patience, anger, and threat. Morris's piece specifically protests the reintroduction of chain gangs in the United States: "It was like a physical blow. Looking at my people working for free, with chains on in public" (qtd. in Crowne 223). Morris uses the uncanny echo of Cooke's song as an act of homage, but the recontextualization, forty years later, renders it biting irony.

In the course of "Chain Gang," Morris radically unhinges the original: she lets loose invocations of African deities Ogun and Agun, the gods of mask and theater as well as ironwork and metallurgy, further seeking a sense of spiritual recovery. The deep, percussive pronunciation of the names of these Yoruba gods helps the piece to dramatize blues experience in deeply physical terms. Sounds of ancestral agency combat sounds of enslaved working; these two "characters" rip the idea of the chain gang away from its supporting conventions and confound its offense. "Freestyling," or improvising rhymes to an established rhythm, sends the song even further into other histories and contexts: "sane" and "insane" as well as "devil" and "angel" extend the narrative subtext and its simmering insinuations. The implied and actual erasure here serves as a reminder of how memory keeps recrystallizing and recontextualizing. As Morris builds in a sense of stricken inarticulateness, her vocal expressivity erupts into thundering grunts and raw-throated expirations. This loosening of word from meaning, of sound from word is part of Morris's process of generative de/re-construction, as if the rest of language's resources had been abandoned. The body's pain, as Elaine Scarry claims, disables language, and it is just this unrepresentability of physical pain that Morris presents. The demonic discharges of *ch* and *ga* seem to be a sonic emblem of the exhaustion of words themselves.¹⁶ They manifest a sonic narrative of train chugging, worker grunting, rail splitting, and clock ticking. Thus Morris skewers the

16. In his essay "The Exhausted," Gilles Deleuze elaborates: "It is not only that words lie; they are so burdened with calculations and significations, with intentions and personal memories, with old habits that cement them together, that one can scarcely bore into the surface before it closes up again" (173). Piled up rhythms unfold a multitude of perspectives that bore holes in language's hermetic surfaces. By repeating words, Morris exhausts them, effectively freeing them of their burdens—their calculations, intentions—and paradoxically discovers hidden, revitalizing capacities.

economic implications of the chain gang and revises the longing of Cooke's song into retributive threat. Is the "tick-tock" at the piece's end a bomb's timer? Does it signal an exhaustion of the possibility of words, or talk, to change calcified racism? Does the ticking point toward an impending outbreak of violence or toward the violence of continued racism itself? Say that the clock's onomatopoeia points to the future, or to the past, and you won't be wrong. The poem's immersive lingering refuses to let us out of its all-encompassing present, which is a sounding board for ideological and material struggles relating to race.

Senses—of body and of language—commingle and complicate a peregrinating underlanguage, not so much linguistic as made possible by rhyme and rhythm. This underlanguage refuses the permanence of its own constitution via improvisation and continued performance and sets a model for acknowledging aspects of identity that go unheard in standard language use. Morris's sound poetry announces a continued enabling of transformation itself. Her sustained investment in the iterative process keeps tonguing identity into new shapes in order to reveal its public relations and ramifications. The sound of these transfigurations, equally punishing and pleasurable, is the sound of a spell that reinstates flexibility into identity and ethical responsibility into lyric poetry. Morris locates language's core by melting it down and reconstituting it as a tool for ideological adjustment. But as with the girl narrator in "A Little," we must ask, How might language adjust? Or aid justice?

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