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# Oral Poetry and Performance in Black Culture

The case of two contemporary artists: Tracie  
Morris and Jean “Binta” Breeze

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# Introduction

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“What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word: poetry?” This is the first question I had to answer to in my first class at University of Amsterdam two years ago. That day, I answered that poetry for me was Dickinson, Frost, Pound, Eliot etc. everything I had previously studied during my American Literature classes. I guess most of my school mates would answer the same, maybe referring to Shakespeare, Wordsworth or some other well-known poet. However, to my big surprise, some of my mates’ answers were very different on the very day when professor Jane Lewty seemed to be very happy about it. Some of them firmly said that poetry could be graffiti painting or a song on the radio, some others said it could be a Facebook status or people talking in the street. I was very confused. Were those people crazy? How could be something so serious like poetry compared to street arts or, even worse, to an internet page? It reminds me of a picture I had seen once in a photography book, the scandalous work of Marcel Duchamp: the porcelain urinal he had called “the fountain”; and that made me think that maybe the same reaction those people had in 1917 was the same I was having that day. Was I behaving as a bigot? Or simply did I have to change my approach to art in general?

People have always been used to utilize “academic” as a synonym of “proper” and “absolute”. As a result, when something is not considered academic it immediately becomes inferior to the “a-level”, “superior” art and not even worth to be considered as such. The same thing happens to poetry. There is a distinction between a “proper” poetry which is generally written on a page and a non-academic poetry that just corresponds to the opposite. Therefore, it is quite obvious that when people speak of poetry they generally refer to William Shakespeare and not to Tupac Shakur, as well as

they contemplate a sonnet and not a dub-poem written in patois. In the same way, it is generally given a big importance to “the old” rather than to “the new”, as if things could gain value while they get older. Yet, nobody seems to ask himself/herself why, as I had been doing until that day. From that day onwards, I have been closely examining how poetry exists in so many different countries, social levels, forms and genres and thanks to Prof. Fazzini I have had the chance to get closer to postcolonial studies and discover how beautiful is an extremely old but new genre generally called: Oral Poetry.

In my dissertation, I will go through the history of oral poetry, especially through sound poetry and dub poetry, introducing two contemporary artists who remarkably represent the world of poetry and performance in Black community. Tracie Morris and Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze are both black, both women and both artistically and socially involved to make a change through their art.

# I.

## Oral Literature: Reading the Sound

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### **1.1. The Written and the Oral: contrasts between high and low literature.**

When one thinks about poetry, the immediate image that comes to his/her mind is a written text in rhymes; no one thinks about a person performing in front of a big crowd. However, if we refer to the etymological meaning of the word itself, we will realize that it comes from the Greek noun *poiesis* whose verb means “to make”, therefore “to create poetry” not necessarily to write it down on paper. So why do people persist in thinking that ‘proper’ poetry has to be written?

Firstly, it is worthwhile to state that ‘the oral’ is often wrongly associated with ‘the popular’ (Zumthor, 1984:24). It may be because the first medium used to hand folktales from generation to generation, was the voice since the majority of the population could not read and write. Yet it is certainly inappropriate to give a negative connotation to oral poetry and link it with illiteracy, as opposed to the positive feature of written poetry perceived as a higher form of literature. However, since it is difficult to imagine a society based only on the unwritten, it is easy to confer primitive stereotypes to it (Zumthor, 1984: 25) but, even though the unwritten refers to the folks turning into a synonym for “traditional”, “tribal” and “popular” (Finnegan, 2011:16), let’s not forget that some of the finest literary

genres originally belonged to an oral tradition, like Epic for example which is still “the most developed form of oral poetry” (Finnegan, 2011: 9).

In addition to this, Finnegan affirms that “many of the generalizations made about oral poetry are over-simplified, and thus misleading oral poetry can take many different forms, and occurs in many different situations” (Finnegan, 2011: 9). It includes *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as well as Negro songs, Children’s lullabies or TV commercials with popular samples; it is not distant, in space and time. On the contrary, it is still around us (Finnegan, 2011: 4). It is part of our lives: it recollects the past to understand the present, it gets hold of the tradition but it relocates it into modernity.

In the past, scholars used to favor a kind of oral literature which belonged to remote cultural situations as if being further in space and/or in time meant to be more respectable and suitable to a higher academic level. As a result of this, tradition became an essential point of reference and everything that seemed to detach from it or which simply introduced something new did not measure up to its heritage. Actually, scholars’ major interest is still in the traditional forms, gathered together under the name of “folklore”, rather than in contemporary oral poetry which is a field often unexplored by “serious” academics. Thus, the analysis of an “emotional verse of some preachers in the American South”(Finnegan, 1011: 4) or of some “primitive literary forms” like *Zulu Praise-poems* or *Maori Lyrics* (Finnegan,2011: 6) are preferred to urban oral poetry, like *Spoken word* for example. However, we have to admit that scholars, who were interested in traditional and primitive forms in Europe and America, have started throughout the years to shift their interest to more recent urban works (Finnegan, 2011: 6), widening the field of study concerning ‘orality’, and making it even more difficult to define as a fixed closed genre.

Moreover, like any form of art, it is not possible to crystallize it in a fix definition because it keeps changing and developing day by day. For this reason, it is very important to make a clear distinction between the different forms belonging to this wide genre so as not to fall into over-generalizations and wrong definitions as it often happens, and then considering its main features and differences in “style, symbolism, performance and social background” (Finnegan, 2011: 9). Indeed, it would be necessary to underline the differences between an English ballad and the Australian Aboriginal song-cycles, or again between some Medieval lyrics and Maori songs (Finnegan, 2011: 13).

Oral Poetry is well-known as the antipodal of written poetry so much that the word “oral” is often replaced with the word “unwritten”; but where exactly stands the boundary line between one and another? How can we define an originally oral poem like the *Song of Roland* now available on a printed page? Is that still oral poetry or has anything changed? Finnegan goes on observing:

What are we to say, for instance, about some of the schoolchildren’s verse that has now written down and published? Does the fact of its having been recorded in writing make it no longer oral? Or, if this seems far-fetched, what about the situation where a child hears a parent read out one of the printed verses (or even reads it himself) and then goes back to repeat it and propagate it in his school playground? And what then about popular hymns, whether English, Zulu or Kikuyu, which may begin their lives as written form and appear in collected hymnodies, but nevertheless circulate largely by oral means through the performances of congregations made thoroughly familiar with them? Or

form like jazz poetry, or much medieval verse, written expressly for oral performance and delivery? (Finnegan, 2011: 17)

In addition to this, to define a poem as ‘oral’ it is necessary to consider three different factors which are: *composition*, *transmission* and *performance*, therefore to state and specify in which of these aspects a certain oral poem is accounted as such (Finnegan, 2011:17). On this basis, an epic poem like *Beowulf*, studied at school as a written text, can be considered an originally oral poem since it designated an oral composition and performance. In fact, even though there are still many discordant hypotheses about its authorships and hidden meanings, what it is certain is that his “peculiar structure”, full of discontinuities and recurring “changes of tone”, shows clear signs that this poem was designed for an oral performance (Goldsmith, 2014: 1-5).

To transform a piece of art originally born in a form into another, on the one hand, can open new horizons of meaning and interpretation; on the other hand, it can be very dangerous since it risks losing its original nature and becoming something unfilled and despoiled from its primitive significance.

Depending on these preconditions we can state that, although the written version is one of the greatest masterpieces of English Literature, it cannot be compared to the original version because without its performance it proves to be deprived of its ‘oral-ness’, therefore of its primordial purpose. A similar example can be found in the first approach to African Oral literature by European scholars who attempted to translate the ‘oral-ness’ of the performance into ‘written-ness’ without considering the roots of those poetic compositions, and therefore applying a European method to a completely different conception of literature and art at the core of African oral tradition. Okpewho has observed that:

Many European scholars had considered African Oral narratives as primitive and unsophisticated because they judged them on the same standards as the written literature. [...] oral narratives are produced in circumstances different from those in which, say, novels are written and must therefore be judged in different form. (Okpewho, 1992: 15)

Moreover, it is very important to underline that European scholars translated that text with a sociological prejudice. Allowing them to eliminate all the text's parts they did not understand since they are considered primitive and irrelevant (Okpewho, 1992:12). 'Orality' and written texts are usually in contrast but they also get combined, creating "constant overlaps" so that it is not possible to draw often a clear line between them anymore (Finnegan, 2011:2). An example of this can be *Lyric poetry*: a written poem usually in rhymes which is sung, so orally transmitted by voice:

Poems with many diverse functions occurs in the sung form; love lyrics, psalms and hymns, songs to accompany dancing and drinking, political and topical verse, war songs, initiation songs, 'spirituals', lament, work songs, lullabies, and many others (Finnegan, 2011: 13).

Actually, in European tradition as well as in African folklore, sung form is one of the most incisive as it has a more direct approach with the audience and an immediate impact on it. In this case, the written and the oral mixed up together offer a complete work of art. A significant example of concrete intermixes between oral and written is

*ewì*, a genre of written and radio poetry of the Yorùbá, which does not restrict language into written text; on the contrary it takes advantage of writing to offer a new “space of cultural creativity” (Nnodim in Alain, 2005: 250). In fact, it bases its poetics on the prosperous tradition of the Yorùbá and it adapts it to a new reference that sees ‘orality’ and ‘performance’ mixed in “a poetics of citations”, including written text as well as songs. (Nnodim in Alain, 2005: 254).

## 2.2 Folk Songs in Popular Culture

When we speak about Oral Poetry it is impossible to omit the terms *folklore* and *popular culture* since they complement one another. However, “Oral Literature- which comprises riddles, puns, tongue-twisters, proverbs, recitations, chants, songs and stories- represents only the verbal aspect of folklore” (Okpewho, 1992: 4), while the other feature of folklore refers to “traditional methods of cooking, architecture, medicine, and dressmaking as well as religion or ritual, art, instrumental music and dance” (Okpewho, 1992: 5). In other words folklore is made by what people “traditionally say” (oral literature) and what people “traditionally do”. (Okpewho, 1992: 5)

The term *folklore* is made up of two parts: *folk* which clearly refers to folks therefore to a vast group of people; and *lore* an old word which means ‘traditional wisdom’. It makes, therefore, allusion to a range of customs and traditions that belong to a certain ethnic group. Besides, *Folklore* is the English translation for the German words *Volkgeist* and *Volkslied* introduced by the two literati Herder and Grimm as epitomes for ‘spirit’, ‘poetry’ and ‘popular song’ drawn closer to another term ,

*Naturpoesie*, which refers to a ‘natural’, ‘simple’, ‘traditional’ and ‘original’ poetry apparently in contrast with what is considered an academic work. (Zumthor, 1984:19)

It is not so easy to give a specific definition of folklore considering its innumerable meanings and especially dealing with the cultural prejudice that associates popular and oral poetry with a defective literature as opposing to a flawless work of art (Zumthor, 1984: 21). Actually, it is clear that popular literature is part of the traditional heritage of people and, as it happens in popular songs, at a certain point in a long period of time, it starts belonging to the people and not to its author anymore. It becomes, in fact, author-less and its first social identity turns to be the folks.

If we move onto “the lore” a spontaneous question arises: does it change between one ethnic group and another or does it stay unvaried? On the one hand, considering what William Wells Newell wrote in the *Journal of American Folklore*, it is fundamental to distinguish between European, African or even American Indian’s folklore because each of this progenies pass down different rituals, folktales etc. (Dundes, 2005: 227) . In fact, in his attempt to define what the American Folklore is, Dundes mentions Newell’s classification of different types of lore. His proposed classification is as follows:

- (a) Relics of old English folk-lore (ballads, tales, superstitions, dialect, etc.)
- (b) Lore of Negroes in the southern States of the Union
- (c) Lore of the Indian tribes of North America (myths, tales, etc.)
- (d) Lore of French Canada, Mexico, etc.

(Dundes, 2005: 227)

Then, Newell does not allow American Indians to have their own folklore since they are considered too savage for it. In his opinion, folklore is something handed down from an old community so it cannot be born from a new primitive tribe. He gathers, in fact, all this “rough” people’s beliefs together under the name of *mythology*: a “living system of tales and beliefs which, in primitive peoples, serves to explain existence” (Dundes, 2005: 228).

Moreover, it’s worthwhile to consider the fact that Newell made this classification starting from the prejudice that knowledge can only be transmitted from a superior to an inferior race, and Europe is “obviously” superior to African or American Indians (Dundes, 2005: 230). This is exactly the same prejudice that the German Grimm brothers had. They justified the analogies between some European and African folktales by saying that probably “the Europeans (had) brought the tales with them to Africa during the period of the slave trade” (Thompson in Okpwewho, 1992: 7-8). Both Newell and the Grimm Brother can be considered “diffusionists” since they believed that :

...where such similarities occurred it could only be because as some time in the distant past the two societies had some contact with one another which caused the borrowing of certain cultural ideas by one of them from the other. (Thompson in Okpwewho, 1992: 7).

On the other hand “the evolutionists”, like Charles Darwin and, later on, Edward Burnet Tylor and James George Frazer, did not make any distinctions of race, intelligence or dominance. They believed that “there is one human mind and one human race spread out across the face of the earth” and that two societies analyzed “at the

same stage of cultural development” disclose very similar features in their folkloristic traditions ( Okpewho, 1992: 5).

In addition to this, the evolutionists affirmed that it would have been very useful to compare the common features of two societies to completely understand their traditions and it is exactly what Frazer did with its “thirteen volume”-work ,*The Golden Bough*, in which, by comparing “a small Italian tribe” to other primordial tribes, he seems to prove “that the origin of religion would be found in the magical rites of a ‘primitive’ man”. (Okpewho, 1992: 5-6)

As we have already mentioned folklore refers to people, therefore to popular culture and literature, but what do these words exactly mean? Let’s focus in particular to the adjective *popular*: does it refer to a quality or to a point of view?

First of all, “popular poetry” was defined by Montaigne as the type of poetry which is considered “different”, “natural” as opposed to the “perfect poetry”; Pidal instead, in order to give a more precise definition of it, made a distinction between “popular poetry” and “traditional poetry” clarifying that popular poetry was integrated in a quite short and recent period of time during which it kept being unvaried while traditional poetry was diffused during a larger period of time during which it changed. Moreover, he did not include songs either into this group although they are still the most common form of popular poetry. (Zumthor, 1984: 21-22).

Fenton made a clear distinction between writing a poem and writing a song basically saying that during the act of creation we include the final object by thinking how our work is going to be, so when a poem is to be written, the writer, as artist, is thinking about how it is going to look like, how the text is going to be placed in the page and how the reader will react to it; if he is writing a song instead he will be worried about its sound effects on the listener and the impact of the lyrics on the audience.

However what they have in common is a common purpose, so the relation with the audience, as both include in their work of art the impact on the reader/listener, so still poetry and songs are strictly linked one to another (Fenton in Fazzini, 2012: 15).

Furthermore, referring to J.A. Cuddon's "A Dictionary of Literary Terms" when we look up for the term *song* we understand that in less civilized countries around the world poetry is composed to be orally transmitted through voice with chants, words are made for music and the composer is the only responsible for both of them, "the oral tradition sustained the union of music and poetry". (Cuddon:1977) On the contrary, after the 16<sup>th</sup> century the situation changed and even if before "Epic, War-song, Ballad, Madrigal and Lyric were in many cases works produced by professional musician-poets who were also composers", during the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Europe :

...the poet and the composer-musician began to part company, and the classifying of literary forms and genres put the song in an individual category. Lyrics were written in the expectation of their being set to music and composers made extensive use of the great variety of poetry available. ... A handful of poets, only, kept the tradition of song writing alive. Notable examples are Thomas More, Robert Burns, William Blake, Thomas Haynes Bayly, plus the anonymous makers of ballad and folk-song... (J.A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms, London, Penguin Books, 1977)

The main feature of a folk-song, beyond its being anonymous, is to incorporate the close relation between poetry and song. The first purpose of folk literature is to be remembered so which better way to keep in mind something than by adding a melody to

it and sing? This interchange between poetry and song naturally happens, thus sometimes music is not even needed since poetry seems to own musicality in itself.

Differently, this break between poet and musician did not occur in other countries such as Australia or South Africa for example where poet and musician merged in one single person. Let's think for example about European travelers who went to Africa and called the performers "griot", "professional musicians" and Arabs, instead, who called the same performers with a word that signifies "poets". (Zumthor, 1984: 23)

Folk songs are closely linked to a collective memory in order to pass down what the community wants to preserve, that is a way to communicate, to teach, to spread the voice, to instill knowledge, to entertain but especially to speak up and denunciate something wrong which has to be changed. It has become a medium used by people to express themselves but also to protest. This sends us back to our definition of *popular*:

The anxious elite used the word "popular" synonymously with ones like gross, base, vile, riffraff, common, low, vulgar, plebeian and cheap. In the same mindset, "democracy" was something to be feared, for it connoted mob rule. From this point of view, the people were seen as cultureless, lawless timebomb that might explode at any moment into anarchy and social disorder. (Fiske in Lentricchia/McLaughlin, 1995: 323)

Indeed, folk songs are linked to a popular culture which is clearly opposed to an elitist class and to its literary environment and, as Fiske affirmed, the latter is worried by the former's rising voice of protest.

Besides, although when we speak about folk songs the common imagery may be something joyful or simply careless like children lullabies or playful songs, let's not forget that some of the most beautiful folk songs were born from the struggle and the pain of people who apparently owned nothing but their strong will to change ,or simply to denounce, the unfair world in which they lived.

Most of them in fact were composed during the imperialist ages when oppressed people could not do anything but sing their sorrow. This is the way Negro *Spirituals* and *Work Songs* were born; from where one of the most influential African-American music genre derives: The Blues.

W. Guthrie in his book *Race Music: from Bebop to Hip Hop* analyzes how music and rituals refers to specific periods of Black History and contribute to their knowledge and memory. He refers to a vast variety of black folklore's features, and analyzes how these have been more influential than any other theories. He moves from music to food, from smells to ritualize spaces, from social dance to literature, from church to nightclubs. Taking into account that:

All these combine to form living photographs, rich pools of experiences, and a cultural poetics upon which theoretical and analytical principles can be based.

... I learned that music possesses a power; in particular, the power to mean something important about the world around me. (Ramsey, 2003: 4)

This underlines how music and literature be both affected by folklore and how this is essential for the consciousness of a population that has to coexists with the memory of its history in order to remember everyday where they come from and who they are.

## 1.3 The Role of Performance in Oral Poetry

Performance is the main feature of oral Poetry since it is what distinguishes the oral from the written form. The poet, while composing its lyrics, already thinks about its final performance. Therefore, it can be considered a performer himself, besides his being a poet. His purpose is not to communicate through a dull page: he has a direct contact with its audience, so that is what actually makes oral poetry “an art form created in the warm presence of an audience as against the cold privacy of the written work” (Okpewho, 1992: 42).

Actually, oral poetry has been termed by Richard Kostelanetz as “syntactically standard language written to be read aloud” (Hoffman, 2013: 10) and the role of the author is to include performance in the same act of creation of the poem. It is not only a sound matter but poetry’s “orality” is intrinsic in its inception, as though the work of art was ‘oral’ even before being ‘poetry’.

This explains why for example Robert Frost’s works cannot be considered oral poetry. Despite his interest in sound and his many performances in public, he did not include the mere purpose of performance in the creation process, therefore his brilliant-sounding poems primarily remain written compositions. (Hoffman, 2013: 10)

In addition to this, when we speak about a poem in performance we are not referring to a “fixed, stabled, finite linguistic object” (Bernstein, 2011: 9). As a matter of fact, a poem can attract many different performances which confer to it a “fundamentally plural existence” (Bernstein, 2011: 9). Indeed, we can state that “there as many meanings to the poem as there are performances of it” (Hoffman, 2013:10).

There is a direct exchange between performer and audience and this makes oral poetry a special form of art on the grounds that written form is a one-way

communication while here we are dealing with a bilateral exchange based on the impact of the performer on his audience and the reaction of the latter to him.

Besides, the audience's reaction can actively influence the interpreter's performance as evidence of what has just been stated. As a result, performance is not something fixed but it keeps changing every time and it depends on different aspects such as : "the age and the energy of the performer, the nature of the occasion, the type of setting, whether or not any musical accompaniments are used especially by the performer" (Okpewho, 1992: 42).

Moreover, the "emotional relation" established between audience and performer can be decisive for the performance success. On this basis Zumthor states that the performance is free and "unpredictable" (Zumthor, 1984: 186).

Although "Oral literature is fundamentally literature delivered by word of mouth" (Okpewho, 1992: 42), "the bare words can not be left to speak for themselves" (Finnegan in Okpewho, 1992: 46). Thus, to understand the word the audience has to pay attention to all the "nonverbal" aspects of the performance which "occur side by side with the text or the words of the literature". (Okpewho, 1992:46). Okpewho adds:

One of these resources is the histrionics of the performance, that is, movements made with the face, hands, or any part of the body as a way of dramatically demonstrating an action contained in the text. (...) So important are these dramatic movements considered for the effectiveness of the story that in many traditions of narrative performance across Africa, a story is told in convenient movements or episodes, in such a way that each episode is preceded by a miming of its basic details. Without these subtle dramatic efforts, the story in the oral tradition is often considered to have been ineffectively told. (Okpewho, 1992: 46)

On these basis, we immediately understand how important is the body in oral poetry, in performance, as well as in everyday communication.

Actually, the “visual impact” seems to anticipate the sound and meaning of the words since the audience judges the performance as successful or not starting from its extra-verbal features and not strictly from its words. Then, especially in African community, music and dance often accompany poetry, emphasizing its performance or even replacing it, so that words turn not to be needed anymore (Okpweho, 1992: 47-49). Body’s movements become part of poetry and the performer himself/herself seems to be pervaded by it.

The visual has a great influence on the spectator’s perception: we can think about the most direct and stereotyped vision of an African poet singing poems out loud while he is playing percussions or even dancing with make-up, flashy clothes and a tribal mask in his face; or about a more simple and common vision of a lecturer reading his poems out loud in front of a class of scholars. We can state that in both cases not only their physical appearance marks their gender, class and geography but also that the spectator can easily understand their emotional and psychological status even only by the tone of their voice and their facial expressions.

Moreover, the performer establishes a real contact with the audience as if he is “giving himself” to it, they “feel” beyond the visual as if they could “virtually touch” each other (Zumthor, 1984: 241). It is something more than rhetoric so much that Zumthor alludes to jazz singers’ “collective trance” and to an “eroticize essence” (Zumthor, 1984: 241).

Thus, let’s not forget that, although the visual has a great impact on the audience, what affects the public most during the poem performance is the sound.

Indeed, Bernstein compares poetry reading to radio or chamber music stating that they share the same intimacy (Bernstein, 2011: 10). He affirms:

In contrast to theater, where the visual spectacle creates a perceived distance separating viewers from viewed, the emphasis on sound in the poetry reading has the opposite effect- it physically connect the speaker and the listener, moving to overcome the self-consciousness of the performance context. (Bernstein, 2011: 11)

Thus, it is worthwhile not to identify oral poetry performance with acting or theatre since the first feature conferred to oral poetry perception is actually listening. Bernstein adds that ,through the sound, the audience can enter an exclusive “acoustic space” in which performer and audience establish an intimate relation (Bernstein, 2011: 11). However, even though both visual and sound effects influence oral poetry performance, it has to be underlined that “poetry cannot, and need not, compete with music in terms of acoustic complexity or rhythmic force, or with theater in terms of spectacle”. (Bernstein, 2011: 11)

Furthermore, oral poetry is considered “anonymous”, not because of its unknown authorship or its lacking individuality but simply because the “role of the performer is more important than the composer’s” (Zumthor, 1984: 262-263). As a matter of fact, Zumthor referring to the “memory” of a poem, states that the audience remembers a poem by attribution of it to its performer rather than to its composer .

The same thing happens with songs for example: indeed the memory of a song is often linked to its singer and not to its composer (Zumthor, 1984: 265).

Thus, it is not much important who the poet is as the audience will perceive his/her message through the performer's voice and gesture of the performer and not through the poet's self-expression.

## 2.

# Poetry and Performance in Afro-American Culture: from Work Songs to Hip Hop Culture

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## 2.1 Blues History: from slavery to freedom

*The Blues :*

**1**

*: low spirits : MELANCHOLY < suffering a case of the blues >*

**2**

*: a song often of lamentation characterized by usually 12-bar phrases, 3-line stanzas in which the words of the second line usually repeat those of the first, and continual occurrence of blue notes in melody and harmony*

**3**

*: jazz or popular music using harmonic and phrase structures of blues*

(Merriam-Webster's Dictionary)

The first known use of the word “blues” dates back to 1971 when the word “blue devils” was used to refer to unhappy and depressing feelings. They were expressed in music by the so-called “blue notes” (“sad notes”, common both to the major and the minor tone) (Zumthor, 1984: 236). However, although the origins of the Blues are not clear yet, they have been approximately dated after the Civil War (1861-1865) when the Mississippi Delta was improved and a lot of black ex-slaves went South to work in the plantations (Ferris, 2011: 16).

The Mississippi Delta territory was developed from (north) Memphis, Tennessee, to (south) Vicksburg, Mississippi, between steep slopes (east) and the Mississippi river (west) (Ferris, 2011: 15).

Actually, it is a very well-known area in African-American tradition, because of its history, literature and music. It is impossible to ignore the fundamental role that this geographic area has had in many of the progenitor novels of American literature, like *Huckleberry Finn* or *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, works where the Mississippi River is not simply a river but something, which, together with its water-flowing toward south, represents the protagonists’ journey toward freedom.

Despite that, what these emancipated ex-slaves found in the promising south was the same life and work they had had as slaves, except that their identity changed during the years from the condition of slaves to “free” plantation workers.

Black workers, in fact, denounced their situations as oppressed by the white hegemony and the fact that, even after the slavery period, their conditions of subdued minority stayed unvaried. They hoped to find economical freedom and independence by moving to the Mississippi Delta. On the contrary, they did not find anything different: they were exploited by the white farmers, and their work did not allow them to pay their debts. Zumthor bestows to the blues the epithet of being born from “the common destiny of an unhappy community” (Zumthor, 1984: 236) .As a matter of fact, this genre

was born from a need of self-expression and relief from a brutal lifestyle where repression and exploitation were an everyday reality. Indeed, even after the Slavery Abolition Act, black people were considered different and inferior as evidence that the prejudice was more difficult to fight than slavery itself.

Black people seemed to have lost their identity. They did not belong to the African tribe anymore but as they tried to integrate in the white community they realized, day by day, that their attempt to “become Americans” was useless. “Whiteness” was the key to be recognized as Americans and accepted as human beings, however they seemed to be predestined to invisibility. In fact, according to the concept of mimicry, their being Americanized did not make them Americans (Bhabba, 2004: 87); they were “almost the same but not white” (Freud in Bhabba, 2004: 89) and their “inappropriate” difference seemed to mark their destin, as Freud observes:

Their mixed and split origin is what decides their fate. We may compare them with individuals of mixed race who taken all round resemble white men but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other and on that account are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges.  
(Freud in Bhabba, 2004: 89)

Besides, Bhabba asserts that “ the ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from *mimicry* - a difference that is almost nothing but quite – to *menace* – a difference that is almost total but not quite” (Bhabba, 2004: 91). The menace of mimicry stands in its double articulation: the resemblance between colonizer and colonized underlines their difference, as much as the colonist’s demand for identity marks his/her condition of “partial presence” which “disrupts [his/her] authority

(Bhabba, 2004: 88). The colonist is entrapped in a binary system which causes a feeling of paranoia and enclosure. He finds himself between *mimicry* and *menace*; *appropriateness* and *inappropriateness*; *resemblance* and *difference*. In other words: his /her condition is an “ironic compromise” between the desire for a static identity and an inconstant individuality. (Bhabba, 2004: 86)

Leroi Jones, in his book *The Blues People*, states that you cannot pretend to belong to a certain country only because you live and work there or maybe because you speak “20 words” of the national language but “only when you begin to accept the idea that you are part of that country that you can be said to be a permanent resident” (Jones, 1963: xii). As a matter of fact, “to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English” as well as “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”, still remains Indian, although “raised through [an] English School” ( Macaulay in Bhabba, 2004: 87). Let’s read what Watts writes about the Afro-American writer Leroi Jones, known as Amiri Baraka:

*Blues People* focuses on certain moments of rupture/dislocation in the historical lives of Black Americans: from Africans to Afro-Americans, from slaves to freedmen, from southerners to northerners, from rural to urban, and from working class to middle class. *Blues People* begins as a meditation on the immensity of the cultural dislocation experience by the Africans brought as slaves to America. African slaves were not only thrown into an alien culture, but they also were perceived, because of their foreignness, as less than full human beings. (J.G. Watts, 117)

It is exactly what W.E.B. Du Bois deals with in his essay “Strivings of the Negro People” published in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1930): “Double Consciousness”. This

concept refers to a double psychological identity that grows into African American People who handle with their being both “Americans” and “Africans”, a kind of schizophrenic attempt to belong to a certain group.

On the one hand, Du Bois’s concept was obviously provocative, on the other he wanted to induce African Americans to recollect their original mysticism through their folklore, to go back to their origins and traditions, “to privilege the spiritual in relation to the materialistic, commercial world of white America” (Dickson, Bruce; 2001: 301). In their article called “Du Bois's Idea of Double Consciousness”, D. Dickson and J.R. Bruce affirm that:

(...) for Du Bois the essence of a distinctive African consciousness was its spirituality, a spirituality based in Africa but revealed among African Americans in their folklore, their history of patient suffering, and their faith.

(...) Negro blood has a message for the world," he wrote, and this message, as he had been saying since at least 1888, was of a spiritual sense and a softening influence that black people could bring to a cold and calculating world.

(Dickson, Bruce; 2001: 301)

So, we can state that the Blues is not only a music genre but it can also be considered part of a more general American Folklore heritage.. “Blues is not, nor was it ever meant to be, a strictly social phenomenon, but is primarily a verse form and secondarily a way of making music”; “as a verse form, [it] has as much social reference as any poetry” (Jones, 1963: 50). Actually, “love, sex, tragedy in interpersonal relationships, death, travel, loneliness, etc,” are all common themes in poetry as well as “social phenomena”. These ideas helped the Blues to consolidate that peculiar form that

has been dictated by slavery first and would be guided through its course by the “so-called Emancipation”. (Jones, 1963: 50-51)

Ferris in his book called *Blues from the Delta* states that blues music was one of the very few ways through which black people could aspire to a successful life, so that, especially the role of the singer became a fundamental task to “shape the blues sound” (Ferris, 2011: 25). The singer/poet was actually “the spokesman” of his own community. He can make his audience feel his emotions and feelings if the performance is successful or not (Ferris, 2011: 25). Blues was also a medium to protest, a medium to communicate but especially to dream a better life.

Going back to its history, after the early 1920s, many black families, unhappy about their condition, decided to move away from the Delta (Ferris, 2011: 23). The first destination was to move north, to Chicago which was the center of finance, industry and the railroad in the Midwest all through the 1930s.

Thus, many blues musicians worked during the day and played in blues clubs during the night. Some of the most famous musicians were famous figures as Big Bill, Broonzy and Muddy Waters who turn the city into the unlikely blues capital of the USA. Also musicians like Howlin’ Wolf and B.B. King were from the Delta (Ferris, 2011: 25) but if we talk about the pioneers of the 1920s it is impossible not to mention Robert Johnson who is the most significant solo performer of the early blues. In addition to this, despite the fact that the blues is defined as a solo genre, as we said before, we can state that it became a way to denounce the sad situation of a whole community, forced to live as ex-slaves or “new slaves”. They were somehow considered as someone different from the white people, people who had to be kept at a certain distance from them. “Thus the idea of the ‘separate but equal’ society, with equality almost completely nonexistent, came into being” (Jones, 1963: 54).

Their situations were also reflected in the Chicago society; in fact, they did not live in the “Main street” where white people did; instead, they lived in blocks that were called “Black Dog” or “Brick Yard” in order to distinguish them from the white main districts (Ferris, 2011: 23). “The post-slave society had no place for the black American, and if there were to be any area of the society where the Negro might have an integral function, that area would have to be one that he created for himself.” (Jones, 1963: 55). As a matter of fact, in *Blues People* Leroi Jones articulates:

There was always a border beyond which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. There was always a possible limitation to any dilution or excession of cultural or spiritual references. The Negro could not ever become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the white man’s culture. It was at his juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural, or hermetic. And it was his boundary, this no man’s land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music. (Jones, 1963: 80)

Blues was born to express the feelings of a whole community but it went on developing and changing in time until its main purpose became to entertain people. It left a mainly folkloristic dimension to approach a more formal public. (Jones, 1963: 82)

This evolution in approaching music, the blues in particular, shifted from a more primitive form: *Primitive blues*, essentially based on “a conscious expression of the

Negro's individuality [...] and separateness" (Jones, 1963: 86); to a more complete form: Classic blues, which included "all the elements of Negro music plus the smoother emotional appeal of the 'performance'" . (Jones, 1963: 86)

"This professionalism came from the Negro theater"; in particular from "the black minstrel shows" whose main purpose was to exaggerate some of the black people's features, creating a sort of "parody of Negro's life in America". (Jones, 1963:83-85)

This representations are quite interesting to consider not only as a reflection of black people's reaction to the white American world, but especially as a representation of how the black man was seen by white people and how the vision of him gradually changed in time (Jones, 1963: 85-86) . In the mean time, these stereotypes were used by black people to poke fun at the white men too, pretending to be as they were depicted by the white American society, hiding their real nature (Jones, 1963: 85-86). A clear example is the racial stereotype of the black "childlike" man who believes in the supernatural and always smiles, generally known with the name of "Sambo".

*Sambo.*

*Although often used as a derogatory term, Sambo is now used in some circles and mini-cultures to describe someone playing up to a stereotype or "playin' the fool" to hide intelligent and revolutionary motives from potential threats. The term comes from the 19th century "Sambo" stereotype of black slaves as dumb and oblivious. Slaves often used this as a cover to secretly sabotage plantation tools and as an excuse to work slowly and attempt to slowly chip away at their master's system when open revolution was not an option. (Urban Dictionary)*

On the other hand, despite what white people thought, black people were becoming day by day more aware of their potential:

This mass migration towards North (Chicago first, Detroit, New York, Washington and Philadelphia then) was a significant symbol of black people consciousness. Their “movement” represented their freedom of choice and act, their condition and “psychological shift” from slaves to freed men. “It was a decision Negroes made to leave the South, not an historical imperative. [...] a reinterpretation by the Negro of his role in this country.” (Jones, 1963: 96)

Others musicians, instead, moved west: some to Texas and others to the California West Coast. The most significant are T-Bone Walker who integrated with the West Coast jazz musicians and had a big influence on the early rock and roll musicians and in particular Chuck Berry and much later guitarists like Jimmy Page and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Last but not least, let’s not forget the essential role that the invention of radio had in the history of the blues. It allowed artists to preserve their past by recording songs into tapes in order not to forget them. That bring us to state that music is the perfect medium to preserve the history and the meaning of a certain community , especially among African-American people, where music has a very special power in the development of their identity (Ramsey, 2003:4). In his movie documentary which is called *The Blues: Feel like going home*, Martin Scorsese says:

I can’t imagine my life or anyone else’s without music. It’s a light in the darkness that never goes out. (...) Something was kept alive in the music. These rhythms were carefully preserved and passed down, generation to

generation, through slavery, through Jim Crow, right up until the present. It was an act of survival.

Indeed, Scorsese here wants to underline how Blues deals with the history of Black people's pain and struggle , and how this music genre goes along with African-American identity. From African villages to The Middle Passage, from Slavery and plantations to Jim Crow, from tribal chants to Work Songs and Spirituals, the Blues has grown up, embracing the history of a population, becoming part of it.

## 2.2 Hip Hop Culture: Spoken Words and Poetry Slam

The term "hip hop" dates back to the early 1970s and it is mostly attributed to Dj Kool Herc who generated hip hop music and culture along with Afrika Bambaataa and some of the pioneers of hip hop who actively contributed to the development of this movement like Zulu Nation, Grandmaster Flash and Run DMC .

However, what has become all-important to define hip hop culture is the famous statement of one of the most influential voice of rap poetry, KRS-One: "Rap music, is something we do, but HIP-HOP, is something we live" (Pate, 2009: 1,2). This is clear evidence that hip hop is not only "rapping, breaking, graffiti and deejaying" (Pate 2009,2) but it refers to a real existential attitude of living life.

Hip Hop is one of the most widespread form of self-expression in African American Culture. It is generally associated with the commercial beat that rules current

media, giving a negative connotation of it due to its apparently pessimistic impact on American culture (Pate, 2009:xiii).

Actually, hip hop is often associated with images like gangsters, semi-naked women, illiterate people, illegality so with a very low level of life, not considering the media purpose of exploiting its most catchy features in order to turn it only into a commercial fad (Pate 2009, xv). This is what happens when business threatens art, and it is, actually, for this reason that our analysis will focus on its literary aspect (Pate, xviii) in order to state that the most influential feature of Hip Hop is its poetry, called rap, and its words rather than its captivating music or its baggy clothes.

Firstly, it is quite curious to think that rappers are commonly named as illiterate, although they write their rhymes on paper before rapping or, as in slang it is commonly said, “spit” / “bust a rhyme” (Urban Dictionary); indeed, it is even more odd that supposed ignorant people could create “both meaningful and structurally advanced” poetry (Pate, 2009: xv) so that it becomes natural to think that these general suppositions are totally unfounded.

Rap is a mirror reflecting black culture’s “contemporary economics, ethics, morality, politics, foreign policy, sexuality and tolerance among a too-long-to-list range of topics” (Pate, 2009: xv), so what rap is doing it is exactly what African American literature has been doing since its inception. Moreover, it is “the first exported literary form that has emanated from African American culture” and nowadays it is spread all over the world: from Rio to Havana, from Palestine to Russia, from Europe to Asia up to Africa where this culture is born (Pate, 2009: xvi).

It is important to note that, although rap is defined as a contemporary movement, it is still connected to its cultural and musical origins. Indeed, if we focus on its “musical, performative, and literary antecedents” we can easily find interconnections with work songs and prison songs; then with R&B, funk and jazz; and with some of the

masterpieces of African American literature like Phyllis Wheatley, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka etc. (Pate, 2009: xvii).

The real innovation of hip hop in African American culture stands in its impact on the white community. If we take into consideration seminal movements for African American consciousness and Art expression like for example the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's, although they marked a point of change in black society they were both restricted to a black audience and agency. On the contrary, when we move to hip hop the first interesting thing to underline is exactly its power of impacting both black and white communities.

On the one hand, it is true that its main themes belongs to an African American reality and tradition; on the other, this condition of "being black" can also be experienced by a white guy who lives in the same situation of frustration and anger because she or he is subdued by a supremacy that can be defined as "white", in the sense that its "whiteness" can be attributed to its being richer or simply more powerful; instead: it talks about social and economical hierarchies (Pate, 2009: 27-29). On this Pate observes:

American rap/poets who are not black, such as Eminem and Big Zack, reveal uncanny absorption and demonstrate that the nature of contemporary African American urban existence is understandable. You don't have to be black to experience it. You might not (if you are white) be able to transcend the burden of your race, but you can definitely experience blackness in a deeply authentic way if your commitment to do so or your life circumstances require it.

Moreover with the creation of hip hop, what was actually happening was to give an opportunity to black people to enter white folks social ladder, they could aspire to have their own place in the world transforming their frailty and supposed powerlessness into precious advantages: “Just as slaves once did when they put pen to paper, these first rappers began redefining everything” (Pate, 2009: 27) That brings us back to our crucial point: that one of considering hip hop for its poetical rather than its musical content.

However, it is also true that one of its main features is the performance and that a captivating rhythm can help the speaker to increase his/her power to raise people’s attention during the performance (Pate, 2009: 27). Therefore, we can state that in rap, poetry can be divided from its music but not from its performance which is a fundamental part of it, otherwise, while its meaning may probably stay unvaried, part of its essence would be lost.

Moving to performance, it is interesting to focus our attention mostly on one of the methods of performative poetry, nowadays widespread in the U.S., which is: “Poetry Slam”. Glazner in his book called *Poetry Slam* introduces it by saying that:

A Poetry Slam is a performance contest: judges are chosen from the audience and asked to rate each performer’s poem from one to ten. Every poet is given three minutes to read an original poem. For three minutes, these poets own the stage, they take the room. They step up to the microphone and let fly.  
(Glazner, 2000: 11)

The first Poetry Slam took place in Chicago in 1986. Its creator Marc Smith wanted to actively include the audience in the poetry judgment by simply exposing what they would have just thought of a poetry performance.

Actually, their participation was useful to get them closer to the mere object of art and to encourage normal people, not necessarily lettered, to the literary and performative world (Glazner, 2000: 11). Besides, slam poetry “open[s] the door not only to the sociopolitical issue of who has access to poetry but also to the critical question of what poetry is and how it should be evaluated”. (Willet, 2009: 2)

Its idea was not something completely new. In the ancient Greece there were poetry contest in the Olympics games, or in Africa there were “word battles”; again, we have it in Spain too, as we can notice by reading some lines of Cervantes’ book *Don Quijote* where there is an allusion to “some poetical tournament” (Glazner, 2000: 11).

Actually, Poetry Slam grew not only in the United States, from Chicago to New York, to San Francisco up to New Mexico. It is globally spread over in many countries like: England, Germany, Israel and Sweden (Glazner, 2000: 12).

Performance has to be as most free as possible to be effective, so the only rules are: “the three minute rules” thus the poem has to be read in three minutes or less, “the no prop or costumes rule” thus no costumes can be used, “who wrote the poem rule” thus “each poet must have written the poem he or she performs” and “Scoring Poems” thus “at the Nationals, five judges each score the poems from zero to ten” instead “some local Slams have a wider range of scores, with negative infinity being the lowest score” (Glazner, 2000: 14).

However, as we have already said, what counts most in poetry slam is the freedom of expression. Let’s read what Glazner observes/writes:

The greatest thing about slam is its malleability, the way this impossible form can do so many things, all of them simultaneously. (...) draw a

crowd, saturate the audience with power, and set the art of poetry free in a friendly atmosphere... (Glazner, 2000:17)

As a matter of fact, the great thing about performative poetry is its conferring to the speaker more independence from strict rules in order to freely express himself with all the means he needs. Willet specifies then:

Almost all slam poetry is written in first person, is narrative, and because it is delivered in a performative format usually aims to be comprehensible upon a first listen. Devices such as homophonic word play, repetition, singing, call and response, and rhyme are frequently used on the slam stage. A wealth of different performative modes of address are embraced by slam poets, but most of the work performed at slams falls under the categories of comedy, parody, or drama. In terms of tone, protestive and passionate pieces are frequent at a slam, and many poets treat the slam stage as a political soapbox. (Willet, 2009: 3)

Slam is not only performance and competition, is so much more ( Aptowicz, x). It is a community, a theater; it is inspiring, captivating; it basically reminds us that poetry is not the secret, private and selective world we thought, it is accessible and public but especially it can be a window into the world. It is enough to think about one of the most famous slam caf  , like the Nuyorican Poets Caf   in New York City, where it is really possible to touch with hands the passion of poetry by getting in touch with

people of “every ethnicity, every sex, every political view, shouting and whispering onstage” ( Aptowicz, 2008: x).

Slam poetry is “unique” as a genre of spoken word but it is also one of the countless form of oral poetry. Its predecessors are the African Griots as well as the Greek epic novels; yet what influenced most Slams performers were actually the three major arts movement in New York City: *Harlem Renaissance*, *Beat Generation* and *Hip Hop Culture*. (Aptowicz, 2008: 4) Starting from the Harlem Renaissance, Aptowicz observes:

(...) like the late 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry slam, the artists of the Harlem Renaissance celebrated high culture as well as low culture. They wanted to raise the profile and spirits of their proud community while also being true to their experiences of what it means to be black in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Aptowicz, 2008: 5)

Then adds:

(...) the Harlem Renaissance’s improvisational jazz begat jazz poetry... jazz poetry later begat free-styling, which in turn became one of the foundations of hip-hop. (Aptowicz, 2008: 5)

Actually jazz poetry as well as the beat generation performances are meant to be the predecessors of spoken word art because of the malleability of their performance, their fierce representation of black culture, their interconnection between music, poetry

and performance but what would like to underline most is the influence and the interconnections between hip hop and poetry slam.

In the beginning, rap and spoken words were considered antagonists. Slam was refused by those rappers who identified themselves with the image of the “gangsta rapper” as a personification of virility and power. In fact, they feared to lose their reliability and to look too much effeminate if they joined any poetry circle for the reason that their art was born from the street and had to stay there, in order not to be mixed with any poetry event’s positivity or amusement . (Aptowicz, 2008: 9)

However, as a consequence, those Mc’s who did not considered themselves so much “tough” took shelter into slam poetry which seemed to belong more to their attitude (Aptowicz, 2008: 9). Therefore, slam poetry was the reason why rappers started approaching poetry communities, opening themselves to a more “flowerily” view of performance and poetry which includes not only expressions of anger and distress but also of joy and amusement (Aptowicz, 2008:8). They also take with them all their background affecting slam with their personal way of making art.

On this basis, we can state that these two movements, hip hop and slam, influenced each other, and contributed to develop an art form that goes beyond its slang, clothing or musical beat, a much deeper art to represent and support its own culture. (Aptowicz, 2008: 9)

## 2.3 Tracie Morris and Sound Poetry

One of the most prize-winning poet in spoken word competitions is Tracie Morris. She actually won the National Haiku Slam in San Francisco and the Nuyorican Poets Cafè Grand Slam in New York. (Anglesey, 2008: 79). She is one of those performers and poets who can effectively bring her audience beyond the stage, directly to the streets. She is also named “the Brooklyn girl” as she can bring her audience into the Brooklyn streets where she was born. Although she defines herself as a poet and not a singer, it is obvious that music influenced her poetic. It is easy to recognize in her poetry some of the features of Afro-American music, whose culture she actively represents, so: “jazz, blues, rock’n’roll, hip-hop, funk, avant garde, Afro-Cuban music and spirituals” (Anglesey, 2008: 77). In addition to this, what it is more stunning is her ability to “stay on the beat” while she improvises amazing rhymes with a hand over speed that could make Busta Rhymes green with envy. Moreover, her poetry is not affected by her “speed of delivery” and “for all this, Morris epitomizes the spoken word artist” (Anglesey, 2008: 77)

As we have already stated, Morris’ relationship with music is an essential aspect of her life and work as well. In fact, most of her work as scholar and poet deals with the interaction between music and words. She actually states: “I think of the instruments as speaking, and I’m having a conversation with them” (Anglesey, 2008: 78).

Both music and words are enclosed in a poetry genre which represents most of Tracie Morris’ main work: Sound Poetry.

Sound Poetry is a poetic genre which can be defined as a “hybrid” since it stands between words and sounds. As a matter of fact, its process of composition generally begins with a written text but one of its main features is live performance plus sound. It

is actually “a poetic form that works between media” therefore “avant garde and experimental music” can be useful to understand its characteristics. (Perloff, 2004: 97)

Although it does not belong to music, sound poetry seems to have many common features with avant-garde music. One of these is, for example, its using experimental sounds and instruments in order to put something extremely new in its art works. As a result, these experimental sounds turn to be so original that sometimes they are perceived as noises rather than sounds. Besides, another important common feature is the rejection of lyricism in music as well as meaning (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin, 2009: 97).

McCaffrey establishes three different phases in sound poetry’s history. The first, called the “paleotechnic era”, refers to “archaic and primitive poetries” including “folk and children’s rituals, such as language games, nursery rhymes, skipping chants, and folk-song refrains, as primitive forms of sound poetry” (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin, 2009: 98). The second (1875-1928), “marks a period in which poets and artists of European avant-garde sparked small revolutions through their experiments with the acoustic, nonsemantic properties of language” (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin, 2009: 98). Composers and poets focused on the “field of sound”: introducing “non-Western scales”, “syncopated rhythms” and “percussion[s]”, and manipulating the recorded sounds thanks to the inventions of “phonograph (1877), radio (1891) and tape recorder (1934-35)” (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin, 2009: 98). “The poetry of the Russian avant garde, the Italian futurists, and German Dada belongs to this second phase” although it discloses some revelatory features of the third (1950 and beyond). One of these is the attempt of Russian poets to “abandon the word” and “isolate the concrete, phonic aspect of language as an autonomous focus of interest”. They wrote in a “beyondsense” language which was not meant to be understandable since they believed that the word is

only a “linguistic unit” meant to be approached differently by each poet.<sup>1</sup> (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin 2009, 99). Therefore, the main purpose of the word was not to confer meaning but “to produce nonreferential sounds” (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin 2009, 106). Both, the Russian avant-garde poets and the Italian futurists, “ventured beyond the reading into the world of live declamation and performance”. In particular, “the Italians made elaborate use of onomatopoeia and treated typography as a design-equivalent for speech”. (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin, 2009: 106)

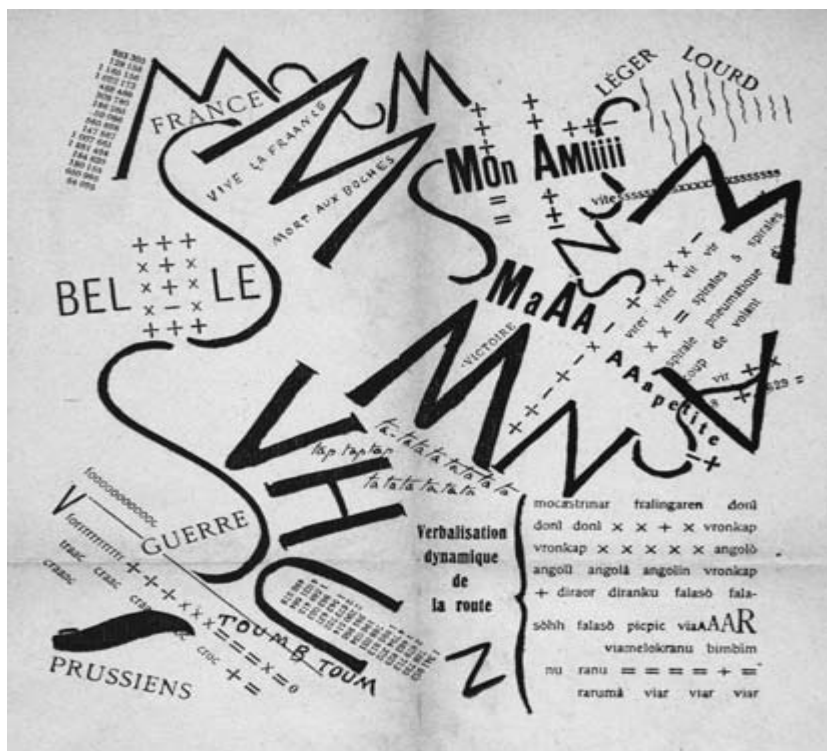


Figure 4. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto” (After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front by Car). In *Les Mots en liberté futuristes* (Milan, 1919), 99. 2009 Artists Right Society (ARS), New York/ SIAE, Rome. Research Library, The Gatty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California. (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin, 2009: 106)

<sup>1</sup> Figure 1. Velimir Khlebnikov, *Zakliatie smekhom* (Incantation by Laughter), 1908-9. Perloff-Dworkin, 2009-100.



“The notation served both to document the piece and to enable poets, artists, and musicians to perform it. For Instance, Schwitters made intermittent but abundant use of umlauts in order to accentuate the importance of German pronunciation.” It is impossible not to notice the importance of performing this piece rather than reading it so that one of Schwitters’ notes states: “Listening to the sonata is better than reading it. This is why I like to perform my sonata in public.” The avant-garde equivalent in music aimed to deviate from the formal harmonies of Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg etc. since “the mission of the musical avant-garde, like that of the sound poets, was to invent a radically new concept of musical sound.” (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin, 2009: 110)

A key figure of this movement was Jean Cocteau who, inspired by the Italian leader Marinetti and the futurist painter Russolo, especially by his manifesto *L’Arte dei Rumori* (The Art of Noises), introduced a new musical form which put sounds and mechanical noises together. After Russolo’s declaration, “we must break out of this narrow circle of pure musical sounds, and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds”, Cocteau introduced something that “anticipated the nonsemantic vocalizations of postwar and contemporary sound poetry” (Perloff in Perloff-Dworkin, 2009:111).

The interconnection between innovative artistic movements and sound poetry is evident since its inception. In fact, the first form of sound poetry appeared with the Dada movement, in particular with the German scholar Hugo Ball, to whom is attributed the sound poem’s historical origin. Ball affirmed to have created a “poem without word” and what he wanted to do was essentially to eliminate the meaning in order to value the sound beyond its reaction to the annihilation and destroying strength

of the WWI. Ball's sound poem is "formulated as a response not to symbolism or to any other rival avant-garde (such as cubism or futurism), but to the contemporary state of discourse under early twentieth century capitalism". (McCaffery in Perloff-Dworkin, 2009: 120)

In addition to this, between the 1920s and the 1930s, a new medium of wireless broadcasting gained popularity: the radio. It was used to transmit both music and words and with its new sounds, like "the buzzing and crackling of receivers" or "the screeches of interference", it "introduced a new twist to the complex relationship between sound and poetry that had preoccupied every writer since Homer". (Gallo in Perloff-Dworking, 2009: 205)

Rubén Gallo, in his essay, looked at one of the most significant efforts to create a radio-sound poetry that was actually a film: *Orpheus* by Jean Cocteau (Gallo in Perloff-Dworking, 2009: 206). This experiment of creating a new type of sound poetry is basically the story of a poet who has lost his creative genius; therefore, he "finds a way out of his creative impasse by copying, [...] and presenting [...] as his own poetry", the broadcasts that come from an unknown world (Gallo in Perloff-Dworking, 2009: 217). Orpheus' transcriptions create a poetry of sounds, words and noises that altogether make the spectator focus on the immediate effect that radio-poetry creates on its audience rather than on the words' significance. Indeed, Gallo declares in his essay that:

The transmissions are cryptic and seemingly nonsensical: they often begin with a long series of telegraphic beeps and blips, continue with a series of numbers, and repeat a sequence of obscure phrases. (Gallo in Perloff-Dworking, 2009:207)

The broadcasts are deeply ambivalent: on the one hand, they are meant to make familiar a story that might seem remote to many modern viewers. On the other hand, the radio transmissions bring messages from the netherworld, putting Orpheus- and the film's viewers- in touch with a realm that is unfamiliar, uncanny, and far removed from ordinary, everyday life. (Gallo in Perloff-Dworking, 2009: 208)

In other words, Orpheus poetry is what Craig Dworking and Kenneth Goldsmith called “uncreative writing: a form of appropriation that subverts the romantic ideal of the creative genius” (Gallo in Perloff-Dworking, 2009: 217). The protagonist's originality stands in his being unoriginal in an avant-garde, hence original, reality. He does not do anything extraordinary except putting into words the reality around him; the same thing that both Apollinaire, by “insert[ing] advertising copy into his calligrammes”, and Marinetti, by “transcribe[ing] war dispatches in *Zang Tumb Tumb*”, do. (Gallo in Perloff-Dworking, 2009: 218).

Furthermore, another remarkable point to consider in sound poetry is “the visuality of language”. In his essay, Antonio Sergio Bessa refers to the Brazilian, Horoldo de Campos, and to the Italo-Brazilian Francisco Matarazzo Pignatari. These were poets who coupled “sound” and “image”, “acoustic” and “optical”, “visual organization” and “musical harmony” (Bessa in Perloff-Dworking 2009, 220) on the basis of what De Saussure states in his book *Course in General Linguistics*:

The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. (Bessa in Perloff-Dworking, 2009: 221)

If we refer, instead, to European sound poetry it is impossible not to deal with one of the most influential British sound poet like Bob Cobbing (1920-2000) or with the contemporary school of Scottish sound poets, to which Tom Leonard, Dilys Rose and Rody Gorman belong (Scottish Poetry Library). However what I would like to focus on is Edwin Morgan's sound poem: "The Loch Ness monster's song".

Sssnnnwhuffffl?  
Hnwhuffl hhnnwfl hnfl hfl?  
Gdroblboblhobngbl gbl gl g g g glbgl.  
Drublhaflabhaflubhafgabhaflhafl fl fl –  
gm grawwww grf grawf awfgm graw gm.  
Hovoplodok – doplodovok – plovodokot-doplodokosh?  
Splgraw fok fok splgrafhatchgabrlgabrl fok splfok!  
Zgra kra gka fok!  
Grof grawff gahf?  
Gombl mbl bl –  
blm plm,  
blm plm,  
blm plm,  
blp.  
( Collected Poems, Carcanet Press 1990)

As it can be easily perceived, the meaning of the poem is essentially given by the sound and not by the semantic of the words. The language is a new invented language made of onomatopoeias which aim to recall the sounds of nature, or as it is suggested by the title, to remind the Loch ness Monster's call. Morgan himself said about the poem:

'The Loch Ness Monster's Song' is an example of a performance piece. It absolutely demands to be read aloud, and the way the lines are set out, the spelling, the punctuation are all devised – even if it might not seem so at first glance – to help the performance. It needs a bit of practice, but it can be done,

and although I have recorded the poem myself on tape, I would not want to say that there is only one way of reading it. Anyone can have a go – and enjoy it. (From *Nothing not Giving Messages* 1990, Edwin Morgan Archive)

The relationship between sound and meaning in poetry has always been a focal point of discussion between scholars, dividing them into different schools of thought. Alexander Pope's statement: "The sound must seem an echo to the sense" (Perloff-Dworkin, 2009: 9) had been subsequently contradicted by the founder of modern linguistics Ferdinand De Saussure who stated that the relationship between sound and meaning is essentially "arbitrary", so "rose is a rose" just because a group of people have conventionally decided that, not because the word *rose* actually suggests its meaning (Haugaard, 1997: 48). De Saussure agreed with Gertrude Stein's issue, previously introduced by Shakespeare's in *Romeo and Juliet* "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" concerning the effort of recovering things' identity by "grasp[ing] the world we live in"(Harris, 1990: 9). Firstly, poetry is the place where the link between sound and meaning shows its relevance, but actually this nexus becomes deeper when we speak about sound poetry.

Therefore, a spontaneous question arises: what do all these European theories and revolutions have to do with Afro-American tradition? Why does Tracie Morris choose this genre for her art? First of all, what the Dada movement was doing was just: reacting against something, going against the tide, deconstructing a pre-existing concept of art and that is exactly what Tracie has been doing, since the very beginning.

She started working in sound poetry through hip hop, in particular by associating its rhyme scheme to the "code switching in the Puerto Rican community", therefore associating "Black English/Ebonics and code in Africa Diaspora, moreover she affirms that the elements which pushed her to write song poems were essentially three: "the

deconstruction of standards in jazz”, “the work of the Four Horsemen in Ron Mann’s ‘Poetry in Motion’ video”, “the work of Kurt Schwitters, a contemporary of the Dada movement”. (Morris in Rankine-Sewell, 2007: 210).

In addition to this, she likes to remember the first time she heard Sonia Sanchez, referring to a kind of vision she had after hearing her work at the “tribute to the ‘people’s historian’ Dr. John Henrik Clarek”.

**Father’s Voice** (excerpt)

*wa ma ne ho mene so oo*

*osee yei, osee yei, osee yei*

*wa ma ne ho mene so oo*

he has become holy as he walks toward daresay

can you hear his blood tissue ready to pray

he who wore death discourages any plague

he who was an orphan now recollects his legs.

(Selection from Sonia Sanchez’s “Does your house have lions?” in Harriet’s poetry blog)

Later on, she writes:

I didn't know what her sounds meant for sure and I wasn't writing poetry at the time, but I think that I was encouraged to make variations on conventionally uttered sounds later because of that forum. I also wasn't culturally/politically raised to think that the avant-garde was somehow an unapproachable area for Afrocentric people, that there was a collective continuity to tap into and embrace. I think that the concept of coding in our tradition encourages us to construct our avant-garde. (Morris in Rankine-Sewell, 2007: 211). Again, about the poem she observes:

For those of us who don't know the language of the first three lines, all the sounds still signify both as American English and non-English texts. This incorporation of multiple sources for the voice has impacted my corporeality through the experience of reading it (in my own voice inside my head) as well as through "sounding it out". (Morris in Harriet )

In addition to this, she underlines the importance that the body has in her sound poetry. Her poems aim to cause a "visceral" reaction due to the affection of an inner sensibility closely linked to the irrational sphere. In particular, she refers to her first sound poem called "A Little". Her first poem was originated one day while she was walking down the street, from the subway to her house. The rhythm of walking was given by her body with her "breathing and beating heart" (Hume, 2007: 415), therefore she had a vision and decided to include the natural rhythm of the body into the poem. But how?

In "A Little", the presence of the body is essential not only for generating the poem's rhythm but actually because of its dealing with the violation of it. It is a poem about "sexual abuse of girls", but how could Tracie Morris deliver all this through

words? How was it possible to transfer the protagonist's inner "feelings of inarticulateness and isolation" to the audience? (Morris in Rankine-Sewel, 2007:211).

Tracie came up with a sentence: "I am just a little girl" and decided not to add any words to it since the audience would have been carried by the "physicality of words, not the text, not even the context", she therefore affirms that : "the five words and their variations were all that could be said" (Morris in Rankine-Sewell, 2007: 211).

Morris aims to impact the audience instead of charming it with words. She believes that words are only a way to escape from the strong impact of sound.

Like when you see a really scary movie and start paying attention to how much the ketchup on the floor looks like real blood—amazing! We/I get into deconstructing wordplay etc. when dealing with uncomfortable poems. But the risk comes in staying with it. So sound engages with viscera in a way that compels physical interaction. Sound is something that works beyond the "brain barrier" and directly intersects with the body. (Morris in Harriet)

Therefore, she wants to directly affect the "viscera" so that the listener cannot "deconstruct the sound" and escape from it anymore. That sound should stick to his/her body and head. Head is the room in which the "bloody murder" happens and once it has entered memory it will never run out of it. Morris wants sound "to make clear to the listener [...] the inability of the utterer to leave the situation". So the sound ha[s] to facilitate the notion of enclosure". (Morris in Rankine-Sewell, 2007: 214).

Moreover, it is inevitable to notice that sound embodies is a common feature of Afro-American music (blues, jazz and gospel songs), together with the African American "aesthetics". (Morris in Rankine-Sewell, 2007: 212). In addition to this, in

“Harriet’s poetry blog” she analyzes different poems, focusing her attention especially on the relationship between words, sounds and meaning. Stating that the main purpose of experimental poetry ,and sound poetry as well, is “playing with words” she means “playing with word sounds”. This is “ ‘prioritizing’ sounds above meaning” does not imply that a sound poem is pointless (Morris in Harriet). Therefore, even when we find some incomprehensible word that seems not to mean anything, their sound will affect our perception of it as music does, making us “feel” something that will be the meaning of the poem (Morris in Harriet). As a consequence, the meaning of a poem as well as of a word is subjective, since the reaction of the audience to a certain performance depends on the individual who perceives it.

Furthermore, Tracie affirms that “Sound poetics is as much about silence as it is about speaking” (Morris, 2011: 391), therefore breaks and cuts in speech and “ ‘non-word’ sounds in performance referred to a hidden, concealed meaning which can be as much efficient as a hollered word.

Let’s now focus on Charles Bernstein’s interview with Tracie Morris. It can be very interesting and useful to read Tracie Morris’ conception of slam, sound poetry, performance and art in general. She also speaks about her being from Brooklyn, about the influence that art can have in society and the interconnections between poetry and music.

Bernstein asks her whether the poem exists on the page, in a live performance or in the middle between the two. She actually answers that: “The Poem exists beyond the media in which it is presented” . So the poem is independent from the media and it exists by itself, then it identifies itself with the media which gives a better perception of what that particular poem is and what its author wants to communicate. For those reasons, the poet would choose a written form rather than an oral one or vice versa. The poem has to be written when the author needs “the space of the page” in order to

previously arrange the text; instead, it has to be performed when the author wants to metaphorically touch its audience's viscera by making it deeply and irrationally feel what conceals behind the words of the poem. The perception of the poem goes beyond its meaning and it almost becomes something physical. Finally, when it is recorded the poem would be in between the performance and the fixed form of writing. In fact, it is still orally broadcasted but, at the same time, it is not directly transmitted by the performer to the listener as in the oral form.

Moreover, she states that she usually does not want to have any "visual representation" of the poem in order to see how far she can go without having any visual text, therefore only experiencing the sound. In addition to this, she refers to tape recording by saying that although recordings cannot be compared to live performances she makes her best to render the recording as much effective as the live sessions. In particular, she tells her interviewer about what happened when she was invited to contribute to the *2002 Whitney Biennial*. She and her engineer Val Jeanty did their best to record two of her sound poems, "A Little" and "The Mrs Get her Ass Kicked" including, in the tape, the same visceral feeling that especially those two performance poems own, since they deal with a very strong theme: abuse. She wanted the listener to put his headphones on and be captured by those sounds which might not entered his/her viscera but surely entered his/her head making of it "the room of the performance". Besides, she also refers to this event also in her article *Poetic Statement. Sound making notes* in Rankine-Sewell's book, by affirming that:

I wanted the room in which the traumatic event occurred to be the head of the listener. The head is an inescapable place in that you can't just walk out of it. One could certainly center an experience in another part (say, the viscera of the body), but then the head becomes part of the body, not something that one leaves behind. (Morris in Rankine-Sewell, 2007- 114)

Furthermore, when she is asked about the role of art in a changing society, she refers to people like Jimi Hendrix and Miles Davis who simply by “continuing to experiment, to push the envelope, to take things to another place reconfigures people’s concept of what kind of world that they can exist in”. Jimi Hendrix’s music is considered to be over politics but this is not the point. In fact, she adds :

(...) reconfiguring the blues and electrifying it takes it out of the dusty South of the Mississippi Delta since [he has] the right to be in a big city all over the world for an African American, Native American person, to do that is just placing himself in a non folkloric (...) position. (Tracie Morris in Charles Bernstein’s interview, Pennsound)

Therefore, although poets sometimes do not show themselves as politically involved, their attempt to push the limits, to experiment and to go against the tide makes their art something politically effective.

In addition to this, being from Brooklyn is fundamental in identifying herself as an artist as well, since Brooklyn for her is really her “home” in a personal and emotional way. It is also what marks her way of thinking, acting and doing poetry.

Then let’s not forget that Slam poetry has also been really influential in her career, especially in the beginning. In Bernstein interview, in fact, she states that slam had been really useful to make her appreciate the fact of performing in front of a big crowd. However, even more helpful it had been losing the slam because from that very moment she felt free to make every kind of work and experiment with poetry. Indeed, it allowed her to “go where the poetry led her” and when its purpose was not winning a slam she

actually won it twice. Now let's move forward in order to analyze some of the most significant sound poems of our "Brooklyn Girl": Tracie Morris.

### **The Mrs Get her Ass Kicked**

Inspired by:

Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire's

**"Cheek to Cheek"**

Heaven... I'm in heaven,  
And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak.  
And I seem to find the happiness I seek,  
When we're out together dancing cheek to cheek.

In composing this sound poem Tracie Morris was inspired by musicals especially by Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire's song "check to check" which gave the lyrics to Morris' sound poem. Her poem deals with domestic abuse, a very common theme in African American literature. Here it is ironically stressed by the presence of this white-wealthy-happy couple.

In particular, during Kelly Writers House's Reading, Morris affirms that her creation started by thinking about a particular movie scene where Doris Day is "floating around the kitchen" with her beautiful clothes waiting for her husband to come back home. After watching that scene, the first thing that came up to her mind was that obviously Doris might not have been working in the kitchen because there would probably have been a black woman having it done for her. However, she says that the most striking thing was the reason why she was dressed like that in her own house. As a matter of fact, Morris asked herself: "why she gotta look like that in her own house? Who she is appealing to? Why she gotta look like that before her man comes home?"

(Tracie Morris, Reading at Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania, November 18, 2013)

If we compare Fred Astaire performing “Cheek to Cheek” in the movie “Top Hat” (1935) with Tracie Morris performing her sound poem “The Mrs get her ass kicked” is evident from the very title that Tracie Morris wanted to deconstruct that sparkling image of a happy couple “in heaven”, showing exactly what the counterbalance of heaven is.

Actually, “she uses humor to show horror” (Hume, 2007: 417) therefore the title’s brutality would be then evoked by the strong oxymoron created between the contrasting feelings of joy and fear evoked by the words’ significance and their performance. “Think of Kurt Schwitters's *Ur Sonata*, which strikes listeners as funny because the rigorous for-mal structure seems wildly incongruous with the carnal play of pure sound” (Hume, 2007: 424)

At Kelly Writers House, she starts performing by hitting her chest with her hands in a very fast way, so that her chest along with her voice affected by these “chest percussions” become an instrument (the same technique was used by Bobby McFerrin in the 1980s). This gesture creates irregular quick sounds that make the audience feel anxiety and fear not only for the tension created but also for the inner implication that this “percussion of the body” owns since we are speaking of physical abuse.

This sounds are also related to t heartbeat. Her heart in fact is not pulsing so fast because of joy and love as in Fred Astaire performance. On the contrary, here it does because of pain and fear. Therefore, when she says : “My heart beat so that I can hardly speak” the audience is taken by a sense of choking, thinking about her man subduing her, differently from Fred Astaire’s movie when the only thing that shines through their singing is love and happiness. Besides, this sensation of choking is stressed by the many

breaks in Tracie's voice which refers to her not being able to speak and breathe, too.

Thus, Hume adds:

(...) 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. (Hume 2007, 418)

## **Chain Gang**

Inspired by Sam Cook's song

That's the sound of the man working at the chain gang.

This poem, inspired by Sam Cook's song "Chain Gang", is the first poem in which, during her performance, Tracie Morris added extra-textual words that did not belong to the original song. As a matter of fact, in "Poetic Statement. Sound making notes", she affirms that during her "Chain Gang" performance at Amiri Baraka's house in Newark, New Jersey, she added the words: "n\*\*\*\*r", "Kunta" and "Kizzie. (Morris in Rankine-Sewell, 2007: 114)

She took these words from a slavery context and maybe the fact of their not being used in common speech, since they are still considered a taboo in American Society, makes her using them just to go above the lines, to do something new. The

poem, in fact, is about slavery: the working man is clearly a black man, however by using the “n” word, she underlines his blackness and condition as a slave, pushing it to the limit. Let’s now move onto the sound of the poem and analyze the effect that language creates in the listener’s perception of the poem:

The poem draws on rhythms heard in the language of the Yoruba in West Africa and calls on the Yoruba deities. The listener cannot escape the hard “g” sounds, slashing the air, pounding rhythmically, accentuating the movements of the chain gang.” (Simpson-Henderson, 2010: 241)

Actually, from a linguistic point of view we can state that Yoruba brings the listener to West Africa, therefore the connection with slave trade is immediate and there would be no need to specify the man’s origins and skin color. Thus, the language in itself “evoke[s] the experiences and legacy of the slave trade with all its horrors, pain, and suffering” (Simpson-Henderson, 2010: 237).

In addition to this, those “g” and “c” ‘s repetitions allude to the slave’s work routine creating a circular movement, as if the slave was closed inside that circle with no possibility of escaping from it. Therefore, in the same way, the listener cannot escape from those repeated sounds that have already affected him/her.

In the original song of Sam Cooke there is a repeated “Hoo. Hah!” that Morris intentionally did not include in her poem (Simpson-Henderson 2010, 241). On the contrary, to replace the “gang” which is clearly perceptible in Cooke’s song, in her “People Poetry Gathering” ‘s performance she adds the words “tic-toc” and “same sound, same man” which again refer to the routine, to a cycle with no exit. Here, in

particular, it refers to the flow of time since “tic-toc” is the sound made by the minute hand which articulates the slave works as well as the chain gang does.

## **Project Princess**

Teeny feet rock layered double socks  
Popping side piping of  
Many colored loose lace-ups  
Racing toe, keeps up with fancy free gear,  
Slick slide, just pressed, recently waved hair.

Jeans oversized bely her hip, back, thighs have made guys sigh  
For milleni-year.

Topped by an attractive jacket  
Her suit's not for flacking, flunkies, junkies, or punk homies on the stroll.

Hands the mobile thrones of today's urban goddess  
Clinking rings link dragon fingers no need to me modest.

One or two gap teeth coolin'  
Sport gold initials  
Doubt you get to her name  
Check from the side,  
Please chill

Multidimensional shrimp earrings  
Frame her cinnamon face

Crimson with a compliment if a  
Comment hits the right place

Don't step to the plate with datelines from '88  
Spare your simple, fragile feelings, with the same sense that you came

Color woman variation reworks the french twist

Crinkle-cut platinum frosted bangs from a spray can's mist

Never dissed, she insists: "No you can't touch this"

And, if pissed, bedecked fist stop boys who must persist.

She's the one. Give her some. Under fire. Smoking gun. Of which songs  
are sung, raps are spun, bells are rung, rocked, pistols cocked,  
unwanted advances blocked, well-stacked she's jock. It's all about you girl. You go  
on. Don't you dare to stop.

" 'Project Princess' is an epic catalogue an ode to young black women in a Brooklyn housing project" (Simpson-Henderson 2010, 241). It appeared for the first time in print in her book "Chap-T-Her Won (1991) but what really counted was her first performance of it, since it was a manifesto of her amazing skills in a live performance and her ability to be "authentic" by mixing poetry, hip hop, spirituals and spoken words in her personal unique genre (Hoffman 2013, 226). Actually, her following performances of it are even more impressive since what she does is not simply deconstructing some previous way of doing poetry. She, instead, "deconstructs" her own poetry by making it something completely different in each performance.

Thus, if the first video recording of "Project Princess" looks more like an Hip Hop video clip of the 90's (starting from the camera shot on the buildings, the performer rapping in the middle and the two black girls on the side, wearing colorful-street clothes with flashy earrings and necklaces while they are chewing their gum and dancing), in her WPS1 reading/performance the audience is not provided with the visual effect of a video. So what happens is that the listener instinctively focuses on the sound. Hume in her essay about Tracie Morris' sound poetry states:

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. (Hume, 2007: 416)

The meaning is in a second position, since she raps so fast that it is very difficult, especially for a non-native speaker, to grab the meaning of all the words. Therefore, the listener starts analyzing all her repetitions, interruptions and vocal effects. Sometimes the performer seems to stop as if she made a mistake but then she starts playing with that sound effect obtaining that the audience cannot distinguish whether she is really making mistakes in pronouncing the words or if she is doing it on purpose.

Although this reading/performance is basically focused on experimenting and playing with words, the musical influence is still present, in particular hip hop influence is still there in her poetics. Starting from what is called "the flow" that is "the musicality of the artist's delivery" therefore "rhythm", "rhymes", "timing" etc. (Hoffman, 227) and the sound effects that she creates with her voice, very much like what a DJ does with his hands. Morris can produce "cutting" and "scratching" with her own voice without needing any specific musical instrument. Nevertheless, although the sound precedes the meaning in sound poetry let's not forget the role that this performer has in representing Afro-American culture and especially here in representing Feminism. Her message refers to black women and it is evident especially in her last sentence: "It's all about you, It's all about you girl...". Here she encourages women not to stop but to go on fighting for their cause.

“Transcription of the first thirty seconds of”  
**Slave sho to Video aka Black but Beautiful**

Ain't she beautiful / She too black / She too beautiful / boot-booty-ful / she  
too black / aint she aint she boo-boo-beauty-fula in'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.

(Hume, 425)

All the poem is basically focused on these two words: “Black” and “Beautiful” which both the title and in the lines are presented with the conjunction “but”. They are opposites, as if being black meant not to be beautiful and vice versa. This annihilation is also exaggerated by the negation “ain’t” which emphasize her not being “beautiful” because of her being “too black”.

However, it is impossible not to associate these two adjectives with the Black Power Movement’s motto which was in fact: “Black is Beautiful”. On the one hand, it is used by the author to associate these two adjectives as synonymous rather than contraries, and, on the other hand, it is used by Morris to demolish the chauvinist attitude of that movement (Hume, 2007: 426). As a matter of fact, “she” is not the subject of the poem but the object instead. There is a debate on her being beautiful or not but she is not included in the discussion as she is not taken into consideration for her intelligence but for her physical appearance.

In addition to this, during Morris’ performance some terms, like “beautiful” for example, are split or transformed into other words that refer to female body and to the

fetish vision of it as a sexual object. Like *butt* and *booty-ful* for example, which are very well-known terms in the hip hop world usually referring to a female backside with a sexual connotation. Moreover, Hume in his article states:

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. (Hume, 2007: 427)

In this way every listener the audience cannot understand if "she" is beautiful because of her being "booty-ful", "cute", "butterful" etc or if all those features establish her not being pretty. The listener is not able to distinguish whether the same features belong to her blackness or not.

## 3.

# Spread the Voice! Jamaican Culture in Contemporary “English” Poetry

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### 3.1 Introduction to Jamaican culture

#### 3.1.1 *Colony or Creole?*

JAMAICA, approximately 140 miles from east to west and fifty miles at its widest, with an area of some 4,207 square miles, lies ninety miles south Cuba and about the same distance west of the long and narrow peninsula of Haiti in that northern section of the Carribean archipelago known as the Greater Antilles. (Brathwaite, 1978: 2)

Jamaica was discovered by Columbus in 1494 and occupied by the Spaniards who consequentially destroyed the Amerindian Arawks settlement and imported Black slaves from West Africa. This slave trade was continued by the English who conquered the island in 1655 (Brathwaite, 1978: 2). Slave labor was essential to increase the production of sugar which soon became the first economic activity of the island.

Politically, it “was run as a conquered territory by the Army”(Brathwaite, 1978: 6-7). However, in 1660, its “Army rule” was switched with a “form of representative government by Governor, Council and Assembly” (Brathwaite 1978, 8). Actually, the role of the Assembly would be the protagonist of the battle for Jamaican representativeness against the British Government’s hegemony. As a matter of fact, “between 1677 and 1680, it was the Assembly’s action that prevented the establishment of a system of direct Crown rule in the colony”; and it was the Assembly that had emerged within the creole Establishment by the beginning of our period” (Brathwaite, 1978: 8).

“Jamaica was seen by its settlers as an English colony, settled by Englishmen, loyal to the Crown if not Parliament, obeying the same laws and enjoying the same rights as their cousins at ‘home’ [...]” (Brathwaite, 1978: 63). Jamaica shared with Barbados, Leeward Islands and the mainland American colonies the same language, religion and cultural features originally belonging to the Crown main land: England (Brathwaite, 1978: 64). These regions were connected and dependent to each others as Caribbean relied on the northern states for food and plantation provisions while the latter leaned on the former for slaves and plantation products (Brathwaite, 1978: 64). Therefore, these commercial links naturally brought personal relationships that often brought to friendships and marriages as well between Yankees and Creole with a consecutive mix of different ethnic groups. However, by 1760, the northern American colonies had developed a “self-supporting agriculture and economy”, differently from the southern colonies of Caribbean that were having problems due to “low productivity, soil exhaustion, underdeveloped technology and lack of diversification” (Brathwaite, 1978: 67). America was close to industrialization and to a policy of self administration while Jamaica was not. “As things stood, Jamaica was unable, unlike the Americans, to claim and take independence in 1774” so it “remains a colony” rather than developing a

creole status (Brathwaite, 1978: 96). As a matter of fact, K. Brathwaite in his book *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* deals with the role of Jamaica in relation to its Mother Country, and discusses if it could be defined as “colony” rather than “creole”. He states:

Jamaica found itself in this position in 1744 when the island’s relationship to a wider (American) cultural complex was in question. In 1807, when it was a question, as they saw it, of defending their own internal structure, the (white) Jamaicans ambivalence of attitude and their cultural dependence on the Mother Country again defeated them. At every step, it seems, the creatively ‘creole’ elements of the society were being rendered ineffective by the more reactionary ‘colonial’. [...] how far this colonial status (and the mentality that went with it) affected the process of creolization [?]. Was the failure of political action, the failure to make the economy viable, in locally autonomous terms, a result of colonialism, a failure of the creole society, or (as was more likely) a combination of the two? After all, all Jamaican creoles were colonials, but it does not follow that all colonials in Jamaica were creolized. (Brathwaite, 1978: 100-101)

Therefore, a spontaneous question arises: what does Brathwaite mean for creolization? What does exactly stands for it when we speak of Jamaican territory? The most important element in the study of Jamaican society’s development is “the response of individuals to their environment and to each other” [...] [on the basis] of “the circumstances of the society’s foundation and composition”. (Brathwaite 1978, 297) Jamaican society was in fact made by a Jamaican “dominant a group” and another one made of “legally and subordinately slaves” coming from West Africa (Brathwaite 1978, 297). These two groups seem to be classified under two stereotyped categories: superior and inferior, dominant and subordinate, etc. so that, entire sections of society start to

believe in the stereotyped concept of themselves along with the thought that changing their situation is impossible (Brathwaite, 1978: 297). In the same psychological process through which slaves accepted their condition of slavery only because they identified themselves with their work and felt a sense of fulfillment in working as slaves, West African Negroes accepted not having an identity, being sold, branded and given a new name, learning a new language etc. (Brathwaite, 1978: 298) They accepted being inferior because that was what they had been taught and they did not even attempt to change their situation. Actually, Brathwaite validates that:

Slaves [...] were also conservative, disliking, even fearing change; becoming attached to places and/or persons with whom they had identified themselves. For the docile there was also [...] the fear of punishment; for the venal, there was [...] the compliment or the offer of a better position and for the curious and self-seeking, the imitation of the master. (Brathwaite, 1978: 298-299)

What is even more interesting is the fact that, as a consequence, “the imitation went on, naturally, most easily among those in closest and most intimate contact with Europeans” (Brathwaite, 1978: 299). Therefore “one of the tragedies of slavery and of the conditions under which creolization had to take place” was this kind of imitation, otherwise called mimicry in which black people kept on acting like whites imitating their master’s worst habits (Brathwaite, 1978: 300). In addition to this, the social change of creolization was clearly audible in the evolution of language, visible in the alteration of the dressing code and in the variation of skin color (child of many interracial liaisons). Whites creoles speaking, dressing and even playing music like blacks became ordinary in Jamaican creole society, as evidence of “two cultures of people [white Jamaican and

African slaves], having to adapt themselves to a new environment and to each other” (Brathwaite, 1978: 307).

However, Jamaica did not recognize the potential power of this new mixed society and kept on seeing it with the blind lenses of the stereotype. Instead of valuate themselves, they kept on comparing them with the “two ‘great’ traditions” around them, Europe and Africa, generating a pessimist “cultural dichotomy” that caused the “the failure of Jamaican society”(Brathwaite, 1978: 307-309). Brathwaite adds:

[...] White Jamaicans refused to recognize their black labourers as human beings, thus cutting themselves off from the one demographic alliance that might have contributed to the island’s economic and (possibly) political independence. What the white Jamaican élite did not[...] accept, was that true autonomy for them could only mean true autonomy for all; that the more unrestricted the creolization, the greater would have been the freedom. They preferred a bastard metropolitanism[...] with its consequence of dependence on Europe, to a complete exposure to creolization and liberation of their slaves. (Brathwaite, 1978: 307)

On the contrary, Jamaican contemporary society has a much more positive and conscious knowledge of its own potential, probably founded on the apprehension of cultural polarity”. People share the idea of experiencing “common divisions” rather than “common values” and accept “a ‘plural’ society” made of four different orientations: European, Euro-creole, Afro-creole and West Indian. (Brathwaite, 1978: 310)

When we speak of Afro-creole we refer to slaves imported to Jamaica from West Africa who, although integrating as a new creole identity, still remained attached to their original habits and customs. We can combine them with a “folk culture” that

Brathwaite defined as “the culture of the mass of Ex-Africans who found themselves in a new environment and who were successfully adapting to it”( Brathwaite, 1978: 212)

Folk culture had a great influence in Jamaica society especially after the gaining of political independence in 1962. It started to gain confidence thanks to the changes in Jamaican society after 1865, becoming the mover of many artists and writers who urged to express themselves through their traditions and who kept their origins alive through art. However, black folk values were still perceived as inferior when compared to Whites (European) and ‘mulattos’ (creole) ‘s, not only by Whites and mulattos but also by West Indian themselves. (Brathwaite, 1978: 212)

Slave customs and rituals were infinites: from the ones linked to life cycle like ceremonies for birth, sexual/domestic unions and death, to everyday life habits like religious practices, music, dance, clothing, entertainment etc. (Brathwaite, 1978: 213-237). However, what will interest our study most, will be the influences of this ancient folk culture in Jamaican poetry and music today, and how much the fact of being a West Indian can affect poetry through language, thought and performance.

### ***3.1.2 Rastafari Speech***

*The Rastafarians are inventing a language, using existing elements to be sure, but creating a means of communication that would faithfully reflect the specificities of their experience and perception of self, life and the world.*  
(Nettleford in Pollard, 1994: 7)

As Nettleford states in Pollard’s book *Dread Talk, the Language of Rastafari*, Rastafarians, starting from SJE (Standard Jamaican English) contributed to the

evolution of JC (Jamaican Creole) in order to create their own language: Dread Talk. Their purpose was to “speak up with words”, find themselves in their language, so that when they speak nobody except them can understand what they are talking about. (Pollard, 1994: 7)

It just arise in conversation, describing things, or several times you have several different types of reasoning and you step up with words... so we the Rastas suppose to speak, that here, there and anywhere we find ourselves, we suppose to speak and no one know what we speak beside ourself. That's how we get to start. (Brother W in Pollard, 1994: 7)

Dread Talk is a clear example of “lexical expansion within a Creole System” (Pollard, 1994: 4). “Jamaican Creole has traditionally been the speech form of the Jamaican poor” and the Rasta man perfectly identifies with this “sociopolitical image” (Pollard, 1994: 4). As a matter of fact, he used jc language which set him in a fix, stereotyped, social level but at the same time he wanted to make of his language something unique that could only characterize Rastas (Pollard, 1994: 4). This is the reason why it is not possible to identify jc language with dt.

Actually, Pollard makes a lexical close analysis of the difference between dt and jc, underlining what mostly characterizes Dread Talk. Pollard basically divides Dread Talk words in two categories: words “in which known items bear new meaning” and “words that bear the weight of their phonological implications with some explanations” (Pollard, 1994: 8-10). Besides, a third category is added to them, the one of /ai/ words which refers to Rastas rejection of the JC pronoun /mi/ which is seen by Rastas “as expressive of subservience, as representative of the selfdegradation that was expected of the slaves by their masters” (Pollard, 1994: 11). The ‘I’ pronoun acquires a significant importance in Dread Talk. As a matter of fact, Rastas substitute the pronoun ‘me’ not

only “in the singular [form] (‘I’)” but also “in the plural (‘I’ an ‘I’)” and in “the reflexive (‘Iself, Ian Iself)”. Besides, a more accurate study of Dread Talk shows that the pronominal form /ai/ is also used as prefix in the beginning of many jc words in order to modify the initial sounds of many nouns (apparently without a fix rule) (Pollard, 1994: 13).

Rastafarian speech reflects a way of living and thinking, a way of “stepping out” with words from a social system which Rastas do not belong to (Pollard, 1994: 15). “Dread Talk is a comparatively recent adjustment of the lexicon of Jamaica Creole to reflect the religious, political and philosophical positions of the believers in Rastafari” (Pollard, 1994: 18). Actually, “the word was the ‘organ’” of the movement” that has developed because of a special need of expression in Jamaica (Pollard, 1994: 19).

Rastafarian belief system [...] [is] a philosophy in response to the Jamaican situation and to all that the establishment has represented historically for the sons of slaves growing up in what a recent researchers labels a ‘pigmentocracy’ in which ‘blackness became equated with lowliness and servility, whiteness with power and godliness’. (Albuquerque in Pollard, 1994: 22)

The acceptance of a black monarch must be seen against the rejection of the traditional English monarchy [...]; the acceptance of an African heaven on earth (Ethiopia), whose black God is the king, against the Christian paradise in the sky where a white God reigns with white angels [...]; and the forceful creative turn of words against English, the language used by the oppressor to “increase confusion”. (Pollard, 1994: 22-23)

Rastas have always seen English as the language of colonialism (Yawney in Pollard, 1994: 27). English represents monarchy, white hegemony, corrupted establishment etc. therefore, in their attempt to detach from all this, they want to create a special language that can only represent their own vision of life.

As much effective was language in the struggle against power, also more incisive was the role of music in Jamaican protest movements. Some of the most turbulent movements was during the Sixties, when “depressed economic conditions”, “urban unemployment” and “reverberations of the Black Power movement in the USA converged” (Pollard, 1994: 30), becoming the reason for Jamaican to speak louder through a mix of “traditional Jamaican folk music, American pop and Rastafari drums” (Pollard, 1994: 30). The most significant thing is that although Jamaican music was clearly against the establishment, it was accepted by it. Music was the only common thing among different social class. In fact, as Pollard states, “music became the one element common to all parts of society” and “all classes of Jamaica were moving to music that had been reserved for lower-class dance halls (Pollard, 1994: 30).

Another important movement is the one of The Seventies when Reggae becomes the main music genre in Jamaica especially in the Rastafarian tradition. Reggae musicians were seen as “shamans” and “prophets” (Pollard, 1994: 33), therefore they were not simply singers and/or musicians since they had a precise role of social and religious responsibility. Music was everywhere in Jamaica, and it was the only thing able to “penetrate the class barrier” (Pollard, 1994: 34). In the same time, “language has come to be separated from the burden of the message it bears” (Pollard, 1994: 35), therefore Dread Talk is not only related to Rasta speech or to a specific level of society. DT has become a common way of expression in Jamaica somehow losing its original prophetic message (Pollard, 1994: 35). Besides, due to “globalization of culture”, as Jan

Van Dijk affirmed in Pollard, “the message of Jah people [...] travels almost without restriction and sweeps ‘Rastology’ into even the remotest corners of the earth”(Pollard, 1994: 96). The catchy rhythm of reggae and its lyrics has attracted people from everywhere: North America, Europe, Asia, Africa etc. (Pollard, 1994: 96-97). Its anti-establishment struggle became easily shared by all those people who were fighting for the same reason or who somehow identify themselves with Rastafarian stream of thought. Music became a vehicle to push ideas beyond the Caribbean border and although it could not be a substitute for political activism, it could help to make people think, move and raise.

## **3.2 Jamaican music**

Let’s start by saying that Caribbean music, as Afro-American and African music too, is “based on quite different principles from the European classical tradition” (Hebdige, 1987: 11). It is based on a system that gives precedence to the “collective voice” rather than the “individual voice” and push rhythm and percussion through drumming so the listener/ spectator becomes protagonist after being naturally brought to the dance floor by the rhythm. ( Hebdige, 1987:11)

One of the common principles shared by reggae and other Caribbean music forms is being a mix of African and European melodies and harmonies, so we can feel the African tribe beneath the music but at the same time we can feel the European influence upon it. (Hebdige, 1987: 43)

“One of the most important words in reggae is ‘version’. Sometimes a reggae record is released and literally hundreds of different versions of the same rhythm or melody will

follow in its wake” (Hebdige, 1987: 12). Therefore, each performance would be different one from another and would affect the original version by adding, changing or cutting words. As we have already said, many times, performance plays a very important role in African tradition and being Jamaican mainly made of African descendants, it is evident that also in one of the most prominent Jamaican musical genre would happen the same. As Hebdige states in his book “Cut’n’mic”:

Versioning is at the heart not only of reggae but of all Afro-American and Caribbean musics: jazz, blues, rap, r&b, reggae, calypso, soca, salsa, Afro-Cuban and so on. [...]

One of the characteristics of Afro-American and Caribbean music often cited by critics in a spirit of censure, is that there is too much stress on repetition and not enough ‘originality’. (Hebdige, 1987: 15)

Hebdige, instead, underlines how repetition can be powerful in performance and not boring as many can think. It is necessary to think of rhythm which is made of repetitions and it is “at the core of life”, not only in a musical, artistic perspective but also in everyday life. (Hebdige, 1987: 15)

### ***3.2.1 Reggae***

#### ***Reggae.***

*: popular music of Jamaican origin that combines native styles with elements of rock and soul music and is performed at moderate tempos with the accent on the offbeat.*

(Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary)

On the one hand, as a Jamaican popular music genre, Reggae's origins date back to the 1960's. On the other hand, according to Chang and Chen's book *Reggae Roots*, reggae can also refer to a "particular beat that was popular in Jamaica from about 1969 to 1983" (Chang, Chen; 1998: x). "The word 'reggae' referred to a particular phase in Jamaican pop music" following two other important genre in Jamaican music: "ska and rocksteady" (Hebdige, 1987: 45). The name first appeared in 1968 with the song *Do the Reggay* which referred to a new dance and sound where bass guitars were featured in a new particular rhythm. (Hebdige, 1987: 45).

Reggae is one of the world's few folk genre that is still alive. Its impact on global music and international popular culture is extraordinary if compared to the size of Jamaica.

Reggae is many things to different people – 'conscious' music dealing with social and racial issues; a reawakened African art form; just another danceable Caribbean rhythm. The music ability to satisfy such a varied spectrum of needs explains much of its widespread popularity. (Chang, Chen; 1998: 6).

However, "reggae isn't just a set of highly danceable rhythms" (Hebdige, 1987: 22). Its lyrics speak of poverty, inequality and struggle for establishing a black identity. Besides the danceable rhythm, there is an history of slavery. During slavery times, music was the only way in which slaves could fight their conditions, and express their

feelings of anger and frustration. Through music they kept alive the memory of their freedom, especially through “drumming”, in fact, they remember African rhythms so that “they could keep a part of themselves free from European influence” (Hebdige, 1987: 26). At the same time, instead, they mixed their African tradition with European music genre creating something new and incomparable.

After the large slave revolt in 1831, finally, in 1834, “the Abolition Bill was passed in Westminster and 668,000 slaves were finally given their freedom” (Hebdige, 25). However, the days of slavery have deeply marked the island. Nowadays, Jamaica still shows “social and economic problems which can be traced back directly to the old plantation system” (Hebdige, 1987: 25).

So, even though it was not necessary to be Jamaican or to be of African descendants to enjoy the Reggae beat which helped this genre to be “attractive to millions who were never part of the intended audience” (Chang, Chen; 1998: 6), the true essence of Reggae is still being “essential to Jamaicans”:

Through all its stylistic changes, reggae in its purest arena – the dance halls – has retained the essential bond of shared emotional experience. Performer and audience implicitly assume a common language, culture and musical heritage. (Chang, Chen; 1998: 6).

Jamaicans particularly suffered the international explosion of Reggae, as well as Afro-Americans did with the evolution of Delta Blues. They wanted back the “ethnic roots” instead of that “mainstream commercial reggae” that was hitting the international charts (Chang, Chen, 1998: 2-7). The first international star of reggae was Bob Marley (1945-1981) who through music spread a message of peace, love and brotherhood all around the world. “Beyond its commercial impact, Bob’s music has an universal quality

that transcends race, color, economic class, even language” (Moskowitz, 2007: 1).

Besides, Hebdige adds:

As Bob Marley [...] ‘chants down Babylon’ and shakes his long, plaited dreadlocks on the stages and screens of Europe and America, he not only gives the world a new form of music. He puts that other Jamaica on display. [...] he reveals what our travel brochures and history books hide- the roots of black Jamaican experience in slavery and colonialism. (Hebdige, 1987: 22)

### **3.2.2 Dub**

Dub’s origins date back to the late 1950s, when Duke Reid, Prince Buster and Sir Coxsone Dodd produced the first “rudie blues”: primitive r&b records with a vocal accompaniment added live by the djs during the performance. As Hebdige states, in fact, the djs “would ‘scat’ or ‘toast’ over the record as it played” (Hebdige, 1987: 65). Then, these live improvisations would be recorded producing what later became *talk over* and *dub*. What is dub today? “The dub now is just the bare bones, the rhythm played, bass line of course over-emphasized. And it’s just a naked dance rhythm” (Hussey in Hebdige, 198: 83). Dub is a music genre basically oriented to recorded music industry, therefore, it depends on the sound system which has the responsibility of keeping its tradition alive. Nevertheless, it “doesn’t mean that music has become narrower and more ‘commercial’” (Hebdige, 1987: 89). As a matter of fact, the situation is so genuine, and the skills of dub producers are so good, that they can make their music without ‘selling their soul to the evil sound system’.

### ***3.2.3 Jamaican music in Britain***

From the 1950s to the mid-1960s, thousands of West Indians migrated to England due to Britain's labour needs bringing with them their culture, belief and especially their music. They lived in areas like London's Paddington, Brixton, Shepherd's Bush and Notting Hill that became ghettos. Every day, Jamaican people faced everyday discrimination for being black or simply for being immigrants, therefore they sought refuge in their own culture and music organizing Reggae festivals, as the one called *Notting Hill Carnival* where "you can hear reggae, calypso and steel band music" (Hebdige, 1987: 91). Jamaican music was more popular than other Caribbean music in England. So that Jamaican started to produce music exclusively for the British audience which grew every day. Besides, the audience was not only restricted to black people and what is also more curious is that the white fans "began outnumbering the West Indians" until the *rude boys* hit the British cities in the late 1960s and the white audience became bigger and bigger (Hebdige, 1987: 93). So, although in the mid-1960s Jamaican music still belonged to an underground audience and did not hit the pop charts for being "too raw and crude" (Hebdige, 1987: 92), in the late 1960s the white reggae fans started imitating the black rudies, until in the mid-1970 reggae had begun to influence pop and rock band like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and great solo artist like Paul Simon and Eric Clapton.

In addition to this, although white people started to mix their culture with the West Indian, we can easily state that black people were the ones that could truly understand what *Jah people* were talking about in their songs when they dealt with themes like: "Haile Selassie, Ethiopia, Back to Africa and so on" (Hebdige, 1987: 100).

Black People in Britain shared the anger and bitterness of their life condition in Europe being doubly immigrants and doubly nostalgic of their home.

One of the most influential poet and musician of our times, born in Jamaica in 1952 and still living in London since he moved there in 1963, is Linton Kwesi Johnson.

“In 2002 L.K.J. became the second living and the first black poet to have his selected poems published in England in the Penguin Classic series” (Banks, 2002: ii).

### ***3.2.4 Linton Kwesi Johnson***

“Linton Kwesi Johnson is Britain’s most influential black poet. [...] he is known world-wide for his fusion of lyrical verse and reggae (dub)” . As Russel Banks states in his introduction:

In LKJ’s case, the music that underwrites his poetry is reggae. Literally, as well as literarily. Though he is known world-wide as a recording and performing reggae musician and dub-poet and can fill a stadium, the music, he says “was not only a vehicle to take my verse to a wider audience but was organic to it, was born of it”. (Banks 2002, iii)

He writes in JC and is still known as the first dub-poet who spoke of “‘Dub-lyricism’ as a new form of oral poetry, wherein the lyricist overdubs rhythmic phrases on the rhythm background of a popular song” (Banks, 2002: iv).

He believed in the Rastafarian movement but he soon changed his mind affirming that Rastas do not have the solution for black people. As a matter of fact he states that “you have to accept that home is where you are at any given time. And you have to make up your mind to confront life as it faces you” (Hebdige, 1987: 101). Johnson is extremely inspired by Britain reality and as, he writes in one of his poems called *Bass Culture*, he does not aspire to popularity. He does not want to become a superstar, instead he wants to stay with the feet on the ground otherwise, being too far from real life, he would lose his primary inspiration (Hebdige, 1987: 102). As a matter of fact, one of the central themes of his poems is the conflict with the English crown and the terrible situation in which immigrants lived. About this, the British Council Press states:

Contemporary readers who have not experienced the decades Kwesi-Johnson addresses may find his work self-consciously historical. His poetry forms a valuable chronicle of Black working class life and the social injustices prevalent at the time. (from *British Council Press*)

In his book *Mi revalueshanary Fren* he denounces the situation of the black immigrant who must work all day but who is still believed to be *lazy* as the stereotype suggests. With his sharp humor L.K.J. makes the black voice audible and protests against the European establishment, in particular against the English Crown as he clearly manifests in his well-known poem: “Inglan is a Bitch”.

### 3.3 Jean “Binta” Breeze

Jean ‘Binta’ breeze was born in a little rural village in Jamaica and studied at the Jamaican school of drama in Kingston. She is a performance poet, actually the first female dub poet, who gained notoriety after moving to England in 1968 thanks to an invitation from the great poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. She writes and performs in Jamaican and Black English, making her poetry an enjoyable refrain, despite the fact that she deals with serious themes like race, abuse and poverty. She mixes poetry with dub and reggae rhythms, sometimes even “echoing [rap] and African American gospel songs” (Bruce, 2002: 2). Despite her criticizing the British government, she was awarded an MBE by the British Empire which she surprisingly accepted with a little bit of controversies from her “political friends” . Her poetry deals with political, social and gender issues. She does not identified herself with the black feminist movement but her poetry is deeply marked by some of the black feminist movement’s cornerstones. However, what strikes our attention most is the musical feature of her poetry. As a matter of fact, “In her poem 'The Garden Path', Breeze sets out her manifesto: "I want to make words/music/move beyond language/into sound."<sup>2</sup> She does not need musical accompaniment since her voice is music itself without any additional need. The way she performs and uses her voice and language to catch the audience attention is amazing. Everything she does during her performances is part of the poem: the way she modulates her voice, her gestures, her speeding up or slowing down, her adding new words to the written work etc. Everything is possible in her performance and nothing is accidental. Moreover, especially for a complete artist as she is, the line between poetry

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<sup>2</sup> “Dub Poet Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze awarded MBE, Huffington Post UK, 2013.

and theater or between music and dance becomes very thin. Her art is all of these disciplines together and stands in the middle among these at the same time. In addition to this, it would be necessary to get a little bit closer to her poetry and performance to really understand what is Jean 'Binta' Breeze as artist and person as well.

'If you should see me,  
walking down the street,  
mouth muffled  
head low against the wind,  
know  
that this is no woman bent  
on sacrifice  
just  
heavy with the thoughts  
of freedom...'

(From *Spring Cleaning*, "Mother... Sister... Daughter..." Jean 'Binta' Breeze)

wen yuh see she  
walk // holdin freedom  
water// balance pon she head

('Caribbean woman', Jean Binta Breeze)<sup>3</sup>

The theme of freedom, as the theme of the "exile", is one of the main points of discussion in Jean 'Binta' Breeze poetics. It is quite interesting to note that she uses the image of a black woman carrying a balance on her head to express an idea of freedom since this image exactly reflects the stereotype of a black woman working for a slaveholder in his mansion or in her poor African village. Therefore, a spontaneous question arises: what is freedom for a Caribbean woman? On the one hand, the first

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/jean-binta-breeze>

instinctive answer would be that freedom corresponds to moving away from Jamaica looking for a better life in another country, so to go on exile. On the other hand, as Chancy states in *Searching for Safe Space*, “the condition of exile” often corresponds to a “condition of consistent, continual displacement”; “it is the radical uprooting of all that one is and stands for, in a communal context, without loss of the knowledge of those roots” (Chancy, 1997:1). Although the individual moves to another country, she cannot completely erase her past and forget where she comes from. So, what makes the experience of exile so painful is not the fact of moving away itself but the knowledge and memories of the self’s origins. In relation to this, Chancy adds:

It is, in fact, this knowledge that renders the experience of exile so cruelly painful, for what one has lost is carried in this forced nomadism from one geographical space to another; all that one has lost remains “over there”, in that place one known as home, now a distant vague shape on the world map, no longer the place in which we, the exiles, find ourselves. (Chancy 1997, 1-2)

According to Chancy’s statement, exile in Caribbean context is a “process of forced migration” (Chancy, 1997: 2) rather than a pursuit of freedom. In addition to this, the individual can’t find her/his place in the world and keeps on feeling in an outer space: in between two places, two lives, two different identities. Ironically, the stereotypical image of slavery becomes a representation of freedom when freedom means to belong to a certain folk and ground; when being free means to identify with these latter. As we have already said, most of all in Rastafarian religion, there is a common belief among Jamaicans and it deals with the return to Africa after death. Africa represents their idea of heaven for all the Jamaicans, so the only memory of

belonging to that ground becomes something extremely meaningful when you are a Caribbean woman exiled in Britain, as Breeze is. In addition to this, freedom becomes a synonym for “speak[ing] out” and making your voice louder. Breeze and, in general terms, Caribbean women represent a minority emblem since they are not only black immigrants but also “women”. In a system ruled by “wasp” (white anglo-saxon protestant) men, being a black woman is not easy at all. However, “‘out there’ women have the opportunity to speak out against their marginalization in a culture which is not theirs and which is not likely to punish for speaking out against the emigrants culture that it feels the less threatened by” (Chancy, 1997: 5). Besides, “In exile, Caribbean women can ironically politicize their discourse and be heard in more than one culture simultaneously, making their consciousness and those they reach ‘contrapuntal’ at one” (Chancy, 1997: 5).

When Breeze deals with freedom she refers to artistic, political and physical freedom and if freedom stands for equality of sexes, the role of the female body becomes a central character. The body is a representation of women’s identity. Those Afro-Caribbean women whose are literally abused, physically or sexually feel like “strip[ped] of their autonomy” and want to find a way to establish their identities by highlighting and exasperate their being Afro-Caribbean. Therefore, their “Black female body recover through women’s language, relationships to one another, and through women’s writing and words” (Chancy, 1997: 5). Then Chancy adds:

The struggle for recognition, whether in academic, social or political arenas, is abdifficult one for those of us who, as “minorities”, do not benefit from equal or even adequate representation in any of these settings, How do we reclaim ourselves, our home islands, without a firm presence in the very circles that keep us perpetually on their peripheries, looking in?

Breeze, in particular, emphasizes her being an Afro-Caribbean woman combining words and music. The spectator is captured by Breeze's voice which is permeated of her blackness and marked by her origins. What can be more immediate than music in the perception of Breeze's art? "I want to make words/music/move beyond language/ into sound" she states in her poem *The Garden Path*, and this is exactly what she managed to do. She combined dub, reggae and spoken words creating a masterpiece which is named under: dub poetry. Her collaboration with the master of dub poetry, Linton Kwesi Johnson, helped her to improve her genius and to become the first female dub poet, recognized and awarded by the British Empire:

[...] Breeze's work has a strong political dimension but it resists limitations, ranging over a wide variety of subject matter from childhood memories of Kingston to contemporary life in inner-city London. Breeze prefers to explore social injustice obliquely, using personal stories and historical narratives to concentrate on the psychological dimensions of black women's experience [...]

(From *Poetry Archive*)

Even if Breeze poetics is full of political and social issues, we cannot define it as political poetry. As a matter of fact, her main aim is to explore the exiled woman world through words and music leaving the social context a little bit behind.

### **Dreamer**

roun a rocky corner  
by de sea  
seat up  
pon a drif wood  
yuh can fine she  
gazing cross de water  
a stick  
eena her han  
tryin to trace  
a future  
in de san

(From *Riddym Ravings & other poems*)

During her live performance at London Liming, Tracie says that she wrote this poem when she came back to Jamaica due to illness. In this poem, she does not speak of race, skin color, feminist issues or Caribbean identity at all. She simply describes a girl, probably a younger version of herself, or herself in that precise moment when she came back to Jamaica, who is staring at the sea looking for answers. She guesses what would be her future, and she starts drawing in the sand. On the one hand, however, even if there is not any evident reference, the fact of “tracing in the sand” and asking to nature, in this case *the sea*, for answers about life and the future, take us back to primitive rites of shamanism linked to Afro-Caribbean traditions. On the other hand, it can refer to themes of childhood like innocence and curiosity. Coming back home she goes back to the origins, far away from the knowledge and malice of European civilization, but still innocent and pure. As a matter of fact, even if she is now speaking of a common girl who is dreaming about her future, she cannot completely separate her poetry from her cultural context.

Another intimate poem taken from her collection of poems *Spring Cleaning* is

“Love Song”:

### Love Song

if I had a machete  
I would  
like all  
my  
family  
plant us  
a garden

if I had a gun  
I would  
shoot locks off treasures  
open vaults

if I had a bomb  
I would defuse it  
neutralize the very thought

if I had power  
i'd rule it  
free the passage  
from start

if I had you  
I would be  
overwhelmed

(From *Spring Cleaning*)

This poem deals with the power of love over every kind of atrocity. Nothing can win over the love, not a “machete”, not a gun, not even a bomb. At first sight, the title “love song” seems to be in contrast with the content of the poem. The speaking voice narrates facts full of hate and disaster and the reader/spectator does not understand what the title has in common with its content until the very end when there is a turning point: “If I had you”, everything would be different, “I would be overwhelmed”. As to say: the love I feel for you goes beyond everything: no war, no distance, no race would take you

away from me. This “you” can be embodied by a single person or can be more generally identified with a vast group of people according to Rastafarian belief of spreading love to each other, conceiving different forms of love. As a matter of fact, after her marriage she joined Rastafarian religion becoming a member of it.

**riddym ravins ( the mad woamn’s poem)**

de fus time dem kar me go a Bellevue  
was fit di dactar an de landlord operate  
an tek de radio outa mi head  
troo dem sieze de bed  
weh did a gi mi cancer  
an mek mi talk no nobody  
ah di same night wen dem trow mi out fi no pay de rent  
mi haffi sleep outa door wid de Channel One riddym box  
an de D.j. fly up eena mi head  
mi hear im a play seh

Eh, Eh,  
no feel no way  
town is a place dat ah really kean stay  
dem kudda-ribbit mi han  
eh-ribbit mi toe  
mi waan go a country go look mango

*(taken from Riddym ravings and other poems)*

The poem is named by Breeze herself “the mad woman’s poem”. In the whole work, it is very easy to perceive the schizophrenic narrating voice which autobiographically refers to a disorder that Breeze had truly suffered from. As we have already said, Breeze uses her poetry to spread knowledge. Her poetry is a medium to inform people. She wants to catch people’s attention in order to make them aware of a serious disorder which is schizophrenia. At the same time, she wants to make people

who suffer from schizophrenia to be comfortable with her poetry so that they can identify themselves with her voice and she can represent them with her art too.

As Lorde states in *Chancy*, it is necessary to recognize the power of diversities, not only to tolerate them but to be aware of the strength that they own.

Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters. (Lorde in *Chancy*, 1997: 13).

According to Lorde and to the Black feminist movement, people must start from knowledge and awareness of the difference not from the prejudice of it. People must stop categorizing and dividing other people in group depending on their closeness or not to a fixed standard imposed by their own point of view (Chancy 1997, 13). As a matter of fact, if we take into consideration the word “Black” which is often used when we speak of “Black Feminism” or “Black Diaspora”, how can we define what this word means if we speak for example of “Libyans, or Egyptians or Moroccans who are white in Africa but are black as people designated ‘black’ in the United States”(Chancy, 1997: 15)? Moreover, we can state that “the use of the term “Black” has come to designate cross-cultural, racial connections for many women of the Third World residing uneasily in the First World, that is the world of their colonizers” (Chancy, 1997: 15). In addition to this, Afro-Caribbean women not only have to “overcome various oppressions” but they

also have to fight against their “homelessness” as a “central feature of self-definition” being conscious of the “diasporic dimensions of their work” (Chancy, 1997: 18).

The narrating voice describes the life of a Caribbean woman in England and the difficulties that she encounters in everyday life. The chorus says: “Eh, Eh, / no feel no way / town is a place dat ah really kean stay / dem kudda- ribbit mi han / eh-ribbit mi toe / m waan go a country go look mango” (lines 11-16) and the “town” she is referring to is obviously London. The comparison with L.K.J’s poem *Inglan is a Bitch* is quite immediate. Both Breeze and L.K.J are describing how difficult for an Afro-Caribbean immigrant is to live in a big city like London and how the individual suffers this limbo filled in with a sense of not belonging to a stable community. This chorus makes the poem feel more like a song and helps the reader to feel the rhythm of the performance. Breeze’s dub poetry is still in the middle between poetry and song, and this chorus together with its multiple voices add to her work the background of reggae and spoken words performance, making something extraordinarily unique out of it:

### **Homecoming**

is dat day  
wen yuh put yuh key  
in yuh own front door  
an wipe yuh foot  
from de dus  
of all unwelcome

settle yuh children  
roun yuh table  
full of good wholesome  
food  
an sing to dem  
loud as yuh desire  
but mostly sof  
so dem dreams  
will not be frightening

den yuh put yuh foot up  
ease yuh bones  
ready

to meetde dawning  
of dem opening eyes

dat day  
wen yuh tek awn life  
an know  
yuh have de will  
to mek it  
an a man don't mess

dat day sister  
wen yuh reach over  
de blues  
an it don't matter  
wedda outside  
cowl or hot  
stony or smood  
high or low  
for inside warm  
wid all de loving  
from yuh heart

dat day, sister  
name  
homecoming.

In this poem Breeze encourage women not to surrender and to try to change their own life. Being a woman can be a disadvantage if you are a black woman born in a community where “woman” is synonym of “inferior”, or worse, if you are a black female immigrant living in a country ruled by a male chauvinistic system. However, it can be favorable since, according to Breeze, only women have a strong ability to reinvent themselves and make their life better. Therefore, she imagines a different homecoming and use a dream not only to release women from their tough life, but rather to suggest a better option and propel a change. She is not only speaking of and for herself. As a matter of fact, through what seem more like personal stories she is telling the story of the women of a whole community. She is representing them through her art and at the same time denouncing their situation. She uses the personal sphere to make the audience comfortable in her words so that the reader/spectator can easily “enter” into the poem. Nevertheless, her aim is to offer an alternative way of living, giving the

necessary strength to make women believe in themselves and in a better future. Breeze uses the private sphere represented by the word “home”, aware that this apparently common word encloses a special meaning in Black women tradition especially linked to a gender issue. Home in the white first world generally represent a place of release from the daily hard work, the place where the whole family gets reunited after a long day and share thoughts, emotions and take comfort, but this is not the same for a Black woman. The same “home” becomes a house and a prison when it is a place of abuse and beating by the man. It is the place where the abuse is hidden and the same home is the place where a black woman does not have an identity. She feels an outsider in her own home, as well as she feels an exiled in this new country. According to Chancy’s chapter “Exiled in the ‘fatherland’” a black woman needs to speak out to bring herself into visibility:

This act of remembrance is one of the few means which a reparation of the rift between the younger and older generations of Black women might still be achieved. Still, Afro-Caribbean women writers struggle to be published, read, heard: remaining invisible except perhaps to each other.

Paradoxically, invisibility appears to define many Afro-Caribbean women’s lived. By extension, silence is a recurring motif in the literature by Afro-Caribbean women who bring themselves into visibility by speaking out on issues that are normally taboo subjects in Western societies generally- issues such as racial discrimination, abuse of the elderly, sexual abuse, and incest. (Chancy, 1997: 33)

This is the reason why Breeze wants to speak out in order to make women of today and of the past re-gain their lost identity and proudness. Believing and acting can change their future.

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