IRENE POLIMANTE

Tracie Morris's Poetic Experience: From Slam Poetry to Sound Poetry

Inside Slam competitions

Slam poetry belongs to the multifaceted movement of Spoken Word Poetry, which engaged academic and media interest during the 1970s as a youth-counter-hegemonic cultural practice (see Sparks and Grochowski), and which "exist[ed] outside the mainstream literary, cultural, and musical genres" (Jenkins 10). Although nowadays it is a geographically, culturally and situationally constructed genre, there is a common feature that associates the many different poetic spoken-word-forms[1] with this heterogeneous movement. Spoken-word poems, indeed, are texts written in everyday language to be interpreted or simply read in front of an audience. The use of voice, sounds (even breath), intonations, gestures, mimic, and body movements are pivotal for the poetic performance, which is not the mere oral representation of a poem[2] but the subversive act to "open spaces between oral and written forms of creative expression by moving the spoken-word-poet's voice from the paper through his or her body, thus serving as a bridge connecting the lived experiences and social realities of individuals through discourse" (10).

These texts, typically written and delivered in the first-person pronoun, directly engage the audience on topics of political and social interest, while the physical presence of the poet opens the way to human bonding and engagement as well. Moreover, the use of public spaces, such as cafes, theatres, parks, event centers, or even university campuses, supports "progressive community-building networks" (Sparks and Grochowski 6), inasmuch as people gather around a poetic event to share the poetic experience and to feel part of a community, even if ephemeral and temporary.[3] And for Morris "community" is the heartbeat of her artistic

enterprise, since the audience she primarily addresses is the urban African American community of Brooklyn.[4] However, in the introduction to her last work, *Who Do with Words* (2018),[5] the artist shows a more inclusive sense of belonging, because at the moment to describe who is her "people" she states:

> Who's "we"? I'll leave you to your own constructions but I mean Black people, people of color generally, women, the poor, the queer, the displaced, the people of unconventional bodies and minds (as well as, of course, combinations of these fluid categories) and even those who have privilege and use it to undermine oppressive systems (John Brown anyone?); those who yearn (for others as well as themselves) to breathe free. I especially mean those who do not benefit from being perceived of as "neutral," the standard. (Morris, *Who Do with Words* 21-22; italics in the original)

Active participation and full involvement of the audience lay at the core of the success of slam poetry – to wit, a performance poetry competition with few rules:

> Anyone can participate. Poets are given three minutes to step up to the mic and perform one original poem of their own construction. Typically, no props, costumes, or outside accompaniment are allowed. After the poem is finished, a panel of 5 judges, who have been randomly selected from the audience, judge the poem and performance on a scale of 0.00-10.00, with the high and low scores dropped. . . . The highest score you can get is 30. . . . Slam's premise is that everyone's opinion about a poem is a valid one. . . . The poets who earn the highest scores return to the stage for multiple rounds, as the field is whittled down based on the reactions of the judges. . . . each attempting to impact the audience (and the judges) just a little more deeply than the last person did. . . . The audience is, in many ways, just as important as the poets. They are encouraged to respond to the poets and the judges in any way they see fit: cheering, booing, laughing. . . . At the end of the night, a winner is crowned. (Aptowicz xxiii)

During the summer of 1986, the Green Mill bar in Chicago hosted the first *Uptown Poetry Slam*, that was the beginning of Marc Smith's

democratic revolution which "took verse outside of the academy, taking evaluative power away from academic critics and giving it to popular audiences" (Somers-Willett 6). However, it was only two years later, when Slam arrived in New York, that it became the editorial and media phenomenon that it now is all around the world. Undoubtedly, the intermingling of policies for the promotion and protection of the Arts[6] with a long established cultural tradition[7] was conducive to such a huge success. Another decisive factor was the constitution of a community of poets who worked together on an unorthodox poetry project which could dialogue with the local citizenry[8] while restoring the lost bond with the ancient oral tradition.[9] This set of intentions brought about a threefold result. Firstly, following in the footsteps of the Beats, "framing poetry as a communal effort parallels community-building work typical of the 1960s and changes established notions of what constitutes authorship and literary production"; secondly, Ginsberg's reference to poets as "community and family" "underscores the tacit acceptance of poetry as a group phenomenon and threatens the prevailing romanticized conception of the author as a solitary inspired figure" (Kane xiii). Finally, the wide use of orality and performance as constitutive elements of slam poetry challenges the supremacy of the written dimension, for they try to rebalance the unequal relationship between "Print Culture" – "and the hierarchies of publishing and circulation [that] are territories where social contentions are as densely coded as anywhere" – and "Talk," "the most mixed of media: social, bodily, clichéd, spontaneous, conflictual, identificatory" (Perelman 201). These three elements also lay at the basis of the poetic production of the vibrant and multicultural community that developed around the Nuyorican Café of Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman, who cared about including "middle-class whites from Queens and Bensonhurst, Latinos from the Lower East Side, blacks from uptown, and visitors who have come to this mecca of slam poetry from Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, or Dublin" (Kane 204). And the poetry performed at slam competitions reflected such a diversity. Furthermore, while offstage, the performers were bonding and networking together as a group but, once on stage, it was the individual with his/her specific identity to be enacted who performed. This synergy between collectivity and individuality made it possible for the poets to highlight

their many differences whilst experiencing a wider sense of unity. Despite the distinctions of gender, status, religion and ethnicity, the poets were able to work as a team, and such union carried the first wave of New York City slam poets to fame and success. Tracie Morris belonged to this group along with other important artists, like Paul Beatty, Willie Perdomo, Adrienne Su, Dana Bryant, Edwin Torres, Maggie Estep, Bobby Miller, etc. (Aptowicz 120-124). From the early stages, Tracie Morris[10] was clearly influenced by the literary and musical African American tradition – which continues to be her source of inspiration and field of study. Morris also showed a real talent for mingling poetic structures with the rhythms, melodies and tones of blues, jazz, hip-hop, funk music and spirituals, insomuch as "within her narratives, she accents syllables in relationship to the beat, but with superb timing and a verbal velocity characteristic of hip-hop forestalling or jazz scatting. She is adept at layering internal and end rhymes as well. Often accompanied by musicians, she recites in sync over articulated rhythms" (Anglesey 77). Another key strength of her poetic, that can be pinpointed even today, is the ability to mediate between the use of ordinary language and more sophisticated aesthetic forms, which pervades both her writing[11] and performance.[12] Such a plasticity allows her poems to be readily enjoyed despite the many cultural references. It is thanks to these qualities that the Brooklyn Girl – the nickname she was given inside the Nuyorican slam hub – managed to win both the Nuyorican Grand Slam Championship and the National Haiku Slam in 1993.

Sound Making Poetry

   Although the two national titles launched her on the market, she decided, nevertheless, to complete the poetic competition experience. Thus, at the apex of her success, Morris was determined to begin a new enterprise: to explore and develop new poetic solutions, while trying out her own artistic skills. The starting point of such an endeavor was to go back to her first and main interest: the sound of language(s). This fascination arose during her childhood in the communal housing projects of Brooklyn, where she came in contact with different accents, speeches

and vernaculars.[13] In those same years, she got inspired by the rhythms and rhyme patterns of hip-hop, which became her main tool to bridge lingual sonorities with melodic frameworks.[14] Moreover, this musical genre drove Morris to think of her own language too, since the use of Black English encouraged her to elaborate a personal "association between Black English/ Ebonics and code in the African diaspora" (Morris, "Poetic Statement" 210).

This connection was strengthened by the fact that hip-hop "is an Afro-diasporic cultural form which attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity and community" (Rose, qtd. in Sparks and Grochowski, 6). Representative of this transitional poetic phase was the release of *Intermission* (1998), a collection of different works – in part re-published and in part brand new – which explores a wide range of artistic fields, going from theatre to poetry, and from music to choreography. As the title itself suggests,[15] the anthology has to be read as a "discontinuance": an "interval" that, without a break, leads to the next poetic act/step to come. Morris engages the "page work" as a moment of reflection and analysis of what has been done previously on stage. Therefore, the whole book is built on a dialogue between the "acted" word and the "written" word, in a constant going back and forth of references and influences. The artistic experimentation also involves the aesthetic form, since Morris writes the pages as if she has to conquer a new space, so that the writing takes possession of the blank paper as the body occupies and shapes the stage. It is in these terms that both "Overview" and "Chief Song"– two of the eight texts written for Ralph Lemon's *Geography (1)* – should be read: the disposition of the words on the page follows the pace of an imaginary call and response between two speaking voices. The main voice traces the corpus of the text, which is followed by the answers of the second one that sometimes completes the information, while at other times it acts as an echo of the first voice. This game of repetitions, only for the last word of determined lines, which is modified in its morphology, allows the poet to play with the contrast between graphic sign, its phonetic reproduction and the related semantic meanings, as shown in the extract below, taken from the poem "Overview":

in this
in this heaven
in this heaven
like
hell

we affirm an **inverted**   **invented**
God

this is either **a void**   **to avoid**
or blinding light   blinding

either way i see **nought**   **drought**
but blue   blues

indomitable

A straight   streak
creek   flash
sinew of haze

i am green   green with
a   knew   green with
a   know   greenish

revisiting the issue of **rebuke**   **puke**
regeneration of family   re-nig, re-nig

bigness of the minute   livid
indelible as **a statue**   **astute**

                            still.

(Morris, *Intermission* 61 – bold print mine)

   The effect of a double-voice pattern is further heightened by the use
of the code-switching from English to African languages, like Bete and

Baule, where words are written phonetically, as it happens in the following
excerpt from "Chief Song":

Mene
Mene Iazu na guine puene

Many Bete

Mene Iazu na guine puene

I am supposed to be   Noh
I am supposed to be   Noh, Noh
I am supposed to be   Noh

The lead in   Danse ce
                       Dans ce paradis

Ki Yi – K
Ki Yi – K
Ki Yi – K
Ki Yi – K
Ki Yi – K

– Os?

                       Noh

But. I ah   Noh, Noh

I-A-Kuko
A cool/cool/cool/kuko
(65)

Considering Morris's work on decomposition, manipulation, re-
appropriation and re-composition of lingual as well as vocal patterns, the
opening statement in the preface of *Intermission* introduces us to another
aspect of her attention to sound, as she herself points out: "this new book

reflects a development in my 'page' work. The more 'stage' stuff I make, the more the page presents itself as a forum for another voice" (Morris, *Intermission*, "Preface" n. pag.). And this other voice also emerges from Morris's investigation of her own voice, emphasizing its physicality and materiality, even before its conceptual and cultural utterances (Morris, "Poetics Statement" 210). Far from a philosophical speculation on the ontological problem of voice, which highlights "how the human condition of uniqueness resounds in the register of the voice," Morris seems to sense the "simple truth of the vocal" (Cavarero 8), at least in recognizing those elements of uniqueness and relationality, which pertain both to the voice, as pure sound, and to the human beings. In this first attempt to free the vocal and, more generally, the aural, from the semantic (see Cavarero 9-13 and ch. 3.4), Morris tries to dissociate sound from words. This split, according to her, should reverse the relation of power between the two, insomuch as the written word is deprived of its dominance of the narrative discourse in favor of sound. In this way, sound overcomes discourse, impeding the actualization of that "intellectual exercise" of abstraction which is generally ascribed to language, as Morris declares:

> "My relationship to sound poetry has to do with other ways of framing meaning that aren't literally based. Every language has that – every language has onomatopoeias when things sound like what they mean. For me, sound poetry teases apart the meaning that is embedded with sound and separates that from literal meaning. So what I try to do is pull those things apart and then create a narrative arc from it. . . . Some people just want to make sounds and leave them totally open to interpretation. But I like to use sound to make specific political points. I don't want people to use language as an escape. Language is abstract, right? It only means what we ascribe to it. But people can sometimes get into, 'OK, this word means this,' and then you start getting into that intellectual exercise. I want to get away from the intellectual and into the body." ("Tracie Morris and Queen Golds" n. pag.)

This work with the body, the voice and sound in general leads Morris to create spoken word poems in which the use of sound is ever more relevant. Her first proto-sound poems are greatly influenced by the techniques applied in other fields, namely "the deconstruction of standards in jazz"

(Morris, "Poetics Statement" 210), as well as the work of sound artists like Paul Dutton and the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters. Representative of the first attempts in this direction are "Project Princess" and "A Little." The first one is a "homage to Morris's urban roots" in the form of "an ode and a rallying cry to young, black girls in Brooklyn" (Jenkins 85). From 1993 to 1998, Morris repeatedly worked on it, as the different versions attest,[16] because of the complexity of this set of prose and poetic language, with references to 1990s hip-hop idioms and misogynous culture. The performance overturns the stereotypical image of the black teenage woman as a "chicken-head" (see M.D. Jones 190 and Shonekan 102-110, 190) by means of an intense work on the musicality and aural semantic of words, since "familiar speech sets in motion something close to glossolalia by way of accent, slur, stutter, backtracking, striation, and telescoping tempo" (Hume 421). The second one, "A Little" (2002), addresses the sexual abuse of a little girl and is entirely built on the combination of only six words: "I am just a little girl." The expressive power of voice and sound prevails, once again, on the "cognitive-inducing text," as Morris reveals:

> I came up with the notion (for myself) that the physicality of words would drive the poem, not the text, not even the context. Without thinking of the words, the hearer is with the body and since in this poem, the body of the subject is the focus of impact – where the story is – the inability of the listener to escape into the mind underscores the character's vulnerability, her inability to escape. (Morris, "Poetics Statement" 211)

In other poems the shifting from music to poetry, and from lyrics to text, is pivotal. This is the case with works like "Chain Gang" (2006)[17] and "The Mrs. Gets Her Ass Kicked, (aka Heaven)" (2008), which clearly refer to popular songs with a strong cultural resonance, such as Sam Cooke's "Chain Gang" (1960)[18] and Irving Berlin's[19] "Cheek to Cheek" (1935).[20] Starting from the original lyrics, Morris samples a line or a whole stanza as a basis for her poems, since what matters are not the words on their own, but "the version as sung, the particular sound of them even more than the text (in terms of visceral recognition) that determines their value" (212). An example is the text of "The Mrs. Gets Her Ass Kicked, (aka Heaven)":

Heaven, I'm in heaven
And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak
And I can't describe the happiness that I seek
When we're out / when we're out / when we're out / when we're out

Hea-ven, I-I-I'm in heaven / and my **hard bea'** / my heart / my-my-**heart**
And I can't describe the hap' / and I can't describe / the
And I can't describe / heaven / I-I-I'm in heaven
And my-my / my-eye-heaven / I-I-I'm in
Hea-vin' / m-my-my / **I-I-awe-awe** / can't hardly speak.
(qtd. in Jenkins 123 – bold print mine)

Morris uses different stylistic techniques of the African American oral tradition[21] to move from the dreamlike love story, that the song recalls, to the nightmare of the physical abuse here represented. The expressive power of the performance completely relies on the changes in tone, voice, pitch, and intonation that interchange with Morris's "singing to unvoice sounds by introducing sonic sounds in their place, adopted from the polyrhythmic syncopations and scratching procedure used in hip-hop" (125). In addition to the beating on her chest to stress the rising tension, silences are frantically broken by the use of multiple glottal stops, "as a method illustrating the syncopation used in Jazz Poetry and the polyrhythmic syncopations of hip-hop" (124). To mark the climax of physical violence – expressed in the lines "and hard bea'," "I-I-awe-awe" and "can't hardly speak" – there is a shift in the words, so that "heartbeat" becomes "hard-bea'" and the first-person pronoun "I" turns into "awe." This alteration represents Tracie Morris's attempt to use "humor to show horror" (Hume 417), which is a stratagem taken from the Blues tradition.[22] Morris also plays with the text in order to deconstruct the sentences, the words and the syllables into smaller units that, completely deprived of their semantic meaning, freely reverberate thanks to those strategies "of speaking and 'voicing' that follow from specifically African American experience" (Crown, "'Choice Voice Noise'" 220). In these terms, the combination of "disjunctive sound play" with vocal virtuosity posits Morris among those "experimentalist black poets {who} understand the human voice's capacity for dissociation and

disarticulation as a reservoir for unclaimed experiences produced by ruptures of the African diaspora" (219-220). Hence, the combined intervention of a language-based poetic with a speech-based African American tradition allows Morris to develop what Crown calls the "epistemology of sound" (220). An ideal condition for both sound and voice to gain the right to speak for themselves as subjects of their own discourse and knowledge, by actually taking possession of the body of the performer: "Exploiting the physical contingency and collaborative nature of performance – the open room, the microphone, and the audience response – Morris allows sounds to possess her voice in order to speak their own irruptive and precious knowledge" (223).

Sound Poetry and African American Aesthetic

Morris's work on voice and sound in relation to the body, the written text and the hearer results in the creation of a type of sound poetry which could be ideally situated in-between the Western and the African American traditions of orality and performance. Orality is a fundamental element in sound poetry, given that sound poems are "experimental language-based texts that disrupt the 'natural speech rhythms' of the poet who uses his or her words, in much the same way as jazz poets, blues singers, and hip-hop artists, to situate their narratives in larger societal discourses" (Jenkins 115). These poems embody the perfect bond between literacy and music, a combination that was made popular by the Beats but which also runs through the history of Western literature, as widely documented in Steve McCaffery's *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue* (1978). In this study, McCaffery charts the main historical phases of the evolution of this genre, namely "the ancient and medieval practices of chant; the European avant-garde's experiments with the acoustic, nonsemantic properties of language; and the electrical and technological experience of the 1950s and beyond" (Perloff 97-98). Such an extended time-frame tells the story of a difficult but powerful relationship between the aural, sonic, and musical realm of sound and poetry "within a culture that so readily and pervasively privileges the eye over the ear" (Kahn and Whitehead 4).

In *Sound Poetry and the Musical Avant-Garde: A Musicologist's Perspective*, Nancy Perloff claimed that, since the peculiar characteristic of sound poetry is "to work between media" in the attempt to "incorporate sounds produced by different kinds of musical instruments and by virtuosic vocal techniques," scholars tend to relate this kind of poetry especially to the experimental efforts of the 20th-century European and Russian Avant-garde, as well as to the more contemporary Spoken Word Poetry: with the avant-garde movements, sound poetry shares the effort "to encompass all sounds," while challenging the "traditional distinctions between sound and speech, sound and music, sound and noise, music and noise" (97). Poets, therefore, started to explore "a radically new conception of poetic sound," using performance as the ideal field to probe "the limits of intelligibility and referentiality" in language (97, 98). Moreover, during the 1950s sound poetry rapidly developed, inasmuch as

> poets performing in this genre in the United States began using their poems to bridge the gap between oral tradition and folklore. Through revolutionary dialogues which produced new symbolic meanings situated in the speaker's current day context, the use of sound in poetry became part of the poet's language game in which sounding letters and words contributed to the quality of the poem, by enabling new meanings of words to surface. (Jenkins 112-113)

This poetic practice, so deeply rooted in sound, quickly began to be "an extension of the oral tradition as a form of storytelling and entertainment among marginalized groups" (McCaffery and Nichol 1978). Moving in parallel with the sophisticated elaborations on sound, there is Performance, a multi-genre form of art extensively used by the Beats during their poetry readings to break "the status quo established by both the academy and white, middle-class culture"; for this reason, they took their readings outside "academic settings in order to encourage experimentation and reach nonacademic audiences" (Somers-Willett 52). Moreover, the Beats' performances exhibited a total adhesion to black aesthetic,[23] not only to rouse audiences through the use of the African American oratory technique of call-and-response, but also to reflect "a cultural dialectic between black and white artists and their audiences," in the attempt to resist dominant

postwar culture (54, 55). However, the man who really explored the communicative possibilities of poetry through the use of action and voice was LeRoi Jones – later Amiri Baraka. In the 1960s he left the Beats and found the Black Arts movement which was willing to help "popular poetry gain favor not only among black authors but also, and perhaps more importantly, among black audiences through performance" (57). As a result, poetry readings were turned into events that engaged with the physical context. It was time for drama to intersect poetry readings, blurring the boundaries between the theatrical and the poetic,[24] while poets looked to the work of jazz musicians,[25] since jazz was "perceived as a more significant social critique of an oppressive social structure" (Thomas 291). The interconnection between political engagement and hybridization of poetry with jazz motifs and techniques lies at the core of Baraka's "physical" poems. For Baraka, poetry is a form of action with a concrete function. Poems are physical entities which may be turned into "personal forces" when the poet directly addresses the audience to raise dismay in order to let people gain awareness (292). To cause such a shock, Baraka used to overdramatize the rhetorical tone of his verses while projecting violent images to demand people's attention by almost literally throwing words in their face. However, performance is also a fundamental element in spoken word poetry.

This historical, literary and artistic tradition sets the cultural *milieu* for Morris's work while providing a framework of contrasting critical tendencies and discourses which develops tensions and frictions reflected in her poetry. Morris, indeed, tries to find a balance in a play of opposites: popular and high culture; visual and aural; mind and body; free experimentation and the need for structure and form; not to mention "the rigid binarism between speech and writing, orality and literacy, and vocal 'expression' and written 'experiment,'" that has been addressed by African American literature with a predilection for "a speech-based poetics, while excluding from consideration 'more writerly texts'" (Crown, "'Choice Voice Noise'" 224). The prevailing of orality, therefore, empowers the African American heritage and fosters the countercultural discourse of the "colonized," the "indigenous," the "Other" (224-225). On the contrary, in Western tradition the primacy of the written text has a millennial

tradition, that can be traced back to Aristotelian thought, and has also achieved resounding success in contemporary literary criticism (see Novak 24), with its bias against the oral realization mode, in so far as it does not satisfy the criteria applied to written poetry.

Given such a dynamic and controversial situation, the publishing of *Rhyme Scheme* in 2012 seems an evaluation of the poetic work done over ten years:

> As *Intermission* before, *Rhyme Scheme* is a beginning too. I'm fleshing out the debate between all the poetry influences/ideas/responses of a dozen or so years in my head, an admittedly selective group of thoughts, and getting clarity. I guess the next step is fearlessly accepting that voice but who knows what it'll sound like? I've been surprised before. (Morris, *Rhyme Scheme* 8)

The last poem, "Dystopia: Vertical," is the only dystopian text of the collection. Entirely different from the others, it is an example of Morris's incursion into the field of Afrofuturism. Together with "Mother Earth" and "AfroFuture – Dystopic Unity," it was first published in 2002 in *Afrofuturism: Social Text*. The review, edited by sociologist and writer Alondra Nelson, fueled the debate, which started in 1998, on the relations between technology, fiction and African American diasporic culture. In that context, the three poems offered a poetic point of view on the analysis of the old stereotypes and cultural clichés which were still being spread by the new technologies (see Nelson 1-15; Dery 179-222). "Dystopia" is a hallucinatory nightmare of the planet ravaged by an inconsiderate use of technology, which has intoxicated the air and polluted the soil. The idea of desolation is given by a sequence of seven stanzas that, on a vertical descent from the unnatural stillness of "a rainbowed sky" goes down through "terra vibratos" – spams of nature's "degraded lungs" – to the "world's crust," where even the "graves" have been contaminated by the waste(s) of "reactors balloon" (Morris, *Rhyme Scheme* 90). The vertiginous dive to the moral and physical abyss in which both the Earth and human population have fallen is given by the vivid images, almost creepy photographs, that each stanza creates in only two lines. The last line of the poem marks the epilogue of such a dystopian version of the future. The picture of ancient dead fists

angrily shaken conveys Morris's indignation and rage for such hypothetical but plausible devastation. The poem, far from being a dystopian manifesto of Morris's adhesion to Afrofuturism, is more a conclusive sample of the artistic research that subtends the whole collection. As Terrance Hayes writes, in the foreword to the collection, "*Rhyme Scheme* concerns both 'the turned around image' and the turned around phrase. It is as much about transformative looking/seeing as it is about transformative listening/hearing. Thus, the audio and text here dub, sample and reconfigure language" (Hayes, in Morris, *Rhyme Scheme* 5). This intertwining between "transformative looking/seeing" and "listening/hearing" completes the first part of Morris's poetic and artistic experimentation, that since 2016 has notably increased. Thanks to her teaching position at the Pratt Institute (NY) as a professor of Performance Studies, Morris's awareness of her role of both poet-performer and scholar has heightened, as shown by her two most recent two collections of poems, *Handholding: 5 Kinds* (2016) and *Hard Korè, Poèmes: Perform Poems of Mythos and Place* (2017), which keenly mediate between popular entertainment and intellectual commitment.

Notes

[1]   The list goes from the common poetry readings to the folkloric traditional poetic works, embedding Slam poetry, Performance Poetry, Sound Poetry, and Dub Poetry (just to mention the main ones).

[2]   "When you're performing, that's also part of the creative process. It's not just a presentation of a finished piece. [When reading,] poets will find themselves leaving out words, adding words. And if you leave out a word on the same poem over a period of time, I challenge you to think that maybe that word shouldn't be there. Performance is another step of editing. Sometimes words will flow from you that need to be added. Most of the time, there are parts that you skip over. But, either way, writing a poem continues as you perform it" (Holman n. pag.).

[3]   "Can a poetic point of view bring us closer together? Is this what we mean when we read a poem? Clearly people besides the poet get something out of reading the poem, that's why books are published, work is recorded and people tour. But does this generate community? I guess what I'm asking is: What's the difference between participating in a poetic 'moment' as part of a community instead of that as a consumer?" (Morris, "Journal" n. pag.).

⁴ "The Brooklyn Academy of Music in Fort Green"; "the BAM Café"; "the NuYorican Poets Café and the Brooklyn Moon Café" (Crown, "The Spoken Word Poetry of Tracie Morris" 213, 214, 219).

⁵ On the grounds of her former researches on African and African American Studies, and Women's Studies, Morris's last ones provide a personal reading of what it means to be "Black," with an in-depth analysis of Black speech acts as well as a philosophical meta-reading of her own *poïesis*, which emerges from a virtual dialogue with some important thinkers – among them the British philosopher John L. Austin.

⁶ Policies developed both by arts organizations, like the St. Mark's Poetry Project, and nonprofits poetry institutions, such as the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) and NYSCA (New York State Council of the Arts), just to mention the more active (Aptowicz 17-19).

⁷ "the current New York City Poetry Slam Movement owes a great artistic debt to three major 20th-century New York City-associated arts movements: the Harlem Renaissance of the '20s, the Beat Generation of the '50s and '60s, and finally the hip-hop culture of the '70s and '80s" (Aptowicz 4).

⁸ "Rather than engaging in the relatively passive dynamics of reading print or listening to a poetry reading, slam poetry, facilitated by performance, commands that the poet, poem, and audience have an immediate and active critical relationship with one another" (Somers-Willett 20).

⁹ With the expression "ancient oral tradition" I am alluding to the origin of the oral tradition as it is conceived in Western culture and, by extension, I am also referring to the so called Homeric question, and the consequent debate, between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, that saw many scholars arguing on the relationship between orality, epic poetry, and the written tradition. For more on that debate see, among others, Parry, Ong. In relation to the poetic rift between orality and literacy, see also Nagy, Bakker, and Montanari, Rengakos, Tsagalis.

¹⁰ For a detailed biography of the author, see the section "Biography" in Tracie Morris's official website (http://www.traciemorris.com/).

¹¹ Like the use of the haiku poetic structure, for example.

¹² "the wonder of her performances is the sheer speed with which she enunciates her puns, en-jambs her syllables, and syncopates her phrasing. This form is not new; it's ancient among the verbal tricksters. The Greeks called this kind of pattern without pause *pignos*, a double-quick delivery that leaves one out of breath. . . . Amazingly, a poem's savvy insights, fresh in code and lingo, are never sacrificed by the speed of delivery. For all this, Morris epitomizes the spoken word artist" (Anglesey 77).

¹³ "There was something hidden within the rhyme I was hearing as a teenager and young adult, and I was trying to articulate what it was, operating from an essential premise that there was nothing wrong with the way people in my neighborhood spoke" (Morris, "Poetic Statement" 210).

[14] "I started working toward sound poetry, consciously at least, through hip-hop. I made awkward associations between rhyme schemes in hip-hop and other things I was studying, such as code switching in the Puerto Rican community, which I was learning about in my Black and Puerto Rican Studies classes at Hunter College" (Morris, "Poetic Statement" 210).

[15] "intermission (n.): early 15c., 'fact of intermitting, temporary pause,' from Latin *intermissionem* (nominative *intermissio*) 'a breaking off, discontinuance, interruption,' noun of action from past participle stem of *intermittere* 'to leave off, leave an interval,' from *inter* 'between' (see *inter-*) + *mittere* 'let go, send' (see *mission*). Meaning 'lapse of time between events' is from 1560s; specifically of performances (originally plays, later movies, etc.) from 1854. 'Intermission is used in US for what we call an *interval* (in a musical or dramatic performance). Under the influence of LOVE OF THE LONG WORD, it is beginning to infiltrate here and should be repelled; our own word does very well' [H.W. Fowler, 'Modern English Usage,' 1926]" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

[16] Written texts for the publishing appeared in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poet's Café* (1994), *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (1996), and *United States of Poetry* (1996). There is also a "hip-hop version" of the poem that has been prepared for a video, which was originally recorded in 1998 and uploaded to *YouTube* only in 2010 (Jenkins 85-86).

[17] For the story of Morris's idea to create her own version of the song, see Crown, "'Choice Voice Noise'" 222-224.

[18] "Between the 1940s and 1960s, artists like Wilson Pickett, Sam Cooke, and Otis Redding charged the original sound of the blues with more excitement, adjusting their sound for club appearances and local sock hops. This sound stepped ahead of the blues by adding a pulsing beat and a steady groove to an already polyrhythmic music. They brought in the participatory essence of gospel music, which allowed them to throw themselves into the lyrics and the performance. Here there was heart, spirit, and love, redirected from God and heaven to walking in this world" (Shonekan 32-33). See also Appiah and Gates, Wallenstein.

[19] A Jewish immigrant, Berlin was a leading figure of the Tin Pan Alley second generation of songwriters, "mostly Jewish immigrants" who "were influenced by vaudeville's ethnic songs." In the early Twenties, Berlin became famous, among others, for "the more permissive tone and lyrics of vaudeville novelty songs, creating a new genre of popular song that celebrated the glamour and excitement of big city life, including its romantic and erotic possibilities" (McCracken 109).

[20] The reason for a counter-narration of the renowned song, together with the audio-file of the performance, is available on Tracie Morris's webpage in the online *PennSound Archive*.

[21] On a visual level, the wide use of mimicry, gestures, and facial expressions comes from the tradition of the Black Minstrel shows, that were answering back to the white man's "attempt to reproduce some easily identifiable characteristic of 'the darky'": "white per-

formers using blackface to do 'imitations of Negro life' appeared in America around 1800, usually in solo performances," with the intention of creating a parody of black people by exaggerating some of their physical attributes (L. Jones 83-84). Morris's appropriation of Berlin's song, to build her own counter-narration of the white upper-middle-class love story, recalls the black shows' appropriation of the "white burlesques of Negro mores"; to wit, "black minstrel shows were also what might be called parodies, or exaggerations, of certain aspects of Negro life in America. But in one sense the colored minstrel was poking fun at himself, and in another and probably more profound sense he was poking fun at the white man" (85). Moreover, the chest beating recalls Bobby McFerrin's performances, which, during the 1980s, made him a popular vocalist in the United States, while, on a sonic level, the use of glottal stops and "non-word" sounds, in addition to sound substitutions, vocalizations, silences, and sound distortions, is typical of hip-hop performers (Morris, "Conceptual Poesis of Silence" 389-394).

[22] The whole performance is a gigantic oxymoron, created by the intertwining of two opposite narrations. On the one hand, there is the dreamlike love story, while, on the other hand, there is the telling of the dreadful marital abuse. For more on blues techniques to convey two different meanings at the same time, see Mauro 149-182.

[23] As shown by Ginsberg's first performance of his long poem *Howl* in 1955, at the Six Gallery Reading in San Francisco (see Somers-Willett 53-54). See also Gingell, Wendt.

[24] "Thinking of a poem as script for performance instead of merely a textual entity is also a tenet of the Black Arts movement. . . . Black Art strove instead to be theatrical, ephemeral, and dialectic. Black Arts practitioners called art defined by its process, not its final object or artifact, 'nonobjective.' . . . poetry existed not in textual form but in the dialectic between author and audience that happened in performance. A single Black Arts poem can vary in expression and meaning each time it is performed not only because of performative improvisation but also because of its reception by different audiences" (Somers-Willett 62).

[25] "For Langston Hughes and Rudolph Fisher, jazz is the backdrop for the desperate urbane comedy of the Harlem Renaissance. For the poets of the 1950s 'Beat Generation' and the militant Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s, jazz is perceived as a more significant social critique of an oppressive social structure. Some of the works of Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Bob Kaufman, Larry Neal, and Henry Dumas explore a spiritual dimension of jazz that can be compared to an almost religious fervor, with all of the many implications of that term. For these writers, the jazz musician is not merely the custodian of an authentic folk culture or even the conscious avant-garde artist; he is the leader of rebellion against postwar conformity and the spiritual agent of the politically powerless" (Thomas 291).

Works cited

Anglesey, Zoë. "Tracie Morris." *Listen Up!: An Anthology of Spoken Word Poetry.* Ed. Zoë Anglesey. New York: One World Books, 1999. 76-9.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. *Africana: An A-to-Z Reference of Writers, Musicians, and Artists of the African American Experience*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2004.

Aptowicz, O'Keefe C. *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*. New York: Soft Skull Press, 2007.

Bakker, Egbert J. *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997.

Cavarero, Adriana. *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Trans. Paul A. Kottman. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005.

Crown, Kathleen. "The Spoken Word Poetry of Tracie Morris." *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics.* Ed. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002.

—. "'Choice Voice Noise': Soundings in Innovative African-American Poetry". *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*. Ed. Romana Huk. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003. 219-45.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture.* Ed. Mark Dery. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1994. 179-222.

Gingell, Susan. "'Always a Poem, Once a Book': Motivations and Strategies for Print Textualizing of Caribbean-Canadian Dub and Performance Poetry." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 24 (2005): 220-59.

Holman, Bob. "An Interview with Bob Holman." *About Creativity.* 15 Mar. 2007. <http://about-creativity.com/an_interview_with_bob_holman/>.

Hume, Christine. "Improvisational Insurrection: The Sound Poetry of Tracie Morris." *Contemporary Literature* 47 (2006): 415-39.

Jenkins, Tammie. *A Case Study of Tracie Morris' Project Princess*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2013.

Kane, Daniel. *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.

Jones, LeRoi. *Blues People*. New York: HarperCollins, 1963.

Jones, Meta DuEwa. *The Muse Is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word*. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2011.

Kahn, Douglas, and Gregory Whitehead. *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant Garde*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

Mauro, Walter. *Il blues e l'America nera*. Milano: Garzanti, 1977.

McCracken, Allison. "Real Men Don't Sing Ballads: The Radio Crooner in Hollywood, 1929-1933." *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music.* Ed. Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight. Durham, NC, and London: Duke UP, 2001. 105-33.

Montanari, Franco, Antonio Rengakos, and Christos Tsagalis, eds. *Homeric Contexts: Neoanalysis and the Interpretation of Oral Poetry. Vol. 12: Trends in Classics*, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012.

Morris, Tracie. *Intermission*. New York: Soft Skull Press, 1998.

—. "Journal: Day Three." *The Poetry Foundation: Harriet Blog.* 2006. .<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2006/03/journal-day-three-56d34c68b9407>.

—. "Poetics Statement: Sound Making Notes." *American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics.* Ed. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2007. 210-15.

—. *Rhyme Scheme*. La Laguna: Zasterle, 2012.

—. "Conceptual Poesis of Silence: Stop and Glottal." *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women.* Ed. Caroline Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody, and Vanessa Place. Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2012. 389-94.

—. *Handholding: 5 Kinds*. Tucson: Kore Press, 2016.

—. *Hard Korè, Poèmes: Per-Form Poems of Mythos and Place*. Nantes: Editions Joca Seria, 2017.

—. *Who Do with Words*. Tucson: Chax Press, 2018.

—. "The Mrs. Gets Her Ass Kicked, (aka Heaven)". *PennSound.* 15 Apr 2018. <http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Morris/10-28-08/Morris-Tracie_04_The-Mrs-Gets-Her-Ass-Kicked_Rothstein-OralPoetry_KWH_Upenn_10-28-08.mp3>.

Nagy, Gregory. *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Nelson, Alondra. "Introduction." *Social Text*, 20 (2002): 1-15.

Novak, Julia. *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance*. Amsterdam and London: Rodopi, 2011.

Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York: Routledge, 1982.

Parry, Milman. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

Perelman, Bob. "Speech Effects: The Talk as a Genre". *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word.* Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. 200-16.

Perloff, Nancy. "Sound Poetry and the Musical Avant-Garde: A Musicologist's Perspective".

The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound. Ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.

Shonekan, Stephanie. *Soul, Country, and the USA: Race and Identity in American Music Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Somers-Willett, Susan B.A. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2009.

Sparks, Barbara, and Chad Grochowski. "Narratives of Youth: Critical Critique Through Spoken Word." *Seminario Ciéntifico sobre la Calidad de la Educación*. Matanzas, Cuba, February 2002.

Thomas, Lorenzo. "'Communicating by Horns': Jazz and Redemption in the Poetry of the Beats and the Black Arts Movement." *African American Review* 26 (1992): 291-98.

"Tracie Morris and Queen Golds Featured at Creative Capital's *The Lab*." *Harriet Blog: The Poetry Foundation.* 21 February 2014. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet>.

Wallenstein, Barry. "Poetry and Jazz: A Twentieth-Century Wedding." *Black American Literature Forum* 25 (1991): 595-620.

Wendt, Larry. "Vocal Neighborhoods: A Walk through the Post-Sound Poetry Landscape." *Leonardo Music Journal* 3 (1993): 65-71.