Off the page and off the stage: the performance of poetry and its public function

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Off the Page and Off the Stage: 
The Performance of Poetry and its Public Function

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Für Elsa Gräbner
Off the Page and Off the Stage:
The Performance of Poetry and its Public Function

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Introduction

La poesía es algo que anda por las calles. Que se mueve, que pasa a nuestro lado. Todas las cosas tienen su misterio, y la poesía es el misterio que tienen todas las cosas. Se pasa junto a un hombre, se mira a una mujer, se adivina en la marcha oblicua de un perro, y en cada uno de éstos objetos humanos está la poesía. (Federico García Lorca) ¹

Hablando y escuchando palabras es como sabemos quiénes somos, de dónde venimos, y adónde va nuestro paso. También es como sabemos del otro, de su paso y de su mundo. Hablando y escuchando palabras es como escuchamos la vida. (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos) ²

I begin this study with two epigraphs from seemingly unrelated areas: one about poetry, and the other about politics. One was spoken in the 1930s in Spain, the other was written in the early 21st century in Chiapas, Mexico. One is taken from an interview, the other from a letter. One is authored by a canonized poet, the other by a guerillero.³ One was spoken right before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, the other in the middle of what its author calls the 4th World War. But from their very different moments and loci of enunciation both make some similar points about language.⁴

According to Federico García Lorca and the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos the world we live in produces language. Language, in turn, produces the world we live in. Thus, language is simultaneously poetic and social. Thinking about language helps us to understand the world, and thinking about what we want the world to be like requires

¹ Poetry is something that walks in the streets. Something that moves, that walks past us. Each object has its mystery, and poetry is the mystery that all objects possess. It walks past a man, it looks at a woman, you can sense it in the oblique walk of a dog; poetry is present in every one of these human objects.

² Speaking and listening to words is how we know who we are, where we come from, and where our path leads us. It is also how we learn about others, about their path and their world. Speaking and listening to words is how we listen to life.

³ Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos is the voice of the Mexican Guerilla movement EZLN and first appeared on the media scene in January 1994 when the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista para la Liberación Nacional) took over seven major cities in the Mexican state Chiapas to resist the implementation of NAFTA. The EZLN was quickly fought back by the army, but their popularity and international impact since 1994 has been immense. For an analysis of the EZLN in the context of the Antiglobalisation movement see for example Kingsnorth 2003.

⁴ Neozapatism argues that since the end of the 2nd World War there have been two more world wars. The 3rd World War is also known as the Cold War. The 4th World War is the conquest of the world by Neoliberalism. For further information see among other texts Marcos 1997 and Marcos 2003c.
thinking about how we will think, dream, conceptualize, construct and relate ourselves to
this world and to each other through language.

In this study I discuss the work of poets who have developed a method that allows
them to reflect on language as simultaneously poetic and social: the poetry performance.
The poetry performance creates a situation in which poetic language is bound up with the
physical presence of the speaker and the audience in the moment and at the locus of
enunciation. It creates a situation of connectedness between the individual and other human
beings, the place, and the particular moment in time. This insistence on the physicality of
the human being and on being in the moment is unusual at a point in time at which most
developments in poetry emphasize the digital, the technological and by extension, the
disembodied.5

The temporal, spatial and personalized commitment of the poetry performance has a
number of effects on poetic language and on the poem itself. On a formal level, the
performance of poetry opens up new possibilities of signification. It focuses on the sonic
qualities of language rather than on its visual elements. Its live enunciation makes it
possible to enact what I will call “sonic layering” (see chapter 8 on “Poetry in the City”):
the simultaneous interaction of words, speech, music, non-verbal sounds, the poet’s voice,
and poetic imagery that appeal to our smell, taste and vision. Hence, the performance of
poetry spills over into its surroundings or constructs its world. But it does more than that;
the movement between language and the world goes in two directions.

The performance of poetry also develops means to integrate its surroundings not
only into what it says, but more importantly into how it says it, i.e. into its use of poetic
language. The performance of poetry encourages the development of a poetic language that
continuously spills over from the encapsulated entity of the poem into the cultural, social
and political space that surrounds it. This does not mean that the work with poetic language
is being subsumed under the engagement with the social and the political. However, it does
mean that an analytical approach that focuses on the word alone and leaves aside other
poetic elements like the ones I outlined above, or that discusses the word in isolation and
not within its context, is not sufficient for an analysis of performed poetry. My aim in this
study is the development of a methodology that allows the literary and cultural analyst to
do justice to the many elements of signification that are mobilized by the performance of

5 Electronic and digital poetics are one of the most recent, most interesting and most popular developments in
E-poetics and digital poetics are necessarily de-bodied. The performance of poetry takes the opposite
direction.
poetry, and to understand the effect that the invocation of these elements has within the cultural context of the poetry performance.

My endeavour leads me into an area of poetry and cultural studies that remains largely unexplored. So far, the performance of poetry has received little attention. Usually it is conflated with the poetry reading and is treated as an addition to the written poem as if it was an extra treat for the reader who gets to see and hear the poet in person. In classrooms it is taught – if at all – through analyses of the written text of a poem. Then a recording is played but usually not analysed.

As a result of such a reductive practice of literary analysis some of the most important elements of a poetry performance escape critical attention: what does the sound of the poet’s voice – its inflection, intonation, accent, pauses, its fluidity or stutters – tell us additionally about the words he speaks? How do other sounds – melody, percussion, recorded sounds – contribute to or change the production of meaning? And, in the live performance, what impact does the audience and its possible reactions like clapping, cheering, or interjected commentary have on the performance of the poem? All these elements contribute to the production of meaning in the poetry performance. Yet, they are hardly ever addressed in analyses of performed poetry.

This practice obliges me to make an important qualification. In this study I do not deal with the poetry reading, even though some of the analytical tools I develop can be useful for an analysis of poetry readings. However, the poetry performance and the poetry reading are distinctly different manifestations of poetry. First of all, the poetry reading is just that: a reading aloud of poetry that is meant to be read from the page. This means that the poetry reading mobilizes only one element of signification additional to the word itself, the poet’s voice. The poetry performance, on the other hand, mobilizes the voice not as reading voice but as speaking voice. Also, and in contradistinction to the poetry reading, the performance usually puts the word in contact with other elements of signification such as music, other sounds, visual elements and theatrical devices. Furthermore, it takes many of its devices such as accents, the use of vernaculars, rhythms, or music, from the cultural sphere that surrounds it. Hence, the performance of poetry is hardly ever self-contained. It spills over into its surroundings. For these reasons I argue that the analysis of performed poetry requires a whole different set of interpretative skills than the poetry reading. Poetry performances cannot be analysed separately from contextual elements such as the venue, the audience, and the socio-political events that shape the moment of performance and reception. They require an interdisciplinary approach that includes the methodology of
literary studies as well as the methodology of theatre and performance studies, music, and cultural studies. Poetry readings, on the other hand, can be analysed separately from their contextual elements; they do not depend on them.\(^6\)

Another element of difference between the poetry performance and the poetry reading that is crucial for this study is the position of the poet. The set up of the poetry reading places the poet in the position of lecturer and the reader in the position of a quiet student who may ask some questions at the end of the event. Hence, the poetry reading maintains an authoritarian relationship between poet and listener. The poetry performances I analyse in this study mobilize what is proper to the poetry performance – the different layers of signification and the particular situation of enunciation – to deconstruct and break down this authoritarian relationship between poet and listener, often times in the service of the social and political movements to which the respective poets feel committed.

The most problematic element of the term “poetry performance” as opposed to the “poetry reading” is that it evokes notions of acting and hence, of pretense or insincerity. There is indeed a recent trend in the U.S. that inclines towards the organization of whole poetry shows, not by the poets, but by a hired stage director. For the purpose of this study I reject the notion of a poetry performance as a show or a spectacle. Instead, I propose to conceive of the poetry performance as a way of demonstrating what happens when people relate to their surroundings through language. Richard Schechner argues that performing is “showing doing” […] pointing to, understanding, and displaying doing” (22). My argument is that as we speak, we do something. We respond to the world around us, we try to have an impact on it, we establish a relationship to it. The performance of poetry “shows doing”: it addresses that moment of relating ourselves through words to the world and to each other. In doing so, it puts these acts and the way we perform them up for discussion.

\(^6\) In his essay “How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem” Peter Middleton develops a framework for the analysis of the Anglophone poetry reading or poetry recital as I define it. The criteria he develops illustrate the differences but also the connections between the poetry reading and the poetry performance. Middleton argues that both the performance of the poem and silent reading of the poem are necessary to experience the poem. This argument is related to the temporality he assigns to composition: draft writing, first oral performances, second and further drafts, then publication. For many performance poets, the writing of the draft is already informed by sound or by the notion of speaking or by different sonic and rhythmic elements. In some cases, most notably in the cases of the poets that work in collectives like Urs M. Fiechtner and Sergio Vesely, or La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís, the poems exist in a sonic and a written version and/or are finished only in the collaboration between musician and poet. Furthermore, Middleton argues that the live event is a performance irreducible to any form of recording, and that poetry readings are irreducibly singular and historical. I agree with this as far as the live performance is concerned, but my analysis of sound and the phonographic recording in chapter 6 demonstrates that poetry that includes sonic elements invites and in some cases, requires the development of a whole new range of possibilities that are opened up by the phonographic recording. Other elements of the poetry reading that Middleton points out, most notably performance of authorship by the author by reading her or his own poetry, and his argument that the performance implicates the audience on the stage of meaning, are shared by the poetry reading and the poetry performance.
makes them transparent and therefore, changeable. The poetry reading merely adds a voice performance to the “doing”.

Because the performance of poetry makes our verbal relationship to the world explicit and changeable it can become a means of investigating, redefining and reinventing language as speech, both personal and public, and speech as world-making. Some poets like Gil Scott Heron and Linton Kwesi Johnson have taken advantage of this potential of the performance of poetry. They have developed the poetry performance as an effective tool for the performance of their political demands. They employ poetic language to create new, more precise forms of expressing political demands, forms and languages that do not bypass the speakers’ cultural identity, but integrate it into their speech and in doing so, make it an integral part of their demands. One element of their suggestion is that public speech can be sophisticated, not only for the purpose of persuasion and deception, but also for the purpose of empowerment. A younger generation of poets pick up on this tradition of investigating and re-inscribing public speech. In his poem “Act III Scene II (Shakespeare)”, which I analyse in chapter 5 on “Address”, the poet Saul Williams poetically rewrites Marc Antony’s famous speech in Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar*. His struggle to find a “truthful” mode of public speech brings this element of politically militant performance poetry to the fore. In the later chapters of this study I address globalization and interculturality as important themes of the performance of poetry. The inquiry into cultural identity, the way it is performed, and the inquiry into the impact that globalization has on political agency is central to the last chapters of this study.

Below I will clarify the methodological approach I take to the analysis of the performance of poetry. Before I do so, I need to make some terminological clarifications. The kind of poetry I am analysing in this study is labelled with a number of different terms, the most frequently used being performance poetry and spoken word poetry. I also use the terms “performed poetry” and “poetry in performance”. For a generic label I prefer the term “performance poetry” over “spoken word poetry”, even though many of the poems that are subsumed under the label “spoken word poetry” use music and theatrical elements. However, labelling them as spoken word poetry re-enacts a focus on the word alone that I contest in this study. I use the expression “spoken word” to refer to the spoken word as such and not to the generic label. The term “performance poetry” indicates that theatrical and musical elements are involved in the performance of poetry. Therefore I will use it whenever I need to make generic references. I use the terms “poetry in performance” and
“performed poetry” to indicate the use of elements of signification that exceed the spoken word only.

**Cultural Analysis**

In the previous paragraphs I have argued that the performance of poetry requires an analytical methodology that can respond to its location within the present moment and to the complexity that is created by the diverse means of signification that it mobilizes. Hence, I need to employ the methodology of literary studies as well as a cultural approach.

Cultural Analysis, the methodology pioneered by Mieke Bal, has provided me with the necessary framework. Several elements of this approach have been particularly helpful to my analytical approach. The first is that cultural analysis focuses on the dialogue between the analyst and the object of analysis. I have had little previous work on the performance of poetry to fall back on and therefore needed to develop my methodology of analysis in close engagement with the objects at hand. The second element of cultural analysis that has been useful for the development of my own analysis is its strong sense of present-ness. The dialogue between object and analyst always takes place in the present moment. Hence, it is manifested in the “expository speech act” that Bal identifies. In the context of exhibition analysis, she describes the expository speech act as follows:

> An agent, or subject, puts “things” on display, which creates a subject/object dichotomy. This dichotomy enables the subject to make a statement about the object. The object is there to substantiate the statement. It is put there within a frame that enables the statement to come across. There is an addressee for the statement, the visitor, viewer, or reader. The discourse surrounding the exposition or, more precisely, the discourse that *is* the exposition, consists in “constative discourse.”
>
> (1996: 8)

“Expository writing” doubles the exposition process. It exposes not only the object, but also “the discourse that *is* the exposition”. In other words, expository writing shows “not the culture he [the critic] is studying but the way he acquired his knowledge; he shows himself at work”. (1996: 168). “Showing the critic at work” means that expository discourse connects both the object and the critic to the moment of the enunciation of the discourse. Thus, expository writing makes the position of the critic (or cultural analyst, as I prefer to call her) clear and thus contestable and relates her own position to that of her object.
Within the methodology of cultural analysis Bal has developed an analytical methodology that is based on concepts. Concepts are useful because they establish a connection between everyday language and academic jargon, thus opening up analytical language to expressions of popular culture that have not yet received much critical attention. Bal argues that

[...] concepts can become a third partner in the otherwise totally unverifiable and symbiotic interaction between critic and object. This is most useful, especially when the critic has no disciplinary tradition to fall back on and the object no canonical or historical status. (2003: 23)

In this passage she raises two points that are important to my analysis of the performance of poetry. As I already pointed out, I have “no disciplinary tradition to fall back on and the object [has] no canonical or historical status”. Furthermore, Bal’s conceptualization of concepts as “a third partner in the [...] interaction between critic and object” resonates with the power that Lorca, Marcos, myself, and the poets whose work I discuss in this study recognize in the word. The word is more than a tool; it is a sometimes strong-willed and obstinate friend that does not always comply with one’s desire to express oneself. It wields its own effects over the world. In chapter 3 on “Speaking and Listening” I will conceptualize the dynamic between poet, audience and the word as a trilogue between speaker, listener and the word. By using the methodology of cultural analysis I transpose this triologue onto the level of theoretical analysis.

The work with concepts has another advantage. I have already pointed out that for an analysis of poetry performance I need to take recourse to an interdisciplinary methodology. Concepts are the theoretical tools that can undertake this travel between different disciplines. Bal argues that: “They [concepts] travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities” (2003:24). The travel between disciplines is important for an analysis of the performance of poetry. In chapter 4 on “Performance” I engage approaches from performance and theatre studies with Bakhtin’s notion of close and open interaction in my analysis of Gil Scott Heron’s performance of his poem “Whitey on the Moon”. Similarly, in my analysis of the interaction of the sounds of the spoken word, music, voice and rhythms, I bring approaches from literary studies in contact with musical and sonic elements.
In this study I analyse poetry from the U.S., Western Europe and Latin America. Most of the poets did not know of each other until they found each others’ poetry discussed comparatively in the pages of this study. My use of the conceptual approach allows me to point out the elements that connect their work and those that make it different form each other. The latter elements are often related to differences in the contexts in which these poets live. I can perform such a comparative analysis only by using a methodology that can travel between different cultures and dispersed geographical locations without establishing a dominance of one location over the other; concepts can do this work.

Furthermore, the use of concepts disputes easy readings of poetry performances that are based on a deciphering of authorial intention or of a simplified notion of intertextuality that relies on conscious influence, as Bal points out. The work of Lemn Sissay or Saul Williams establishes a tradition with the work of Scott Heron and Linton Kwesi Johnson. However, this does not explain the concerns these authors share with Urs M. Fiechtner and Sergio Vesely or La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís. This connection can only be explained through reading the performance of poetry as a response to social and political conflicts and to the pressures that these developments put on citizens and artists.

Hence, I do not discuss the work of poets in a chronological order, even though a study of the history of the performance of poetry in the Western world is called for here. However, such a project requires the tools to adequately analyse the poetry. Developing these tools is the aim of the present project. The concepts I suggest as tools for the analysis of the performance of poetry are the following: the poet-author, the poet’s public figure and the poet’s textual persona; speaking and listening; address; performance; sound; accents and translations; the city; and borderlands.

The first concepts I discuss – the Poet-Author and his different manifestations and Speaking and Listening – are concerned with the relationship between poet and the audience. In chapter 2 I argue that the presence of the poet on the site of the performance and his claim to be the originator of the poem by enunciating it personally are among the most striking features of the performance of poetry. For many academics this is deeply disturbing because the author seems to make claims to authenticity and originality that literary theory has deconstructed in the attempt to avoid intentionalist readings. I argue that the reinstatement of the poet as author does not have to lead to an intentionalist reading. Moreover, the reinstatement of the poet as author in a context in which he is immediately addressable makes the authoritarian structures of authorship and of reading contestable. To approach this contestability in an analytical way I propose three categories for the analysis
of the manifestation of the poet in the performance of poetry: the poet-author, the textual persona and the public persona of the poet.

In chapter 3 I engage different models of reading. I oppose the “literary seduction” to a dialogical reading, analyse the implications that these different modes of reading have for the position of the poet and the reader, and finally engage them with the model of speaking and listening as it is developed by Marcos, integrated with the model of dialogue that Paulo Freire develops in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). By introducing these perspectives from pedagogy and from political discourse I underscore the connectedness of the poetic with the social. My analysis of the text by Marcos brings out the political connection. It also points out that the poetic conversation cannot be reduced to a two-fold entity. It is always a “trialogue” and consists of the speaker, the listener and the word, i.e. poetic language. Such a view avoids a purely instrumental use or reading of poetic language, according to which it would simply be in the service of a political ideology.

In the following chapters I develop the concepts of “performance”, “address”, and “sound”. These concepts are concerned with performative and sonic elements of the performed poem. In chapter 4 on “Performance”, I make the tradition from public poetry to performance poetry. Through the analysis of poems by Gil Scott Heron, Lemn Sissay and Chus Pato I develop tools for the analysis of the actual performance of poetry and its cultural significance. I propose open and closed interactivity as categories of analysis through my engagement with the poem “Whitey on the Moon” by Scott Heron. Also, I return to the implications of the performance “showing doing”. Through an analysis of a performance by Sissay I take up and develop Bal’s proposal that performance and performativity are intricately related. Finally, through a discussion of the interaction between poetics and poetry in the work of Chus Pato I propose a model of performance as an interaction between poetics and poetry, between political work and poetic work.

In chapter 5 I focus on the function of address in the performance of poetry. Theorists like Jonathan Culler, Barbara Johnson and William Waters argue that address is a crucial element of lyric poetry. However, their analyses of address and more specifically, of apostrophe, take their case studies from written poetry. I argue that the performance of poetry is so concerned with establishing contact between the poet and his audience that it creates a situation that by default includes an address. Through an analysis of the poems “Fair” and “Architecture” by Lemn Sissay, of the poem “Act III Scene 2 (Shakespeare)” by Saul Williams, and of the poem “Ordinary Mawning” by Jean Binta Breeze I bring out
different modes of address in the performance of poetry. Furthermore, I explore the specific locus of enunciation of women poets who address a public audience.

In chapter 6 on “Sound”, I depart from the live context and focus on sound recordings. CD recordings are becoming increasingly important for the poetry performance. Through an analysis of the first solo album of Manu Chao I develop categories for the analysis of different elements of sound, namely music, the spoken word, non-musical sounds and rhythm. Most importantly, I develop the category of the “sonic I” and demonstrate how Chao first constructs and then undermines the sonic I’s authority through the use of sonic devices.

In chapter 7 on “Accents and Translations”, I return to the live performance, this time through an analysis of accents and translations in performed poetry. In an analysis of some poems by Linton Kwesi Johnson I argue that accents function as a bridge between personal and community identity. Whereas the connection between personal and community identity is a source of empowerment in the diasporic context in which Johnson evokes it, it is being problematized by the “accented translations” of the German-Chilean duo Urs M. Fiechtner and Sergio Vesely. In their concert readings they perform a series of translations between Spanish and German, and between music and the spoken word. In doing so, they destabilize notions of fixed identities and profoundly question ideas of origin.

The last two concepts, of borderlands and the city, are concerned with the locus of enunciation. In chapter 8 entitled “Poetry in the City”, I move from the metaphorical locus of enunciation in the borderlands between sound and music to an analysis of a very concrete locus of enunciation. I analyse a performance of La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís and of Willie Perdomo in Mexico City. In this performance, the cities in which the performers live (Mexico City and Spanish Harlem, NY) function both as topic and in the case of Mexico City, as stage for the performance. My analysis focuses on urban imaginaries as a possible source of urban agency.

In chapter 9 entitled “Borderlands”, I argue that the mobilization of sonic devices in combination with the spoken word creates a sonic borderland that is also a cultural borderland. I discuss Homi Bhabha’s and Néstor García Canclini’s conceptualizations of hybridity and Gloria Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of a borderland through the criticism of Walter D. Mignolo, and engage these different concepts with an analysis of Chao’s second solo album Próxima Estación...Esperanza. In this final chapter I mobilize the concept of borderlands to return to the points I make in chapter 1 and place my analysis of the performance of poetry on the borderlines of theory, poetry and politics.
Poets

I said in the previous section that it is not my intention to write a history of the performance of poetry in the Western world but that I want to develop a framework for the analysis of the performance of poetry and its public function. Therefore, I have chosen poems the analysis of which brings out the concepts that can serve for the analysis of the public function of the performance of poetry. However, I did try to keep in mind which poets are considered to be particularly representative of their times and of performance poetry. In order to connect the conceptual approach to the more traditional chronological one, I will now give a brief chronological overview of the performance of poetry since the 1970s until 2005.

My choice of case studies was based on several criteria that I applied quite strictly. Firstly, I decided to apply a comparative approach to the analysis of the performance of poetry instead of focusing on one particular type of performance poetry. I made this choice because I want to analyse how the performance of poetry negotiates and engages cultural differences. This is an important element in the work of such prominent representatives of performance poetry as Johnson, Breeze, Fiechtner and Vesely.

My second criterion is a socio-political one. Its development was informed by my interest in how far poetry as an art of, and investigation into, the possibilities of language can make a contribution to social and political transformation. This concern informs the work of many poets, most of whom are not performance poets. I opted for the performance of poetry as the touchstone of my analysis because I believe that literary analyses into the political efficiency and function of poetry are often hampered by their focus on content. Poets advocate political causes and strategies that are often supposed to lead to some form of liberation, but their poetic forms replicate authoritarian modes of communication. The poet emerges as protagonist or as a prophetic figure that shows the correct way to his readers. The “fantasy of poetic control” which I discuss in chapter 3 is the most extreme result of this absorption of authority into the practice of poetry. Together with many performance poets I argue that the performance of poetry tries to establish a more immediate relationship between poet and audience, one that allows for dialogue and that shows the poet as a member of his community and not as the superior of his fellow human beings.

Probably because it encourages such a relationship many poets have developed the performance of poetry within the context of their commitment and the movements they are
committed to. In this study I have chosen poets who investigate language as a tool for oppression and liberation, and who seek to empower their audience not only towards the outside, but who try to develop language and poetic discourse as a tool for the emancipation of themselves and their listeners both individually and collectively. Examples are Scott Heron, Breeze, Pato, Johnson, Fiechtner and Vesely, La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís, and Williams. Finally, there are some poets such as Sissay and Perdomo who use the performance of poetry to break down cemented social structures that impact on the relationships between human beings.

The performance of poetry did not come out of thin air; neither is it a product of the society of the spectacle. I argue that performance poetry is one of many poetic genres that poets have developed in the context of a poetic genre I call “public poetry”. I borrow the term from Latin American poetry studies. Latin Americanists use it to describe a type of poetry that Mike Gonzalez and David Treece describe as follows:

In our view, Latin American poetry has found a voice not in imitation of the West and its despairs, but in an echo of public dissent, of common language. It has broken its isolation not by occupying a subordinate place on the Elysian fields of cultural tradition, but rather in the rediscovery of a collective voice and a collective experience found at times in popular culture, at times in shared ritual or song, at times in folk memory. What is important is that poetry has opened its frontiers to all those possible components, has excluded none, and in Ernesto Cardenal’s words has sought the community of the shadows to be its voice (xiv).

Gonzalez and Treece refer specifically to Latin American poetry, but many of the characteristics they point out are also applicable to performance poetry. The most important ones are poetry as an echo of public dissent, its use of common language, its rediscovery (and problematization of) collectivity, its interstitial existence between popular and high culture, and the opening of its frontiers to possible text-external components of poetry. Latin American poetry has been very influential in opening up poetry’s frontiers, probably much more influential than European critics usually admit.

Crucial for this opening up of poetry’s frontiers was a group of poets who worked from the 1920s to the 1970s. This group includes for example Paul Éluard, Federico García Lorca, the Generation of 27, Pablo Neruda, Bertolt Brecht, and others. The poet who connects all these poets through personal friendship with him – even those who did not
personally know each other – is Pablo Neruda. I develop my arguments in chapter 2 and 3 around the analysis of a novel written about him, his work, the public function of his poetry and his poetic persona. *El cartero de Neruda* by Antonio Skármeta exposes as almost no other theoretical or fictional texts do the impact that Neruda’s public figure and his poetry had on the public at large. My analysis of the novel as theoretical object enables me to point out a number of characteristics of public poetry that have become crucial elements of performance poetry, in particular regarding the public function of the poet. My analysis of Neruda’s example also serves to demonstrate that the performance of poetry has developed out of a long and by now canonical tradition of poetry.

Public poetry is characterized by its connection with political and social movements. I argue that the performance of poetry is one poetic device that poets developed in the context of their political militancy\(^7\). It became very popular as an instrument of political militancy in the U.S. during the early-1970s. Most famously, the Beat Poets and Amiri Baraka had prepared the grounds for its popularity. Amiri Baraka and his colleagues from the Black Arts Movement in particular recognized the connections between Langston Hughes’ Blues and Jazz poetry, the performances of the Beat Poets, African storytelling traditions and of the role of the *griot* therein. They propagated and developed the performance of poetry as a properly African-American – and hence, hybrid – art form. Poets such as Scott Heron and, slightly later, The Last Poets developed the performance of poetry in the context of the radical political militancy of the 1970s. Interestingly, they as well as Linton Kwesi Johnson were associated with the Black Panthers and not with the Black Muslims or the Civil Rights Movement in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr. In accordance with their political radicality they developed a poetically radical art form. One very important element of their poetry is the direct contact with the audience and their use of interactive elements (see chapter 4 on “Performance”). In terms of their use of Jazz and early forms of Rap they set an important and overwhelmingly influential example for contemporary performance poetry.

The Last Poets and Scott Heron became very popular among the members of the Black movement of the U.K. However, the Black population in Britain was not predominantly African-American but Caribbean. In the early 1970s musical and poetic

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\(^7\) I prefer the term “militancy” over “activism” because militancy places a stronger emphasis on a person’s membership of a political group or organization and on their position within theories, ideologies or frameworks of thought that make concrete political demands in order to effect changes in the structure of societies. The term “militancy” conveys that at issue is not only the commitment, but also the status of being organized. Also, the term militancy unmistakeably conveys the specific radicality and the extent of personal commitment that characterizes many of the groups and movements that the poets whose work provide the corpus for this study were or still are involved in.
manifestations among the Black movement in Britain were articulated along the model of African-American art and vernacular. Linton Kwesi Johnson (b. 1961) was one of the most important poetic voices that argued for and developed a specifically Black British poetry that appeals to the traditions of the Caribbean. Johnson was born in Jamaica and came to the U.K. at the age of 11. He was the first poet to perform his poetry in Jamaican patois to a reggae rhythm. This type of poetry became known as Dub Poetry.\(^8\)

Around the same time, in 1976, the German poet Urs M. Fiechtner (b. 1955) and the exiled Chilean poet and songwriter Sergio Vesely (b. 1952) met up coincidentally at a solidarity festival in Germany. The organizers were short of a room and asked the two artists, who had never met in person before, to shorten their respective performances and perform after each other in the one room that was available. Fiechtner suggested that they should combine their performances instead. Vesely agreed, even though he did not understand any German and Fiechtner knew almost none of Vesely’s poetry. This spontaneous joint performance was the beginning of a performance form that I discuss in the chapter 7 on “Accents and Translations”, the concert reading. Like Johnson’s poetry, the concert reading engages different cultural and literary traditions through an intense interaction of spoken word poetry and music. But whereas in dub poetry music, rhythm and language reaffirm each other, they question and reframe each other in the concert reading. A comparison between the two performance styles brings out very different points of view on cultural identity; yet, as I will argue, the poets share a number of political principles.

Jean Binta Breeze (b. 1956) was also born in Jamaica and now splits her time between her country of birth and the U.K. Like Linton Kwesi Johnson she is a Dub Poet. She became famous in the early 1980s through politically explicit poetry, for example the very famous poem “Aid comes with Bombs” in which she criticizes the politics of the World Bank. Since the mid-1980s she has turned to a subgenre of Dub that she calls “domestic dub”, focusing particularly on the social situation of women. In chapter 5 on

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\(^8\) Kwame Dawes points out that the high number of black poets among British performance poets has a negative side-effect for those poets who are looking to publish their poetry. He argues that publishing houses shy away from publishing poets that emerge out of the performance poetry scene because they reduce the validity of this poetry to a “specialized area”. This policy affects especially black poets. Dawes responds to the publishing industry through a defense of the performance. He argues: “They [the poets] do not speak of performance as merely the act of stepping on stage to read or recite, but see the performance of language, sound, rhythm and rhetoric as elemental to the poem as it appears on the page. A poem’s ‘performability’ enhances its presence on the page and it is informed by features of poetry that all poets tend to value and celebrate” (47). I agree with his argument that good performance poets of whichever race enhance the possibilities of written poetry. However, his argument has the tendency to attempt to connect the quality of a poem to whether it works on the page or not. I do not agree with this tendency; my argument in this study is that performance poetry is a genre of its own that works according to its own rules. The quality of a performed poem is not determined by whether it works on the page or not, but by how it mobilizes the poetic elements that are at its disposal.
“Address” I analyse one of her domestic dub poems, “Ordinary Mawning” for her use of address in order to create a sympathetic audience for the textual I of the poem, a single mother.

The Galician poet Chus Pato (b. 1955) by her date of birth, her poetics and her politics may be counted among this first generation of performance poets. However, she became well known somewhat later, in the mid 1990s, when she emerged as an important voice of Galician left-wing feminism and nationalism. Pato’s poetic work is inseparable from her political and cultural work, including her activism for specific groups but also her public statements about poetry and the inclusion of manifestations and analyses of her own poetics in her poetry. Her work is an important example of poetry that is always a performance, though it is not necessarily a performance on a stage but a performance in the sense of a cultural practice.

Johnson, Fiechtner and Vesely, Breeze and Pato were active throughout the 1970s and are still working today. The second generation of performance poets who feature prominently in this study were born in the 1960s and 70s and started performing and publishing in the late-1980s. Most of them had their breakthroughs in the mid- to late-1990s. I am referring to Willie Perdomo (b. 1967), Lemn Sissay (b.1967), Saul Williams (b. 1972), and Manu Chao (b. 1961).

As I demonstrate in chapter 5 on “Address”, Sissay and Williams take complementary approaches to societies in which the paradigms for political struggle are reconfigured. Both are critical of the Black movement and the African-American movement; yet, they are still engaged in the struggle against racism and political authoritarianism. They articulate their engagement through the evocation of very different elements of the performance of poetry. Williams usually takes the position of the public speaker. He inflects political rhetoric through poetic language and in doing so, attempts to take deception out of political language. Hence, political language becomes a tool of understanding and communication. Sissay, on the other hand, takes an approach that seems intimist at first. He frequently addresses the situation of people who do not fit into any of the spaces that society has to offer to them. Through his use of address he creates spaces that exist separately from the violence of social norms that try to police and contain peoples’ identities.

Willie Perdomo is a Nuyorican poet and one of the most famous performers from the Nuyorican Poets Café. In recent years he has complemented his poetic work with work
as a community-based educator and creative writing teacher. His poetry is deeply rooted in
the cultural environment of Spanish Harlem.

The examples of Perdomo, Sissay and Williams demonstrate that during the 1980s and
the 1990s at least in the English-speaking countries a process of localization and
institutionalization of poetry performances has taken place. Certain venues and
organizations took up the promotion of performance poetry. Notable among others are the
Nuyorican Poets Café and the British organization Apples and Snakes, both founded in the
1980s. They played an especially important role in promoting the work of young, still
unestablished performance poets, especially through poetry slams. I do not address slam poetry in this study because its premises are so different from those of performance poetry that a constructive discussion of it would require the development of a proper methodology. Most obviously, slam poetry has a strict time limit of two, three or five minutes. Furthermore, the poetry slam is a competition. These two characteristics alone put demands on slam poetry that are irrelevant to performance poetry and in the opinion of some poets, conflict with the artistic element (art should not cater to an audience and should never be written in competition with the art of other poets, but should be measured against itself). Both slam poetry and the connection between slam poetry and performance poetry disserve closer critical attention, but such an endeavour would by far exceed the scope of the present study. However, it is important to note that the poetry slams at the Nuyorican Poets Café and the National Poetry Slam initially made Perdomo and Williams famous. Sissay has been closely linked with Apples and Snakes since the beginning of his career.9

Manu Chao is the odd man out in my selection, as it were, mainly because he is not usually considered a poet but a musician. With the inclusion of his work into this study and with the prominence I have given it – his two solo albums Clandestino and Próxima Esperanza are the main case studies in chapters 6 on “Sound” and 9 on “Borderlands” – I make two relevant points. One point is that the borderline between music and the performance of the spoken word is fluid and has to be considered and analysed as such. This is obvious in all of the poetry I discuss, most notably in Chao’s, Fiechtner and Vesely’s, and La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís’. As a consequence I argue that music has made just as much of a contribution to performance poetry as word-based poetry has. Chao

For more information on poetry slams see Eleveld 2002, Glazner 2000, Makhijani 2005, Smith and Kraynak 2004 and Foley 2002. Most of these books focus on slam poetry. Foley discusses slam poetry as oral poetry. In my review of Eleveld 2004 I emphasize that the poetics of slam in recent years have led to a commercialization of it and have made it compatible with neoliberalist imaginaries (Gräbner 2006a). For a starting point of an analysis for the interconnections between the performance of poetry and neoliberalist imaginaries (and the resistance to them) see Gräbner 2006b.
is one of the artists who most clearly reflects on and theorizes the relationship between music, sound and the word. That he does so from the perspective of music does not make his work, including its music, any less relevant for poetry.

Santiago Chávez, Judith de León and Rodrigo Solís were all born in the first half of the 1970s. All three have worked in different formations for many years, but they have teamed up only in the summer of 2005. The structure of the performances and the tight interaction between the three has much in common with Fiechtner’s and Vesely’s concert readings. However, Fiechtner’s and Vesely’s performances are informed by “accented translations” and engage the cultures of Germany and South America. The work of La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís is – even though Judith de León is Argentinian – an intense engagement with everyday life in Mexico City. Like Fiechtner and Vesely, La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís perform a dialogue between music and the spoken word. However, they place a stronger emphasis on rhythm and pace, probably due to the fact that Judith de León, a percussionist, is involved in the group. Their clear sympathies with Neozapatismo and their internet editorial project La Tortillería place their poetics explicitly within the context of the alterglobalization movement, a characteristic their work shares with Chao’s.

Women are conspicuously underrepresented in my selection of poets. The prerequisites for women poets to address the public are so entirely different from those of men that they require the development of a different analytical approach. Such an approach would have to account for the confinement of women in the private sphere, for the poetic strategies that made them overcome this confinement, and for the role of feminism. It could be developed through the analysis of the work of poets like Anna Akhmatova, Alfonsina Storni, Rosalía de Castro, Louise Bennett, and others. Such a study would have to pay closer attention than it was possible for me to do to the work of Jean Binta Breeze and Chus Pato, who I do address. Unfortunately such an endeavour would exceed the limits of this study and I will therefore have to leave it for another time. I also think that we need to be honest in our address of the difficulties that women have faced as public figures and particularly as public poets. The lack of women in this study shows that women have a terribly difficult time as public poets. I do not want to gloss over this difficulty by including women poets and pretending that they mobilize the same poetic elements as men do when in fact they do not. This would be a betrayal of the complexity of the poetic strategies women poets have had to develop. I prefer to make obvious the lack of public poets who are women and of an analytical approach that responds to the poetic strategies that they
have developed. By doing so I hope to give the incentive for studies that develop the required methodology.¹⁰

My choice of case studies, then, predominantly responds to the necessity to develop concepts for the analysis of the public function of the performance of poetry, but it is undercut by the attempt to make a selection of poetry that is representative of the development of the poetry performance from the early-1970s until 2005, and of the interaction of the performance of poetry with the political and social developments that are characteristic during these 35 years.

My interest in the performance of poetry developed out of my own perception of language as sound (rather than writing), emerging from my experience of moving between different countries and cultures, and out of my conviction that our societies need a radical social and political change. I have also always perceived language as powerful. I believe that understanding the way in which language yields its power, the way in which it participates in the creation of our societies and in the way we relate to each other, can make an important contribution to changing our societies and ourselves. All of the poets whose work I discuss here mobilize the performance of poetry to explore the power of poetic language and its relation to the social. To do their work justice I, too, have had to inflect the material chosen for this study and its theoretical argument through my rethinking of the relationship between theory and practice, between thought and action. This relationship underlies my study as a whole, and particularly chapter 1.

Before I move on to the analytical part of this study, some stylistic clarifications are in order. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own. When I refer to the racial identity of poets I stick with the terms that are used in their cultural and national contexts; thus, I refer to Lemn Sissay and Linton Kwesi Johnson as Black or black British and to Saul Williams as African-American.

¹⁰ For an analysis of the poetry performances of the U.S. American poet Amy Lowell see Bradshaw 2000. In this article Bradshaw analyses Lowell’s poetry performances as an example of self-commodification and, at the same time, liberation. Bradshaw argues that the emerging market for performances – in Lowell’s case with a strong element of show – opened new possibilities for middle-class female poets like Lowell to gain an audience and develop a public persona for a woman poet.
Chapter 1: Commitment and Analysis

Introduction
In this first chapter I will make audible – and hence, contestable – my own voice as that of a cultural analyst who is tied to and framed within the times in which she writes, and I will contextualize my analysis as a response to the poetics of performance poetry. This move is called for because one of the most important characteristics of the performance of poetry is that it ties itself in with the here and now, the moment of the performance and its context. I myself have responded to this connection to the here and now by almost exclusively writing about poets whom I have seen live. The present-ness of their art required my present-ness as an audience member or witness. Hence, it is important that I clarify the moment and the place from which I write this study. In order to do so I will now analyse the concepts that make up my theoretical and political agenda, and that informed my choice of case studies. My theoretical approach is inflected through my rethinking of the relationship between theory and practice, between thought and action. World literature, autonomy, performativity and agency are crucial elements of my conceptual framework. However, as a theorist I take a different approach to the practice of commitment than poets do through poetry. In the second part of this chapter I will discuss four approaches to committed performance poetry that focus on the practice of commitment in theory. The contrast between my own, analytical and comparative approach, and these four approaches brings out the implications of such different practices of commitment.

The concept of world literature responds to the comparative approach that I have chosen. I develop it through the analysis of a discussion of the concept of world literature proposed by Franco Moretti in his articles “Conjectures on World Literature”. This discussion took place in the New Left Review between January 2000 and March 2003. Autonomy, performativity and agency are important for my rethinking of the relationship between theory and practice, and for rethinking the relationship between poetry and the social and political. In my discussion of the concept of autonomy I engage the views of the German philosopher Theodor Adorno and of the U.S. American-Indian theorist Homi Bhabha. Adorno makes the important point that the politically committed artwork is often instrumentalized by conflicting ideologies; hence, he argues, the most political artwork is the one that resists any ideology. Bhabha argues for a “third space of theory”. In my analysis I come to the conclusion that Bhabha endorses a similar notion of autonomy as Adorno does. But whereas Adorno develops his notion of autonomy from a very concrete
moment of writing and in resistance to a specific historical situation, Bhabha generalizes his paradoxical notion of “autonomous commitment”. My discussion of the concept of performativity demonstrates that such a proposition does not hold in the early 2000s. Through my engagement with texts by the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos and Judith Butler I point out that neoliberalist ideology has appropriated the possibility of “making meaning”. By appropriating several concepts that are vital for political struggle the proponents of this ideology have made it impossible to talk outside of their worldview. My analysis raises the question of how and whether it is still possible to write a theory that is not complicitous with neoliberalism, but that resists it and participates in the construction of alternatives. I take recourse to Timothy Brennan’s work for the development of a concept of agency that can inspire theorists to develop such forms of resistance. In the end of the chapter I return to the discussion in the New Left Review that I started with. I argue that only through a close attention to words, to how they are used, and to who uses them can we turn theoretical and poetic language into a tool for liberation, not oppression.

**World Literature**

Because my comparative approach is based on the methodology of Comparative Literature the first concept I will illuminate is the concept of “world literature”. I will not discuss this concept through an analysis of individual articles and books. Instead, I want to start this study on a tone of debate and dialogue. To do so, I take a controversial debate among literary critics and theorists on world literature and the methodology of its scholars as the starting point for my discussion.

The debate was sparked by Franco Moretti’s article “Conjectures on World Literature”, published in the New Left Review in January 2000. “Conjectures” provoked a number of responses. These responses illuminate different problematic aspects of Moretti’s proposal. Moretti responded to them in an article “More Conjectures”, published in 2003, three years after the publication of the first article. The debate on the question of what world literature is and how one should read and understand it is tied in with an enquiry into the possibilities for a politically committed reading of world literature. Therefore, the debate responds to a number of the concerns that are central to my own analysis of the performance of poetry.

In “Conjectures”, Moretti argues that the discipline that dedicates itself to the analysis of world literature – Comparative Literature – has not lived up to the promises of its beginnings since the concept of world literature was first introduced in 1827 by Goethe
and 20 years later, by Marx. Instead of tackling literatures of the whole world, practitioners of comparative literature traditionally focused mainly on literature from Western Europe. This practice, Moretti argues, has been mercifully challenged by the critical and theoretical approaches based on feminism and postcolonialism. They have brought the “great unread” to the attention of comparatists and historians of world literature.

The awareness of literary critics about the “great unread” requires literary critics “to come up with a new sense of the literary field as a whole” and thus, to “look at all of literary history: canonical and noncanonical: together” (Moretti 2000b: 208). The enormity of such a task leads Moretti to the conclusion that “world literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. It has to be different. The categories have to be different”. (55) Moretti suggests that tackling world literature with the currently practiced methodology of close reading would require an overwhelming and humanely impossible amount of reading and of language skills. Moretti proposes a new “critical method”:

>[. . . .] world literature is not an object, it’s a problem, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That’s not how theories come into being; they need a leap, a wager – a hypothesis, to get started. (55)

Moretti goes on to supply such a hypothesis. He borrows from the world-system school of economic history, whose most famous theorists are Immanuel Wallerstein and his theoretical antecedent Fernand Braudel. The world-system school of economics argues that the international capitalist system consists of a core, a periphery, and semi-periphery. These different spheres are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality. Engaging an argument of Montserrat Iglesias Santos, Moretti goes on to argue that

the destiny of a culture (usually a culture of the periphery…) is intersected and altered by another culture (from the core) that “completely ignores it.” (56)

Such literary and cultural interferences create an inequality of literary influence in a homology to the economic inequality between centre and periphery.

In the remainder of his article Moretti seeks to transpose the political sensitivity and analytical force of world systems theory onto the analysis of literature. Taking Bloch’s
formulation of “years of analysis for a day of synthesis” and its successful practice in the work of Wallerstein and Braudel as an example for a possible new methodology of comparative literature, Moretti argues that

The study of world literature will somehow have to reproduce this “page” – which is to say: this relationship between analysis and synthesis – for the literary field. But in that case, literary history [. . . ] will become “second hand”: a patchwork of other people’s research, without a single direct textual reading. (57)

According to Moretti, taking distance from literary texts will enable the literary analyst “to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems” (57). The recognition, comparison and analysis of these units will enable the literary historian to put together a coherent picture of a “literary world system” which, according to Moretti, functions in a homology to the economic inequalities of the world system analysed by Wallerstein and Braudel. 11

The move away from a Eurocentric (and U.S.-centered) practice of Comparative Literature has been one of the most important developments in the methodology of this discipline. Moretti’s article focuses on the practicalities of it. I will here emphasize an aspect of his suggestion that Moretti touches on, but does not discuss openly, namely the ideological or political commitment that informs Moretti’s literary criticism. He acknowledges the political charge of his endeavour in the concluding remarks of “More Conjectures” and elaborates on it in an engagement with Lukács:

[. . .] his lesson lies in how the articulation of his comparative scenario [. . .] is simultaneously an attempt to understand the great political dilemmas of his day. Or in other words: the way we imagine comparative literature is a mirror of how we see the world. (81)

Moretti affirms that “Conjectures” was written in the same line of thought, and he reaffirms the validity of his project under these circumstances, pointing out that he tried to make sense of an approach to world literature “against the background of the unprecedented possibility that the entire world may be subject to a single centre of power – and a centre which has long exerted an equally unprecedented symbolic hegemony” (81).

11 I will discuss this point later in this chapter when I turn to the response of Efraín Kristal to Moretti’s suggestions. Kristal’s complete text gives a detailed critique of Moretti’s recourse to world systems theory.
At this point of my argument I am interested in his emphatic statement that literature and literary criticism in different ways respond to the “world outside” and the forces that shape it. There would be, then, a point of connection between the political sphere and cultural theory. Moretti alludes to his point in the end of “More Conjectures” when he optimistically proposes the contestation of U.S. hegemony by the movements opposing the invasion of Iraq, and suggests that this should have an impact on the way cultural historians think about their object of study:

Early March 2003, when these pages are being written, is in this respect a wonderfully paradoxical moment, when, after twenty years of unchallenged American hegemony, millions of people everywhere in the world have expressed their enormous distance from American politics. As human beings, this is cause to rejoice. As cultural historians, it is cause to reflect. (81)

Moretti could not know that the anti-war movements which he so optimistically cites and which were indeed the outcome of critical thinking and questioning of the states’ actions by citizens, were met with disregard and insult, and in some countries, with repression. Those in power would simply declare inconvenient scientific findings and positions based on critical thinking and inquiries to be untrue, thus demonstrating that critical thinking does not have a place in the relationship between governments and their citizens.

This disregard for the anti-war movements obliges me to start from a very different point of departure in 2006 than the one Moretti in 2003 so hopefully thought to be available. I will reformulate Moretti’s statement that “the way we imagine comparative literature is a mirror of how we see the world”. To open up a perspective that can lead beyond the repression of the anti-war movements I suggest that the way we discuss any literature, but especially world literatures, is informed by how we would like the world to be.

With this statement I open the discussion to the practice of commitment and to the possibility of a committed literary and cultural analysis. I will discuss articles by several thinkers who have tackled the question of commitment at different times in literature and theory. A particular focus of my analysis will be the relationship between commitment and political action that these articles suggest. Starting from Homi Bhabha’s “The Commitment to Theory” (1994), I will problematize the conflation of committed theory and political action that is suggested in this article, and will look at other articles that respond to concerns similar to Bhabha’s. These articles vary from a sharp distinction between
traditional and committed intellectuals in Gramsci’s text “The Intellectuals”, to Adorno’s analysis of the different functions of committed and autonomous works of art in “Commitment”, in which the autonomous work of art emerges as itself inherently political. I will, then problematize the applicability of Adorno’s concepts to contemporary theory by engaging Judith Butler’s application of performativity to political language in *Excitable Speech* with Marcos’ analysis of the appropriation of language and its performative functions by those in power in “Another Geography” (2003). Timothy Brennan’s discussion of “committed theory” in relation to creative and civic agency in “Cosmo-Theory” (2001), finally, outlines some of the consequences of the conflation between committed theory and political action.

**The Third Space of Theory**

Homi Bhabha’s “The Commitment to Theory” puts forward one particular theorization of the connection between theory, commitment and political action that is embraced by many of those who work in contemporary progressive academic circles. He offers a model that integrates political commitment and theory, and thus makes theory a performance of one’s political commitment. In his essay “The Commitment to Theory” (1994), published in *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha suggests that by situating itself in a particular space, theory puts political commitment into practice. Crucial for his argument is that the idea of situating oneself in a “third space” is the expression and the performance of a political commitment. Through this argument, Bhabha establishes a connection between a performance of political commitment through theory and political action. As we will see later on, when I introduce the approaches to performance poetry put forward by Paul Beasley and Kwame Dawes, this sounds analogous to what my performance poets appear to contend about the relationship between poetry and political action.

The act of situating oneself in a “Third Space” is crucial for Bhabha’s argument. In “The Commitment to Theory” he suggests a double use of his concept of the Third Space. Firstly, he uses it as a cultural concept. The Third Space has developed in the interstices between different cultures and is characterized by the cultural hybridity of its inhabitants. Secondly, he uses the term to designate a space where theory and practice merge because they are both driven by commitment.

The two uses of the term “Third Space” are related to each other, as Bhabha explains early on in his article:
I want to take my stand on the shifting margins of cultural displacement – that confounds any profound or “authentic” sense of a “national” culture or an “organic” intellectual – and ask what the function of a committed theoretical perspective might be, once the cultural and historical hybridity of the postcolonial world is taken as the paradigmatic place of departure. (1994: 21)

Implicitly at stake in these argumentative moves that are based on spatial metaphors is Antonio Gramsci’s differentiation between the “traditional” and the “organic” intellectual.

In the article “The Intellectuals”, published in the _Prison Notebooks_, Gramsci introduces the difference between “traditional intellectuals” and “organic intellectuals”. The “organic” intellectuals develop out of a particular social group:

Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. (2003: 5)

Gramsci argues that each social group needs intellectuals to theorize its identity and its function. The “organic” intellectual fulfills this function from within their group:

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator. (2003: 10)

Thus, the “organic” intellectuals have a very specific function and certain responsibilities within their social group. These include her participation in this group’s social and political aspirations.

The “traditional” intellectuals do not evolve out of any particular social group, even though they have emerged as a by-product of several, at times competing, social groups. However, they form a group in themselves:
Since these various categories of traditional intellectuals experience through an “*épître de corps*” their uninterrupted historical continuity and their special qualification, they thus put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group. (2003: 7)

When Bhabha suggests that “the shifting margins of cultural displacement” confound “any profound sense of an authentic ‘national’ culture or an ‘organic’ intellectual” then he is implicitly suggesting that the – class-based – concept of the “organic” intellectual is tied up with the idea of a national culture. The clear-cut identification of an authentic national culture loses its meaning because the recent developments of cultural displacement make people part of not a unified, but of a hybrid culture; the concept of an “organic intellectual” loses its meaning as well, presumably because the shifts caused by cultural displacement make it impossible for anyone to emerge out of any one particular social group.  

In his article “Antonio Gramsci and Postcolonial Theory: ‘Southernism’”, Timothy Brennan traces arguments such as Bhabha’s back to what he calls the Bobbio/Mouffe line of Gramscian scholarship. These scholars, many of whom came to Gramsci through Althusser, shifted “the emphasis from labor to race” (158) by correctly drawing on Gramsci’s sensitivity for difference and diversity and his articulation of “the multiple faces and differential feel of wage laborers in a global, Fordist system” (158). The problematic aspect of this argumentative move, Brennan argues, is that the politically militant and organized aspect of “labor” was not taken over into the concept of “race” that was developed out of this argumentative shift. The problematic reinterpretation of political militancy is reflected in the discussion on Gramsci’s intellectuals.

I have outlined above that the “organic intellectual” in the Gramscian sense takes an active part in the organized politics of the class that has produced him. She is not only a producer of knowledge, but also an organizer. Thus, the political commitment of the “organic intellectual” emerges out of where the “organic intellectual” situates herself. It is also inseparable from concrete political action. The term “organic intellectual” enforces this reading because “organic” refers to a state of being. However, Brennan points out that

the term “organic intellectual” […] simply does not exist in Gramsci’s original Italian. He is instead speaking of intellectuals *who organize* – who are aware of their place in a field of interests. (174)

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12 For an analysis of the situation of the contemporary researcher on the borderlines between university and social movements as a situation informed by the politics of privatization see Biglia (2005).
Speaking of an “organizing intellectual” and not of an “organic intellectual” indicates that the type of intellectual described by Gramsci is not identified by a particular location or a way of being, but by the activity of organizing and by awareness of her position as one on which interests from the outside impact heavily.

At first sight Bhabha’s reconceptualization of the theorist seems to be in line with the concept of the “organic intellectual”, but not with the “organizing intellectual”. Like Bhabha, Gramsci suggests that the theoretical and the activist realms are not separate and that the theorist is to an extent a product or spokesperson of her environment. The two theorists differ, however, even on the “organic intellectual” when it comes to assigning one’s commitment to a particular cause. Bhabha refuses early on in his essay to align himself with any concrete political objective:

At this stage in the argument [or anywhere later in Bhabha’s article], I do not want to identify any special “object” of political allegiance – the Third World, the working class, the feminist struggle. Although such an objectification of political activity is crucial and must significantly inform political debate, it is not the only option for those critics or intellectuals who are committed to progressive political change in the direction of a socialist society. (21)

Bhabha suggests a way for the theorist to practice her political commitment without belonging to any particular social group or taking any concrete political action. He considers this project a sign of political maturity:

It is a sign of political maturity to accept that there are many forms of political writing whose different effects are obscured when they are divided between the “theoretical” and the “activist.” (21)

The option that Bhabha suggests is “the process of ‘intervening ideologically’” (22). He argues with Stuart Hall that

the notion of hegemony implies a politics of identification of the imaginary. This occupies a discursive space which is not exclusively delimited by the history of
either the right or the left. It exists somehow in-between these political parties, and also between the familiar divisions of theory and political practice. (22)\(^{13}\)

The emergence of such a “politics of the identification of the imaginary” relies on a dynamic whose identification Bhabha traces back to the “rule of repeatable materiality”,

[. . . .] which Foucault describes as the process by which statements from one institution can be transcribed in the discourse of another. Despite the schemata of use and application that constitute a field of stabilization for the statement, any change in the statement’s conditions of use and reinvestment, any alteration in its field of experience or verification, or indeed any difference in the problems to be solved, can lead to the emergence of a new statement: the difference of the same. (22)

Here, Bhabha draws attention to the structure of iteration. In iteration a social norm or political concept is being cited, i.e. performed or quoted. In the moment of citation the agent who is citing has the possibility of altering the meaning of the norm he is citing, and can thus open up a space for the emergence of a new dimension of meaning.\(^{14}\)

Bhabha explains iteration as a possibility to subvert the existing system by appropriating the terms, concepts and norms it offers. This is part of the subversive and democratizing appeal of the concepts of performativity and of iteration itself. Following this logic, Bhabha argues that a practice of theory that situates itself in a certain cultural space and that uses the function of iteration to change people’s ideas and perceptions of a

\(^{13}\) In an analysis of different readings of Gramsci, Brennan critiques Hall’s reading of Gramsci on several points. He argues that Hall “sees Gramsci playing an identical role to his [Hall’s] own, albeit in another era – namely, as strategic interpreter of a new Right bloc that has vanquished the Left, and from which we must now learn” (Brennan 2001: 159-160). This, argues Brennan, is an important insight of Hall’s. The critical break between Hall and Gramsci occurs, according to Brennan, “over the matter of overcoming: what Gramsci saw as the supersession of his adversaries by a fuller explication of a more comprehensive, more subtly differentiated worldview that he felt was still found in Marxism as a self-correcting, epochal orientation (as distinct from a source prematurely cast aside)” (Brennan 2001: 160). However, Hall refuses this engagement with and of Marxism “as a self-correcting, epochal orientation” when he in “Gramsci and Us” “asks us to repeatedly reject various positions out of hand” (160), these positions being social democracy’s “little smidgeon of Keynesianism” and “the old Fabian thing”. In both “Gramsci and Us” and “Gramsci’s Relevance” Hall levels vague charges against “some versions of Marxism”, etc. Brennan argues that such an argument leads to a foreclosing of the strict Marxism of Gramsci. Incidentally, it also allows for a detachment of Gramsci’s theoretical work from his organizational work in the Communist Party, which is the point that Bhabha seeks to make when he writes that the “discursive space” in which the imaginary is identified lies between “the familiar division between theory and political practice”. Contradicting Bhabha, one might say that Gramsci’s theoretical practice is firmly lodged within a political practice, and is therefore inseparable from it.

political reality would be a form of political action. The necessity for his argumentative move seems obvious: It is difficult to find a context for concrete political action if one cannot or does not want to work on a long-term basis in a certain place and with a certain group. An intellectual who is not tied to a particular place or to a particular group within a certain society, but nevertheless wants to act out his political commitment, should be able to do so. Bhabha’s perspective seems to provide a possibility for this. However, his proposition has its pitfalls.

I will limit myself to discussing only those aspects that are directly relevant for my argument. One is related to the metaphors of space that Bhabha employs, most notably in defining the “third space of theory”. The other is related to Bhabha’s use of iteration.\textsuperscript{15}

**Autonomy**

To explain how the first pitfall functions it will be useful to engage Bhabha’s proposition of a third space of theory with Adorno’s analysis of “commitment” in autonomous and committed works of art in his article of the same title, “Commitment”.\textsuperscript{16} Discussing Sartre’s essay “What is literature?”, Adorno argues against a reductive and, in fact, oppressive division between art and theory on the one hand, and political action on the other. Paradoxically, he decries – and rightly so – a peculiar complicity between committed works of arts and attitudes that enable totalitarianism. His argument is the following.

The works of art that are produced with this type of commitment endorse a particular ideological position and seek to impose it on the recipient:

The latter [committed works] can all too readily claim all the noble values for themselves and do with them as they please. […] In Germany commitment in art amounts primarily to parroting what everybody is saying, or at least what everybody would like to hear. Hidden in the notion of a “message,” of art’s manifesto, even if it is politically radical, is a moment of accommodation to the world; the gesture of addressing the listener contains a secret complicity with those being addressed, who can, however, be released from their illusions only if that complicity is rescinded. (2003: 257)

\textsuperscript{15} My discussion of the relationship between art, language, power and spaces has benefited immensely from discussions with Octavi Comeron on this same subject, and the co-organized workshop entitled “Language, Power, Spaces”, held at the CASA meeting in July 2004.

\textsuperscript{16} The title of the German original, published in *Noten zur Literatur*, is “Engagement”. The German word “Engagement” has a different connotation than the English “commitment”. “Engagement” refers always to political or social issues, and it has the connotation of action. One cannot be “engagiert” to an ideology. Someone who is “engagiert” is always actively working for her cause, usually in an organized movement.
Committed works of art, Adorno argues, do not seek to empower their recipients so that they can decide whether they want to support a particular cause or not. On the contrary, in order to persuade the recipient of the cause they champion, they seek to construct another “illusion” in which they want the recipient to remain, so that he supports the cause without questioning it.

So-called autonomous works of art function in an entirely different way:

In dismantling illusion they explode art from the inside, whereas proclaimed commitment only subjugates art from the outside, hence only illusory. Their implacability compels the change in attitude that committed works only demand. (2003: 254)

The implacability is achieved by a refusal to “accommodate the world” as it is. Committed art works do not attempt to persuade the recipient to change her attitude towards certain things. On the contrary, it is the engagement with the work itself that effects this change, without obliging the recipient to commit themselves to any particular cause or ideology. Adorno’s analysis of the function of the autonomous art work emerges from a specific context, as Adorno himself indicates:

The current deformation of politics, the rigidification of circumstances that are not starting to thaw anywhere, forces spirit to move to places where it does not need to become part of the rabble. (258)

During the Cold War period the two opposing systems sought to make any refusal to participate in the “rabble” impossible. In the middle of this onslaught the truly committed work of art “is charged with wordlessly maintaining what politics has no access to” (258).

As it refuses to be taken over or instrumentalized by either of the competing ideologies, it becomes itself inherently political because of its refusal:

This is not the time for political works of art; rather, politics has migrated into the autonomous work of art, and it has penetrated most deeply into works that present themselves as politically dead [...]. (258)
It is these “politically dead” works that are not complicit with a world in which two ideologies were fiercely competing for world domination. Both ideologies, argues Adorno, use similar strategies. Instead of empowering the subject, they try to manipulate it; instead of engaging with thought, they try to channel it. Adorno suggests that the only way to counter such a prescriptive mode of thinking and to create and live an alternative one is to withdraw into a “third”, autonomous space.

In Adorno’s scenario – a world in which everyone had to choose for one ideology or the other – the construction of such a space was a political decision of resistance to an all-consuming system. The autonomous space, denounced as the site of “spectatorlike neutrality” by those who were out to catch souls by depriving people of the possibility to choose anything other than the ideology on offer, would indeed be a site of intellectual independence and critique.

Bhabha’s notion of commitment is in many ways related to Adorno’s notion of autonomy. Bhabha seeks to recover the notion of commitment as a form of struggle against a reduction and limitation of the human subject, against channeling and simplification, and against a profoundly anti-intellectual and uncritical attitude. In this sense Bhabha argues for what can be called an “autonomous commitment”, endorsing paradox as a way of thinking. Whereas Adorno sees commitment as, unfortunately in his view, always connected with a cause, Bhabha argues that it does not need to be. The committed theory that Bhabha talks about would be a performance of the resistance of critical thought against all-consuming ideologies, whichever ideology that would be. In this sense it is also committed, but autonomous of any ideology.

However, I contend that Bhabha’s proposition does not hold in the early 21st century and did not even hold in the mid-1990s because it is not a response to its political and social context, whereas Adorno’s notion of autonomy was precisely that. In the following I will argue that the politics of neoliberalism have reconfigured the conditions we live and write under to such an extent that it has subsumed all possibly autonomous spaces.  

17 Christopher Prendergast discusses the notion of autonomy in some detail in his response to Moretti and to Pascale Casanova, whose study La République Mondiale des Lettres also takes recourse to a version of world-systems theory. Prendergast struggles with the notion of autonomy that Casanova claims emerges from the writings of one of several types of postcolonial writers. According to Casanova, the “revolutionary” writers from “ex-centric” loci of enunciation generate an important shift in the world system of literature by way of their subversion of the “centers” of literary production. Prendergast argues that two types of autonomy emerge from Casanova’s analysis: “a false or mystified kind, which arises when a major literary power has accumulated enough literary ‘capital’ to allow the writer to go about his or her business unmolested (in this reminiscent of Gramsci’s ‘traditional intellectual’); and a true autonomy, hard-won in the struggles of the ‘ex-centric’ to enter the force field of the literary system” (Prendergast: 108). According to Prendergast, Casanova “insists that as a practice literature possesses a certain specificity, even autonomy – although, in refusing to sever literary practice from the pressures of a wider history, she quite rightly repudiates that mystified version
What I called the first pitfall of Bhabha’s “third space of theory”, then, resides in his implicit evocation of Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual as defined by a non-chosen identity rather than by a chosen activity, as well as his implicit interpretation of autonomy as independent from a very particular context.\footnote{In his most recent book \textit{Wars of Position} Timothy Brennan clearly brings out the distinction between what he calls “politics of being” and “politics of position”.

\footnote{The EZLN first became internationally known for the Chiapas uprising in 1994. The uprising took place in protest against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its foreseeable consequences. For information on the EZLN and the texts that they and the Subcomandante Marcos have published see \url{www.ezln.org} (some texts are available in an English translation) and \url{http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezlnco.html} (collection of texts by the EZLN and the Subcomandante Marcos in English translation).}

I will now turn to the concept of performativity and analyse the second pitfall of Bhabha’s “third space of theory” by demonstrating the problematic use he makes of the concept.

**Performativity**

Bhabha’s conceptualization of a hybrid third space is contingent on the existence of several other, diverse spaces. In his article “Another Geography” the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, the spokesman of the Ejército Zapatista para la Liberación Nacional (EZLN), describes a scenario in which one power seeks to subsume all spaces into one homogeneous one.\footnote{The EZLN first became internationally known for the Chiapas uprising in 1994. The uprising took place in protest against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its foreseeable consequences. For information on the EZLN and the texts that they and the Subcomandante Marcos have published see \url{www.ezln.org} (some texts are available in an English translation) and \url{http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezlnco.html} (collection of texts by the EZLN and the Subcomandante Marcos in English translation).} This power is identified as the ideology of neoliberalism. Marcos uses the metaphor of the Tower of Babel to explain his contention. The Tower of Babel, he argues, could only be constructed because of the linguistic homogeneity among the peoples who built it. The moment that they started speaking different languages and became linguistically heterogeneous, the construction of the Tower of Babel became impossible. This is where neoliberalism steps in to revive the initial project:

Neoliberalism’s project for the world is nothing more than a refashioning of the Tower of Babel. According to the book of Genesis, men, in their striving to reach the heights, agreed on a colossal project: building a tower that was so high it would reach the heavens. The Christian god punished their pride with diversity. Speaking different languages, the men could no longer continue with the building, and they...
disbanded. Neoliberalism is attempting to erect the same edifice, not in order to reach an unlikely heaven, but in order to free itself once and for all from diversity, which it considers a curse, and in order to ensure that the Powers never stop being Powers. (2003a, no page numbers)

It is important to note that the basis on which neoliberalism wants to erect the Tower of Babel differs profoundly from that of the biblical peoples:

While unanimity was possible in the prehistoric Tower of Babel because of common speech (the same language), consensus is obtained in neoliberal history through the arguments of force, threats, arbitrariness, war. (2003a, no page numbers)

In Adorno’s and Bhabha’s model we have two powers or cultures that oppose each other. The third space emerges from the friction between them. In Marcos’ model, we have only one power that imposes its own culture. This power does not even bother to oppose those that are different; it simply swallows them up.

After swallowing up all other spaces, neoliberalism organizes the emerging new, single space in a hierarchical manner. In its analysis of the way neoliberalism does this, Marcos’ article deploys a pronounced spatial metaphor. This helps him to demonstrate the interconnectedness between the architectural endeavor of constructing the new Tower of Bable as a location with an above and a below, the geographical vision that neoliberalism proposes, and the geopolitics that enforce this vision of geography:

Those who reside in the North do not do so in the geographical North, but in the social North, that is, they are above. Those who live in the South are below. Geography has been simplified: there is an above and a below. The space above is narrow and has room for just a few. The one below is so broad that it takes in every place on the planet and has room for all of humanity. (2003a, no page numbers)

Marcos’ choice of words, his mixture of images from unrelated areas – architecture and geography – that suddenly condition each other, demonstrates how bizarre such a view of the world is. Talking about world geography one should not even be able to apply the terms “above” and “below” because geographically they do not make any sense: the world is round, therefore there is no above or below. In other words, neoliberalism imposes its own vision of geography.
The geography that neoliberalism imposes is inherently hierarchical. It turns the scientific facts of earth science in a biased way into geography. Like all geographies, it is constructed by human beings, but the geography of neoliberalism has the explicit purpose of imposing a hierarchy. In this scenario there is no second homogeneous space that allows for a third space to emerge out of a friction between these two spaces. There is no point to which one can withdraw – and this is one of the most horrifying and claustrophobic aspects of this system. The system leaves no space outside of it. It subsumes any possibly autonomous space into its hierarchical geography.

The construction of the “geography of power”, as Marcos calls it, is related to the performative function of iteration. Here lies the second pitfall in Bhabha’s argument. In iteration, the author loses some control over the effect that his text has on others. This is part of its subversive and democratizing appeal. But Bhabha does not take into account the possibility that the dynamic can backfire, depending on who is using it. This is precisely the point that Marcos makes.  

He argues that to achieve their aim of complete domination, those in power need to impose homogeneity. One of their means of doing so – apart from sheer force and oppression – is the appropriation of the meaning of concepts. Those in power do so by modifying the meanings of these concepts to support their purposes. They have, for example, managed to conflate “equality” and “homogeneity”:

That equality which destroys heterogeneity is equality with a model. “We are equal to that”, the new religion of money tells us. Human beings do not look like themselves, nor like each other, but rather like a conception which is imposed by he who exercises dominion, he who orders, he who is on top of that power which is the modern world. Those who are different are below. And the only equality which exists on the lower floors is that of renouncing being different, or of opting for being so in a shameful manner. (2003a, no page numbers)

Equality, however, is not just any concept. Together with fraternity and liberty it was one of the three concepts of the French revolution and has ever since been an extremely powerful term in political struggles. It was once suggested to me that certain terms – such as liberty, fraternity, equality, democracy, justice, dignity – are terms of struggle (Kampfbegriffe). Terms of struggle are terms that enable those who use them to recognize, demand and

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20 For a detailed analysis of the Neozapatistas’ approach to language and the power of language see Huffschmid 2004.
defend their rights. They empower and legitimize; thus, they become weapons in a struggle. As terms, they can become the means of travel between theoretical concepts and actions; in other words, between theory and practice.\textsuperscript{21}

Marcos describes a process in which power takes over terms of struggle and gives them a fixed meaning that makes them meaningless for the struggles that depend on these concepts to articulate their own meaning. What happened to the concept of “equality” is just one aspect of a strategy that affects language as such:

Without caring whether or not we are aware of it, the Power is constructing and imposing a new geography of words. The names are the same, but what is being named has changed. And so mistakes are political doctrine, and what is true is heresy. The different is now the opponent, the other is the enemy. Democracy is the unanimity in obedience. Liberty is only the liberty to choose the manner in which we conceal our difference. Peace is passive submission. And war is now a pedagogical method for teaching geography. (2003a, no page numbers)

The new meanings of these terms do not permit any protest against the system that has established their meaning. Neither is it possible to change their meaning again because the new meaning deprives anyone but power of agency. Thus, the terms are deprived of a flexibility that is essential for the democratic use of iteration.

The U.S. American theorist Judith Butler refers to a similar process in her study \textit{Excitable Speech}. Analyzing the acceptance speech of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison she comes to the conclusion that

Language remains alive when it refuses to “encapsulate” (20) or “capture” (21) the events and lives it describes. But when it seeks to effect that capture, language not only loses its vitality, but acquires its own violent force, [. . . .]. (1997: 9)

All the terms of struggle whose appropriation by power Marcos describes above have a violent force in their neoliberalist version; they silence, deprive of agency, and oppress. But

\textsuperscript{21} It would also be possible to read Marcos’ analysis as a critique of the conflation of discourses. “Equality” comes from a discourse that is historically connected to political struggle. “Homogeneity” and “heterogeneity” come from academic and analytical discourses that are concerned with race and cultural identity. The conflation of the two discourses on unequal terms results in the disabling of the first by the second. Marcos argues that they are inseparable. His proposition is related to that of Nancy Fraser, who has addressed this problematic in terms of “politics of redistribution” and “politics of recognition”, for example in Fraser 1999.
in appropriating them, power has also appropriated their moral weight. The terms of struggle that power has appropriated are now terms of war. The word – or concept – of equality for example is so powerful that it can legitimize the annihilation of difference in its name. Note what I just wrote: the word *legitimizes*; the word commits an action. Marcos’ understanding of language is performative. In his interrogation of the function of the word “equality” he does not ask what the word means, but what it does. A certain interpretation of the concept of “equality” has enabled those in power to eradicate difference and to establish homogeneity in the place of diversity and pretend that they did it for the good of everyone. But it was not the word that committed the deeds.

Marcos points out something very important: words and concepts are at the beginning of a chain of events. In that sense they are powerful because they can set events in motion and because they enable and legitimize certain actions. However, they do not commit these actions. Human beings do. Marcos describes a perlocutionary speech act. Butler explains the perlocutionary speech act as follows:

Perlocutionary acts […] are those utterances that initiate a set of consequences: in a perlocutionary speech act, “saying something will produce certain consequences,” but the saying and the consequences produced are temporally distinct; those consequences are not the same as the act of speech, but are, rather, “what we bring about or achieve by saying something.” (1997: 17)

The system that Marcos describes has combined the possibilities of iteration with the possession of state power, economic power, military power, and control over the media and education. Thus, those in power have found a way to control the perlocutionary speech act as well as its consequences. They have learned to use iteration in order to impose a system that allows them to deprive language of its flexibility. They use iteration to change the meaning of words and concepts so that they are compatible with the neoliberalist system and its power structures, and so that the neoliberalist worldview becomes a very part of the meaning of said words and concepts. Once this has been done, those in power impose the new meaning as the final meaning. In doing so, the system does away with the possibility of iteration. Hence, it has managed to make words and concepts unavailable for anyone who disagrees with the worldview that has become part of the meaning of said words and concepts. The concepts appropriated by those in power become then unavailable for those
who struggle against the power that determines the meaning of these concepts: now, if they
demand “equality” they demand “homogeneity”, even if this is not what they mean.

In this scenario words do no longer serve as a means for communication. Instead,
they serve to construct what Marcos calls “another geography”, which is “the geography of
power”. For if what is different becomes the contrary, what is other becomes the enemy,
then the annihilation of the different is legitimate and its replacement by the model of those
who first determine the meaning of words and then map out geopolitics, is desirable.

How to counter such a development? One of Marcos’ most important projects and
one of the Zapatistas’ major achievements has been their constant work with language.
They have managed to restore some flexibility to language and in doing so, to recuperate
many concepts for a vocabulary of dissent and protest. They are capable of doing so
because by way of politically militant (and military) action they have effectively contested
the sole authority of economic and political forces over the determination of the meaning of
words and concepts. They have complemented their military move with a close analysis of
language. Thus, they have managed to create spaces in which the meanings of words and
concepts can be discussed and redefined, and in which the flexibility of iteration becomes
again available for a large group of people.

Bhabha, in contrast, does not account for exterior forces that can interfere with the
process of iteration. He assumes that theory can negotiate its relationship with political
action on its own terms, staying at home so to speak. However, he does not take into
account that the meaning of the terms which are used to negotiate this relationship might be
determined by an outside force. He cannot take this into account because he refrains from
addressing the context of the third space in which theory is to be spoken. As a consequence,
problems arise for the conception of agency.

Agency

The final aspect of the interaction between commitment, theory and literature, the topic of
this chapter, concerns, then, the problematic conflation of creative and civic agency. The
argumentative moves that lead to such a conflation are especially visible in theoretical
discourses on transculturality and transnationality, from which the discussion on world
literature that I have integrated in this chapter draws much of its initiative. Timothy
Brennan identifies some of these arguments in his analysis of cosmopolitanism in his article
“Cosmo-Theory”.

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Brennan argues in the beginning of the article that contemporary cosmopolitanism is contingent on globalization:

for our purposes, globalization bears on cosmopolitanism as structure to idea. It is that purportedly new material reality to which the new ethos – cosmopolitanism – responds. The latter is, then, an ethical stance that its proponents argue grows inexorably out of exciting and revolutionary new material conditions: the mode of proper social conduct appropriate to a heretofore unseen age. (662-63)

If cosmopolitanism is an “ethical stance” it becomes difficult to pin it down because it is applied in different contexts, for example in cultural theory, journalism, art, political analysis, or policy making. Cosmopolitanism’s applicability to all these different contexts turns it into a connector between them. Attached to the connotations and interpretations of cosmopolitanism and the terms and concepts that make up its discourse are ethical values and ideological approaches. Such values and ideologies might be specific to each of these spheres or to particular inhabitants to each of these spheres. However, Brennan argues that they have use-value in different spheres. Marcos’ interpretation of the term equality demonstrates how the use-value of this concept is different for a Neo-Zapatista than it is for a representative of the Bush administration. The member of the Bush administration mobilizes the Neo-Zapatista connotations of the concept even though his political aims are opposed to the Zapatista’s. If the Neo-Zapatista was to use the term equality again, his listener might associate the connotations added by the member of the Bush administration. Fortunately, the Neo-Zapatista realizes that words that travel between different spheres pick up baggage on the way. The Neo-Zapatista therefore looks not only at the word, but also at its baggage and states explicitly what he means when he talks about “equality”.

According to Brennan, many cultural theorists are not as sharp-sighted as the Neo-Zapatistas. They do no look at how the gift they give to a word or a term as they elaborate it into a concept is being mobilized by, say, members of the Bush administration or a spokesman of the World Bank, and they do not look at the baggage given to the word by the Bush administration or the World Bank spokesman, once that it returns to the academy after its travel. Brennan argues that this lack of sharp-sightedness on the part of cultural theorists might be due to an intentional decision to not clean their glasses:

It is not out of the question [. . .] that the cultural theorist actually wants to be confused with his or her other – that cultural theory wants to appear part of a public sphere that it is really only gesturing toward even as it denies this sphere is a corporate sphere. There are also local political considerations that prevent the cultural critics in an atmosphere of obligatory progressivism [. . .] from drawing lines of contact between themselves and more official representatives of public order. (664)

Progressivist intellectuals have a strong affinity with the “organic intellectual” and think that the cultural theorist is doing politically relevant work, or at least that she should do. And quite possibly she is doing politically relevant work, but because she does not concern herself with finding out who her work is relevant for and how it is used, her work might serve parties she never meant to serve. In Brennan’s words, many cultural theorists operate as if they were autonomous, as if “intellectuals did not work for anyone, or had no home” (676).

Brennan argues that this sophisticated strategy of self-paralysis developed out of the attempt to avoid complicity with the attempt of those in power to establish the universality of Eurocentric values:

The “will to truth,” the discursive regime as an arena in which party politics has been displaced by the microlevels of personal interaction, all direct us to the now overfamiliar poststructuralist positions of avoiding complicity with Enlightenment power by remaining vigilant against repressive claims of universality. In this theoretical climate [. . .] one avoids complicity by centering oneself. Such centering has logically moved the theorist to a form of “biopolitics” and specifically to a politics of the body, which among other things is the ultimate expression of a domain of enclosure that cannot be guilty of trespass on another’s. [. . .] The only way to escape complicity as such [Brennan cites the particular example of Bataille] was to oppose all opposition, disagreement, or overcoming. The ultimate riposte to power, in other words, was to make oneself powerless – to let power have its way, provided one was innocent of using it. (675-76)

Accordingly, cosmo-theory concerns itself not so much with the citizen as it does with the subject. Brennan argues that poststructuralist critics conceive of the individual as being
incompatible with genuine agency. Thus poststructuralism – and also postmodernism – replaces the individual with the subject. In its conception of the subject, postmodernism splits off the agential aspects which modernism assigned to the individual from the subject (679).

As a result, “agency is captioned as creativity while ceasing to stand for production or intervention” (679). In a close reading of an analysis or theoretical argument the such-inclined theorist produces

a discourse of “processes,” “movements,” unfoldings rather than designs, projects or campaigns. Life is described as what happens to people. It is not as though there were no role for agency in such theories, which on the contrary rely on excited exaggerations of activity, creativity and plebeian initiative. But agency is almost never seen in moments of civic participation. It is primarily about subject formation. Agency, in fact, tends to be seen as a gradual process of coming to accept a fait accompli, and learning to mobilize it. (677)

Brennan’s criticism is directed against theoretical approaches to different aspects of cultural analysis. However, in the article I am quoting from he is particularly concerned with those theories that are deployed to analyse “transnational” and “cultural hybrid” identities. Such identities are produced by diasporic and borderlands situations. If the theoretical approaches that Brennan characterizes as “cosmo-theory” conceptualize the situations that produce “hybrid” or “transnational” identities in terms of a fait accompli, then these same approaches foreclose the coercive origin and the violent perpetuation of these situations. As a consequence, one cannot ask what happened to the people who are responsible for these situations, whether they continue the projects that produced diasporic and borderlands situations, and what are the motivations behind their actions.23

Thus, it becomes impossible to ask the question of how these powers might still impact on the framework of the third space; whether they might impose rules, constraints, or whether they might implement strategies that limit hybridity to the third space in order to make sure that it does not spill over into the first and the second space, which conceivably also exist even though Bhabha does not investigate them. Under these conditions one can

23 I refer to “diasporic situations” because Brennan criticizes theoretical approaches that analyse these situations and the impact they have on civic and creative agency. I will not go into a detailed discussion of theoretical models of diaspora because this would lead too far away from my subject. For an analysis of such models see Clifford 1999.
only conclude that the cultural hybridity Bhabha writes about is being developed in a space whose margins have been decided upon not by the people who inhabit it, but by somebody else. In other words, the third space is a *fait accompli* and those inhabiting it are making the best of their situation.

In order to contest its situation of a *fait accompli*, Bhabha’s third space as the location of cultural hybridity would have to address its relationship to its surroundings – but this is precisely what Bhabha does not do. Instead, he uses the concepts of hybridity and the third space so as to conflate theory and political action to a point at which they become indistinguishable. Transferred into an uninterrogated public discourse which is dominated by a neoliberalist ideology, such an approach not only leads to the self-paralysis of the intellectual, but also deals a harsh blow to activism. For, Bhabha’s formulations foreclose both activism and political militancy by collapsing theory and political action into each other. Theory becomes a form of activism, but activism is never acknowledged as a form of theory, or even as informing theory. In fact, activism becomes obsolete because according to Bhabha’s argument theory already effects political change. However, I contend that the line between theory and political change has never been as direct as Bhabha suggests. There have always been people who have taken it upon themselves to create conditions under which certain theories could become widely known and effective and were translated (more or less faithfully) into concrete political measures and actions. To not acknowledge this step is not only disrespectful towards many people who did just that, it also means that theory becomes ineffective.

Before I return to the debate on the study of world literature I need to point out another conflation between spaces. Brennan indicates, but does not explore the peculiar affinity of left-wing cultural theory with art rather than activism. This affinity, which usually is not addressed, is one of my reasons for integrating Adorno’s article into this discussion. In my analysis of Bhabha’s text I have argued that he claims a similar notion of autonomy for theory as Adorno claimed for art. This is an example of the blurred boundaries this time not between the academic space and the public space, but between the academic space and the space of art. By placing cultural theory side by side with art, Bhabha suggests that art and theory work in a similar way. This notion is at the very least questionable.24

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24 For an analysis of the relationship between art, economics, politics and theory see Comeron 2007.
A Sharp Lens and a Wide Horizon

I now return to the debate on the study of world literature. I will briefly illuminate two moments of this discussion in light of what I just said. Both examples pick up on notions of equality and inequality, on homogeneity and heterogeneity, and on commitment and agency. One moment comes from Moretti’s engagement with Efraín Kristal’s response to “Conjectures” and the second comes from the response of Jonathan Arac to Moretti. 

In “Considering Coldly…” Kristal struggles with Moretti’s application of world systems theory to world literature among other issues. He writes:

I am arguing, however, in favour of a view of world literature in which [. . . ] the West does not have a monopoly over the creation of forms that count; in which themes and forms can move in several directions – from the centre to the periphery, from the periphery to the centre, from one periphery to another, while some original forms of consequence may not move much at all. (73-74)

Moretti replies:

Yes, forms can move in several directions. But do they? This is the point, and a theory of literary history should reflect on the constraints of their movements, and the reasons behind them. What I know about European novels, for instance, suggests that hardly any forms “of consequence” don’t move at all; that movement from one periphery to another (without passing through the centre) is almost unheard of; that movement from the periphery to the centre is less rare, but still unusual, while that from the centre to the periphery is by far the most frequent. Do these facts imply that the West has “a monopoly over the creation of the forms that count”? Of course not. Cultures from the centre have more resources to pour into innovation (literary and otherwise), and are thus more likely to produce it [. . .]. The model proposed in “Conjectures” does not reserve invention to a few cultures and deny (sic) it to others: it specifies the conditions under which it is more likely to occur, and the forms it may take. Theories will never abolish inequality; they can only hope to explain it. (75–77)

In his response to Kristal, Moretti assumes a stable position that allows him to easily recognize a center and a periphery. The stable and distanced position allows him to produce,
through the methodology of distant reading, a satellite map of the system of world literature. This map is a still image and as such does not show the movements in different locations of the literary world system.

Nor is Moretti interested in them; he is interested in the larger picture. Kristal, on the other hand, zooms in on several cases of interference between world literatures. He talks about Latin American poetry as the genre that effectively contests Moretti’s thesis that movement occurs mainly from the centre to the periphery. To do so he closely engages with several examples, such as Rubén Dario’s influence on Spanish poetry and on the novels of the Latin American boom, which in turn influenced European novelists, and on the resonance that César Vallejo’s poetry has on Beckett’s drama. With his case studies he walks back and forth between center and periphery and allows himself to be led by examples from different genres that, in turn, cross paths many times in different regions of the world. Kristal’s voice is always present in his engagement with his objects of analysis that, as a consequence, are not reduced to objects, but remain equal partners in a discussion. This close engagement allows him to demonstrate convincingly that there is indeed movement from the periphery to the center.

Commitment informs both responses. Kristal understands literature and literary criticism as one way of getting access to a social situation that calls for social transformation, and as one way of understanding the struggles for social transformation the critic encounters in her life and her reading. On his part, Moretti argues that it is important to acknowledge the realities – i.e. that there is hardly any movement from the periphery to the center and that theories will never abolish inequality. He emphasizes his own commitment to a left-wing ideology by making inequality the defining category of his analysis. He also clearly recognizes his limits as a literary theorist when he argues that theory cannot abolish inequality and by implication, cannot be a substitute for political activism. However, his is a conception of an analysis of world literature as a satellite picture seen from far away. This conception is based on the claim that the critic is not part of the world literary system. This implied claim jeopardizes his whole project from the perspective of his own commitment because, as became clear from my analysis of Adorno’s and Bhabha’s approaches to the concept of autonomy, criticism can only be effective when the critic positions herself or himself clearly within the context he or she criticizes.

Jonathan Arac’s criticism of “Conjectures” points out another instance in which distant reading undermines Moretti’s commitment to a different way of reading world
literature. Arac focuses his critique on Moretti’s conception of “distant reading” and argues that his perspective remains Eurocentric in the end. A propos of Wallerstein’s conceptualization of the relationship between centre and periphery and Moretti’s application of it to the study of literature, Arac points out that Wallerstein conceives of the relation between core and periphery as synchronic – only its relation to the periphery allows the core to be core, and the two together define the system at a given point in time. But in Moretti’s law, the centre’s relation to the core operates by “influence”. That is, the centre is earlier than the core: what in Wallerstein is spatial becomes, in Moretti, temporal; and the result comes closer than Moretti might wish to the old priorities of Western comparatism and also to the stadial (“stages”) model of development theories. (38)

In other words, Wallerstein develops a model that enables an analysis of the relations between centre and periphery at one particular moment in time, inviting a close analysis. Moretti does not take him up on this invitation. Instead, he introduces the methodology of “distant reading”.

As a result, the situation described by world-systems theory becomes temporally unlimited, and the relations between center and periphery are no longer the main points of interest of the analysis. The analysis is rendered descriptive and limited to the reproduction of a map of inequalities without analyzing the reasons for or particular manifestations of these. As a consequence, Moretti’s analysis remains Eurocentric in the end. Arac points out one particular instance in which this happens.

Moretti argues that close analysis of certain works should lie with the scholars of Area Studies. This argumentative move leads him to embrace the dominance of English in Comparative Literature, a move that is reflected in his quoting one of his sources in Italian, one in Spanish, and eighteen in English. Arac criticizes this and argues that Moretti reaffirms the fact that “English in culture, like the dollar in economics, serves as the medium through which knowledge may be translated from the local to the global” (40). Moretti responds in a footnote to “More Conjectures”. He writes that as far as I know only four or five [of the critics quoted in English] are from the country of the dollar, while the others belong to a dozen different cultures. Is this less significant than the language they use? I doubt it. (76)
If I understand Arac’s argument correctly, Moretti misses the point. The passport or the birthplace of the critics is not at issue. Arac refers to one of the blind spots of contemporary literary and cultural theory, one that Walter D. Mignolo elaborates on in greater detail.

In his study *Local Histories/Global Designs* Mignolo points out the hegemonic position of English in the international academy. He argues that knowledge flows much more easily from English-speaking environments into Spanish-speaking environments than the other way around. The hegemony of English in the production of knowledge therefore leads to a disregard of theories and texts produced in environments where English is not usually spoken. Moretti’s oversight is evidence of how distant reading makes it impossible to recognize mechanisms that construe inequality. Thus, distant reading leaves inequality unquestioned and intact. At this point, Moretti’s practice reduces his statement that theories cannot abolish inequality but that they can explain it, to the first part of the proposition. Moretti’s practice turns his own logic on its head: because theories cannot abolish inequality he does not attempt to develop a theory that can explain it.25

In contrast to distant reading, close reading emerges as an indispensable tool for committed analysis. Distant reading decenters the critic and in doing so, jeopardizes her civic agency and makes her jeopardize the civic agency of the agents involved in the literature under investigation. Practising a methodology of distant reading, Moretti overlooks several manifestations of the power relations that cause inequality. These oversights make a committed reading of world literature impossible. The literary critic engaging with literature from different cultures should therefore have a sharp lens and a wide horizon that serve her well from her place on earth.

**The Otherly Self**

I will conclude this section on academic theory and commitment by picking up the formulation of a sharp lens and a wide horizon that I used in the previous section. I borrowed it from the article “7 Thoughts in May” by Subcomandante Marcos, published in May 2003 in *Revista Rebeldía*. Marcos deploys this formulation in a passage on the relationship between different groups and social movement, and between different types of theorists and social movements. He argues for the necessity of each group to recognize their horizons and the tools that serve for it. Marcos discusses seven thoughts that developed out

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25 For a very recent publication that struggles with the dominance of the English language in Comparative Literature and of knowledge and literature produced within the Anglo-Saxon paradigm see Apter 2006. Apter proposes to see Comparative Literature as a practice of translations.
of dialogues between the EZLN and social and political movements in organizations with
the aim of “finding, and/or building, common points of discussion”. The seven common
points of discussion that were identified are theory, the nation state and the polis, politics,
war, culture, manifestos and demonstrations, and resistance. Marcos ends his article with an
appeal to the plurality of different types of resistance and for respect for the other’s spaces
and methods:

[... a little respect is needed for the other who is resisting someplace else in his
otherly self, as well as a lot of humility in order to remember that much can still be
learned from that otherly self, and wisdom to not copy, but produce, a theory and a
practice which does (sic.) not include arrogance in its principles, but which
recognizes its horizons and the tools that serve for those horizons. (2003b, no page
numbers)

The respect for the other’s practice of resistance reinforces the necessity of clear boundaries
between theory and practice. The invitation to academic intellectuals – among others – to
interrogate the place from which they resist can be the starting point for a practice of
resistance informed by the commitment of those that resist. For, commitment can inform
and motivate thoughts and actions and as such, can be shared by individuals who resist
either from the point of theory, or from the point of activism. It might help in recognizing
one’s “horizon” and therefore, might be a starting point for discussion and possible
collaboration between different social actors. But commitment can never be a substitute for
resistance and political action.

The discussion of Moretti’s articles intimates that one important task of the
committed literary critic and cultural analyst is to develop places of resistance through the
use of her skills, and mobilizing her place within academia. The French theorist Pierre
Bourdieu takes a step in this direction. In the opening speech of the États Généraux du
Mouvement Social in 1996 he seeks to redefine the task of the committed social scientist. I
will not go into the positive definition of these tasks because I am here concerned with the
Humanities and Bourdieu refers to sociologists in particular. But Bourdieu’s refusal of
certain roles is worth quoting in a discussion of the task of the committed cultural analyst.
Bourdieu says:
[The effective participation of the social scientist] rules out from the start a certain number of roles: social scientists are not fellow-travellers, in other words hostages and guarantors, figureheads and alibis who sign petitions and who are disposed of as soon as they have been used; nor are they Zhdanovian apparatchiks who come in to exercise apparently intellectual powers within the social movements which they cannot exercise in intellectual life; nor are they experts coming in to give lessons—not even anti-expert experts; nor are they prophets who will provide answers to all questions about the social movement and its future. (Bourdieu 1998: 56)

In these negatives, Bourdieu sets the limits for a new definition of the task of the social scientist. Other than Bhabha, he suggests to draw a clear line between the academic space and the space of social movements. He emphatically argues that the academic must not try to fit into a role prescribed to him or her by the demands of activism, but that she/he has to find the place from which to resist within her own “otherly self” and the space she/he lives and works in, the academy. Bourdieu’s approach implies that the scholar does not disavow the instruments that her existence within the academy and the methodology of her discipline make available to her. Instead he argues that she needs to develop them into efficient tools for interaction, communication and collaboration with the spaces that surround her own, for example with the space of activism and social movements.

The mutual respect Marcos calls for suggests that academics take the risk of identifying concrete causes, movements and struggles that they commit themselves to. Furthermore, academic theorists need to acknowledge the intellectual sophistication of many movements and activists. I have never heard of an activist who would commit herself to the “Third World”, as Bhabha suggests, because such a commitment makes no sense in the praxis of political activism. Furthermore, academic theorists need to develop their own tools and recognize their own horizon, rather than copying uncritically from social movements. Academic theorists as well as activists need to acknowledge that their methods and their language might differ due to the fact that each of them is “resisting someplace else in this otherly self”. At the same time, they need to develop a mode of communication which allows them to understand and respond to their respective methods and languages.

As for this study and my own perspective within it, I need to make one last clarification regarding its objects of study. I have focused on Western Literature, rather than on world literature, as I had originally planned. The reason for this is related to many of the problematic aspects of the concept of “world literature” and its problematic methodology. I
realized very quickly in the early phases of my research that my discussion of poetry considered as culturally hybrid became contingent on a static conception of Western cultural identity. Such a conception, I realized, plays in the hands of those who wish to propagate a homogeneous Western culture and normative system that need to be defended against attacks from “outside”. It also disadvantages those who are from the West but whose culture is not identical with the homogeneous one proposed by some. To properly address this contingency and to discuss and theoretically frame alternative conceptions of Western cultural identity, I soon realized that I depended on very close readings. Limiting myself to the discussion of Western poetry is one aspect of my attempt to “center” myself (rather than decentering myself, as Brennan puts it). My argument so far has been, and my further arguments will be, informed by my commitment to do justice to the heterogeneity of Western cultures and the many oppositional forces that are at work within them. This decision is a part of my attempt to recognize the limits and horizons of my academic practice and the tools that serve for these horizons.

As I indicated in the beginning of this chapter, the possibilities of academic theory are different than those of art and, in the case of this study, performance poetry. I will now give an introduction to theoretical approaches to the performance of poetry in order to explore the different practices of commitment that I need to respond to with my analytical approach.26

Performance Poetry and Commitment

In the previous pages I have discussed the methodological and theoretical approach to the analyses of poetry that form the core of this study. I now turn to the poetics of performance poetry. I insist on a methodology that includes political commitment in its premises because many performance poets have started to perform their poetry with the goal to establish a very particular and complex relationship between political commitment and its performance and expression in poetry. I will now introduce four approaches to the analysis of the poetry performance. They bring out the complex interactions between poetic form, content, and commitment that are characteristic for many poetry performances.

26 The approaches I discuss are from a British and U.S. American context. It is difficult to find theorizations of the performance of poetry outside of these contexts, probably because performance poetry has the highest profile and the best infrastructure in these countries, and because it has been practiced since the late 1950s (in the case of the U.S.) and the early 1970s (in the case of the U.K.). In most other countries it either received hardly any recognition at all, or it was treated as an anthropological phenomenon and studied as oral poetry. As I discuss performance poetry from other cultural contexts I will amend the conclusions I draw from the theoretical approaches I present and the methodology they allow me to develop accordingly.
I will first discuss Charles Olson’s seminal essay “Projective Verse”, published in 1950. Olson, from the U.S., collaborated with the Beat Poets but is best known as a representative of the Black Mountain School. “Projective Verse” has become one of the most important documents for performance poetry in the English language. The second approach to the theorization of performance poetry is developed by Charles Bernstein in his introduction to the volume *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998). Bernstein is trying to develop a methodology for the analysis of the poetry recital as well as of the poetry performance. He does not differentiate between the two. He focuses on the analysis of sonic and visual elements of the poetry performance. His argument develops the idea that performance of poetry is an instrument of disturbance of traditional poetry as well as a disturbance for the methodology of criticism and literary theory.27 Finally, I will discuss approaches developed by Paul Beasley and Kwame Dawes in their articles “Vive la différence!” (Beasley) and “Dichotomies of reading ‘street poetry’ and ‘book poetry’” (Dawes), both published in a 1996 edition of the journal *Critical Quarterly*, dedicated to an analysis of “Word, Sound, Power”. The two authors analyse the performance of poetry in terms of interculturality and locus of enunciation/production respectively. Differently from Olson and Bernstein, Beasley and Dawes propose explicitly that the form of the poetry performance carries a political charge.

Out of the four theorists, Olson focuses most on the poem and the process of creating or “composing” it. He calls the production of projective verse “composition by field” to point out that the poem as such is always composed in the moment of being spoken to an audience. Several of the constitutive elements of projective verse can only be developed in field composition. Field composition has three major principles: the kinetics of the poem, its principle, and its process.

“Kinetics” refers to the energy that the poet projects through the through the use of form and the speed. Olson argues that “the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge” (16). This means that the poet gets energy from something he experiences or perceives. This energy is turned into the poem, and the poem serves as the energy-transmitter between poet and audience. This presupposes an unusual mode of writing. The poet does not take a subject matter, an image, an emotion,
which he then represents by way of poetic forms that poetic tradition has made available to him. In field composition the poet “puts himself in the open” and engages with what he finds around him through the poem. This means that when we listen to a projective poem we do not encounter a poet who is in control of the reality around or inside him or struggles for the control of it. Instead, the poem documents a constant back-and-forth movement between the poet and his surroundings. Hence, the poem is not so much a representation of the poet’s encounter with reality or with himself, but the document of the dynamics of this encounter.

The “principle” of the poem means that “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (16). The third element of field composition is the “process of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished” (16-17). This is done through speed: “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION” (17). The raw materials for such a poem are provided by the poet’s breath and by listening. Breath, not metre or rhyme schemes, determines the form and rhythm of the poem and therefore, decides on the length of lines and on line breaks. The line and the syllable are the “hardware” of the poem; they have to be treated as components of its reality. Listening or hearing determines the use of syllables. This entails a personalization of the poem: nobody’s breath rhythm is exactly like anybody else’s. However, this does not mean that Olson advocates a personalization of poetry in the lyrical sense, on the contrary. An important element of Olson’s conceptualization of the reality of the poem is “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego” (24). Olson argues that such a position of the poet leads to loneliness: “If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing [. . . .] by way of artificial forms outside himself”. (25) Hence, such an attitude makes contact with anyone else impossible. The projective poet, on the other hand, will go “down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs”(26). This differentiates him from the traditional poet who “has only gone from his fine ear outward” (26). The projective poet has to make a great personal investment in this process because he is to turn his innermost towards the outside and connect it with everything that surrounds him. This reconfigures the poet from a maker and creator of the poem by means of his subjectivity to a participant in the reality he engages with; the result of this engagement is the poem.
Olson’s approach introduces several notions that later on become crucially important for performance poetry. Breath is a defining element in the poetry of many performance poets, whether they have read Olson or not. Some poets, for example Lemn Sissay, make breath emphatically audible. The kinetics of the poem and the conceptualization of the poetry performance as energy transmission points out that in the performance of poetry there is more at stake than communication based on the interpretation of rhetoric figures. If a poem has “kinetics” then it must spill over into the cultural sphere because it cannot contain the energy that the poem transmits and releases.

The British critic and organizer Paul Beasley critically engages with the frequently abused term “Performance Poetry”, as he argues, but ends up endorsing the term after all. The reasons for his endorsement of the term are indicative of the approach he takes to performance poetry:

The term is not specific or definitive, but general and suggestive. It makes no claims for a special genus or class of activity or materials. It is only usefully understood as a heterogeneric term – a hybrid of diverse artistic and cultural forms. It actively generates different possible interpretations and applications. Some go so far as to say the term suggests an alternative aesthetic and ideology. (28)

In this passage Beasley argues that the vagueness of the term is its virtue. Unwilling to pin down or prescribe form or meaning, the genre performance poetry bases its identity on its openness and tolerance towards different forms of creativity and reception. The genre’s conceptual openness comes from its multicultural environment (29). This argument about the contingency of form clarifies Beasley’s earlier contention that “some go so far as to say the term suggests an alternative aesthetic and ideology”: performance poetry emerges as a far-reaching practice of critique against cultural homogeneity and intolerance, as well as against the prescriptiveness, conservatism and intolerance of traditional literary studies.

Beasley makes the latter point when he discusses poet-audience relations and how those are negotiated in performance poetry. He argues that performance poetry focuses on

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28 In her article “Poetry Beyond the Page: A Stroll through Noticing”, Jayne Fenton Keane from Australia comes to the opposite conclusion. She criticizes the term “Performance Poetry” for its vagueness: “It [the term] may be superficially appropriate but it encompasses too many fields of practice to be critically viable”. However, she identifies similar characteristics as Beasley: The practice of the performance of poetry is culturally very specific, it is an “interplay between poet, culture, text and audience that establishes embodied subjectivity as a core research position for critical discourse concerned with the spoken word”, and it is “intrinsic to the creation of the work, even if the performance comes later”. She finally sympathizes with Bernstein’s methodological approach, rather than with Beasley’s generic one.
the presence rather than on the absence of the poet. Almost by default, it insists on “the sheer physical presence of the poet – on the site and as the agent of interaction” (33). Because it exposes the poet as “expository agent” in that way, the performance of poetry reinvents and promotes a poet’s public function, perhaps especially as guardian of or challenger to cultural value, and redefines the poet’s role to include, for example, community historian, teacher, broadcaster, agitator and entertainer. The specialist conception and myth of the poet as separate from and above people is mercifully exploded. (33)

If such a function is to be democratic, then the performance poet cannot rule over his audience like a populist dictator, but has to integrate the audience into her work:

The audience is a necessary element of the art – it is possible to say that the audience is needed to contribute, participate and to finish the poem. This can be evidenced in the explicit stylistics of the poem, for example the inclusion of call-and-answer devices and structures. Or it may be more implicit – put simply in terms of response. (32)

In this passage Beasley effectively claims that the performance poem mixes two elements of rhetoric, *elocutio* (style) and *actio* (delivery). In rhetoric, *elocutio* refers to the language of a text, to the imagery and the metaphors it employs. *Actio* refers primarily to voice and gestures, i.e. to elements of performance. In the above passage, Beasley claims that the stylistics of performance poetry include devices such as call-and-answer devices and structures, elements that in a traditional analysis of poetry are inseparably bound up with the performance, i.e. the delivery, of the poem. By claiming that elements of delivery are in fact elements of style, Beasley implicitly claims that *elocutio* and *actio* cannot be treated separately from each other in a theoretical engagement with a performance poem.

Moreover, Beasley connects his contention with the social and political impulse of performance poetry when he writes:

Performance poetry requires the active involvement of others – it solicits, conjoins, provokes and incorporates people. It does not tolerate a passive or consumerist role
for the receiver [. . . ]. It relies on and demands feedback. It is an interactive, two-
way, give and take thing. (32)

Thus, the integration of elements of delivery as elements of style is vital for the
performance poem to fulfil one of its public functions, the struggle against the passivity of
the listener. As one of the major tools in this struggle, interactivity is reinterpreted as a
basic form of political action, a connection that is suggested through the use of terms like
the “consumerist role” of the receiver.

Beasley goes on to strengthen the latter argument by emphasizing a close
relationship between performance poetry and “protest poetry”. Both types of poetry
emphasize the oral dimension of poetry, address contemporary issues and grievances, and
are usually performed outside of the traditional locations of poetry recitals. As I have said
above, the venue locates the poet within his community. By establishing this connection,
the poet’s presence on the site invites a negotiation of self and community. Also, both the
“explicit addressing of current affairs” (31) in the articulation of protest and the ephemeral
character of the oral performance emphasize the poem’s disposability, but also its
commitment to the present moment. Beasley locates additional political charge in this
element of performance poetry through framing it within the claims for immortality and
universality of traditional Western culture:

I’m going to argue that with performance poetry there is no pretence to
“immortality” and “universality” – as elitist Western cultural values would have it
– but a commitment to the here and now. (31)

Thus, Beasley’s analysis of performance poetry takes the dependency between the social,
the political, the cultural and the poetic as its argumentative base. He effectively argues that
this contingency is not accounted for by the traditional methodologies of literary criticism,
and as a consequence, performance poetry militates not only against models of a culturally
homogeneous society, but also against the academic bias for homogeneous genres.29

In his analysis of “street poetry” the African-American theorist and poet Kwame
Dawes places his main emphasis on the locus enunciation/production rather than on the
performance itself. In the first lines of his article “Dichotomies of reading ‘street poetry’

29 For a critique of homogeneous genres in the context of contemporary poetry, including performance poetry,
see Casas 1998.
and ‘book poetry’” Dawes makes some statements that allow a clear differentiation between his approach and Beasley’s:

Since so called “street poetry” is characterised by an intense oral execution or performance and since it is inextricably linked with the growth of poetic expression in the music industry (rap, dub poetry, deejaying), there is a quality of social stratification that is inherent in its relegation to the place of “street poetry”. At the heart of this relegation is an emphasis on its “otherness”, its peripheral position in relation to the mainstream. (3)

In this passage Dawes emphasizes street poetry’s close connection with the music industry over its affinity with publishing, and thus, its affinity with popular culture over high culture. Furthermore, he defines the term “street poetry” not positively, but negatively as a strategy of exclusion. Hence, he argues that street poetry emphasizes otherness and social stratification and, as a consequence, social exclusion.

Dawes’ choice of the term “street poetry” also makes it clear that whereas the term “performance poetry” does suggest some kind of venue and a conceptualized performance as the defining element of the genre, the term “street poetry” emphasizes the locus of enunciation and production. The locus of enunciation and production produces a particular kind of talk, a particular kind of knowledge, a particular attitude, and it is inhabited by a particular kind of person:

There is a more sinister edge to the term “street” which is more germane to what we are dealing with here. The street is the place of a certain danger, the place where poor people live and where the Sisyphean futility of the life of the downtrodden and the poor is played out. “Street talk” is associated with the foul language and a certain cultural ethos. “Street-wise” suggests an ability to survive the vicissitudes of street existence through smarts and a capacity for violence. “Street people” are vagrants, beggars, the poor. “Street walkers” are prostitutes. “Street cleaners” are those who have no other source of income but to do the dirty deed of clearing the streets. (5)

Dawes insistence that street poetry is produced by and addresses issues of the socially marginalized gives street poetry a controversial and socially destabilizing edge that is
missing from Beasley’s definition of performance poetry as cultural affirmation and
defence in a celebratory manner.

In the following, Dawes goes into a deeper analysis of the oral features of Street
Poetry, features that he, like Beasley, associates with a social and political engagement. He
carefully argues for the complexity of street poetry which is based not only on the written
possibilities of language, but engages language with its oral/aural elements such as rhythm,
vernaculars, music, melody, and the interplay of sound and silence. Through his analysis of
these features with reference to the works of the poets Kamau Brathwaite, Linton Kwesi
Johnson, David Hernandez and Louise Bennett, Dawes finally compares street poetry with
published “book poetry”. His conclusion affirms the independence of the genre of street
poetry, but he also emphasizes the permeability of genres:

Dichotomies [between street and book poetry] are useful when they tell us what is
happening and where we are coming from. They are dangerous when they prevent
us from listening to each other. I suspect that we can foster a more positive dialogue
through an appreciation of the dichotomies and through a careful look at the links
that exist between both seemingly disparate “schools” of poetic expression. (20)

This final passage from Dawes’ article recalls one basic agreement between him and
Beasley: both insist that performance poetry or street poetry is a genre of its own. Both
insist on the importance of the oral dimension of this genre and they insist on its political
and social involvement. The difference in their approach to the political and social
involvement lies in Dawes choice for the locus of production/enunciation as unifying
principle of the genre as opposed to Beasley’s choice of the medium as the unifying feature
of the genre, thus emphasizing that in principle a “performance poem” can be produced and
performed anywhere and disconnected from class, as long as it maintains its connection
with culture.

Charles Bernstein takes a different approach to the performance of poetry than
Beasley and Dawes do. He avoids terms that might suggest a generic definition. Instead, he
develops a methodological approach for the analysis of the performance of poetry, or the
poetry reading. By using the latter term he indicates that his interest also encompasses
readings of poems that were not written with the performance in mind. Also, Bernstein
traces the history of the performance of poetry back to Greek culture whereas Beasley and
Dawes, who are mainly interested in the public and political dimensions of the poetry
performance, basically start their analysis in the late 1960s with a type of performed poetry that is heavily influenced by African traditions. Bernstein refers to Gregory Nagy’s analysis *Poetry and Performance: Homer and Beyond*, and argues that different types of poetry readings in Western Europe can be traced from ancient Greece through the Middle Ages to the present day.

The expansive scope of Bernstein’s approach to the different practices of the performance of poetry leads him to an in-depth analysis of the sonic and visual aspects of the art form. He departs from a critique of how recent literary analysis has “framed out” certain elements of poetry:

Indeed, the drift of much literary criticism of the past two decades has been away from the auditory and performative aspects of the poem, partly because of the prevalent notion that the sound structure of language is relatively arbitrary [. . . .]. Such elements as the visual appearance of the text or the sound of the work in performance may be extralexical, but they are not extrasemantic. When textual elements that are conventionally framed out as nonsemantic are acknowledged as significant, the result is a proliferation of possible frames of interpretation. (5)

Bernstein makes a point similar to the one Beasley and Dawes make. All three argue that sonic and visual elements of poetry are part of the text and contribute to the construction of meaning. However, he does not say that these elements necessarily have a social or political public function. Instead, he is concerned with an analysis of the different frames of interpretation that emerge from his inclusion of textual elements that are conventionally framed out as nonsemantic.

Bernstein claims that by foregrounding sonic elements – which are extralexical but not extrasemantic – the performance of poetry reshuffles the (writing-based) frames of interpretation that are at the disposal of the literary theorist. For Bernstein, the performed poem introduces sonic features that so far have not been and, as he goes on to argue, cannot be captured by prosodic analysis:

In fact, one of the primary techniques of poetry performance is the disruption of rationalizable patterns of sound through the intervallic irruption of acoustic elements not recuperable by ontologic analysis. While these eruptions may be highly artful, they may also fall into the body’s rhythms – gasps, stutters, hiccups,
burbs, coughs, slurs, microrepetitions, oscillations in volume, “incorrect” pronunciations, and so on – that is, if you take these elements to be semantic features of the performed poem, as I propose, and not as extraneous interruption.

(14)

The regularizing impact of prosody cannot cope with the wide variety of the sonic elements that Bernstein considers “semantic features of the performed poem”. As a consequence, the performance of poetry causes a disturbance in the practice of prosodic analysis:

But more importantly, regularizing systems of prosodic analysis break down before the sonic profusion of a reading: it’s as if “chaotic” sound patterns are being measured by grid-oriented coordinates whose reliance on context-independent ratios is inadequate. (13)

According to Bernstein, the performance of poetry disturbs the traditional epistemology of literary analysis because it introduces semantic features that the methodology of traditional literary analysis not only cannot cope with, but is at odds with or feels attacked by, for example when the “regularising systems of prosodic analysis break down before the sonic profusion of a reading”. If the traditional ways of making meaning out of poetic texts are being collapsed in a confrontation with a particular type of poetry, the literary scholars who are trying to decode the poetry will have to find new ways of making meaning. According to Bernstein’s argument, then, the performance of poetry goes against the grain not by what it says, but by how it says anything it says at all. A love poem would be just as disturbing as would be a poem that addresses an explicitly “political” issue like police brutality because both poems upset the ways in which meaning is being made and therefore, upset those who feel that they are in the position to make meaning.

Conclusion
These four different approaches to the performance of poetry demonstrate the diversity of the social and political ideas and ideologies that inform performed poetry, and the richness of poetic, sonic and theatrical features that a performed poem mobilizes. Any analytical methodology has to be able to respond to this diversity. In this respect, all three approaches have their shortcomings. Bernstein’s approach holds the danger of Eurocentrism, Beasley’s approach can lead to an a-historic analysis, Dawes’ approach invites an exaggerated focus
on issues of class and as a consequence, eclipses the formal characteristics that Bernstein’s approach brings out. However, Bernstein’s approach focuses too strictly on the self-contained entity of the poem. Beasley and Dawes importantly point out that the performance of poetry seeks to spill over from the disturbance of poetic meaning into the cultural, social and political sphere. In the remaining chapters of this study I will develop a methodology through which I can formulate an analytical response to the poetry I will discuss. I can now do so from a clearly defined position of my own, one that is located in a complex tension field defined by geopolitics, different approaches to cultural theory, and my own convictions. These convictions inform my commitment to develop strategies that can contribute to the development of a different practice of research as one element of different power relations.
Chapter 2: The Poet as Author

Introduction
For many critics, the emphasis placed on the author as the enunciator of the poem during the performance of poetry is one of the most disturbing and at the same time, one of the most characteristic features of the poetry performance. That poet-author and the enunciator of the poem are identical with each other seems to suggest that the voice we hear in the poem is a straightforward expression of the subjectivity of its author – a claim that literary theorists have been careful to deconstruct since the 1960s, arguing that the focus on the intention of the author effaces the reader as well as the context of the poem. However, in the performance of poetry the poem is completed only by being spoken. Therefore, the author of the poem makes himself inseparable from the poem in the moment of the performance. Thus, the performance of the poet in poetry performances questions critical approaches that have shifted the focus of attention from the author as the provider of meaning to the reader as the one who makes the meaning of the poem. The Australian poet and critic Jayne Fenton Keane echoes the tendency among many critics sympathetic with performance poetry and many performance poets to celebrate this move as a type of literary rebellion against the critical establishment:

When poets step into public spaces they refute one type of author’s death. They refute Deleuze and Guattari’s body without organs. They refute Barthes’ and Foucault’s construction of us as author-functions, and they refute the anti-poets’ fantasy that poetry is dead. (Keane, no page numbers)

According to Keane, the performance of poetry breaks with many important approaches of literary and cultural theory, the representatives of which have tried to argue the authority of the author out of the text.

Beasley makes a similar argument, though from a slightly different point of departure:

[. . . .] while writing has enabled so much, it has also occasioned the internal exile of the poet – divorcing him/her from almost any social context and role – making only for purer personal or scientific orientation. (32)
Quoting Eliot as an example, he writes that Eliot’s interpretation of the creative process as one in which the poet had to achieve a distance from the work at hand has allowed for a general interpretation and application of distance as a rule. So much so that the poet seems so far from the diurnal (sic) he is sensed stronger as an absence [...]. (33)

Beasley’s passage indicates that among the contemporary poetry audiences he refers to the poet as a public figure is longed for with nostalgia. He also suggests that there is a growing group of poets who do not always feel comfortable with the solitary existence generally assigned to them. The performance of poetry seems to solve both these problems by promising the return of the poet:

With performance poetry, presence is more the rule. In the first instance, the sheer physical presence of the poet – on the site and as the agent of interaction. Secondly, in the sense that the performance poet goes out to close down or bridge distance. And, just as performance reclaims a social space for poetry, it reinvents and promotes a poet’s public function, perhaps especially as guardian of or challenger to cultural values, and redefines the poet's role to include, for example, community historian, teacher, broadcaster, agitator and entertainer. Performance poetry mercifully explodes the specialist conception and myth of the poet as separate from and above people. (33)

Beasley paints the picture of a lively member of his or her community, a figure of authority in the articulation of its struggles and concerns and a central figure in the recording and telling of the community’s history. For Beasley, these should be the central functions of the poet in performance poetry.

People like Beasley and Keane who are very much involved in the performance poetry scene, experience contemporary literary criticism’s insistence on a separation of poet and community, and on an image of the poet as a solitary figure, as hierarchical and disabling. Unfortunately they do not usually elaborate on how the solitary figure of the poet introduces a hierarchy. Their analysis is perceptive, but their arguments need to be fine-tuned, particularly when it comes to politically committed performance poetry.
The politically committed poetry performance neither taps into outlived models of authorial authority, nor does it engage in pubertarian rebellion against the literary establishment. Rather, it picks up and develops very old traditions of engagement between author-poet and readership. The most important poetic tradition for performance poetry is public poetry. I introduced the term, its Latin American provenance, and its implications in the introduction to this study. Public poetry has been developed by many prominent 20th-century poets, among them Pablo Neruda, Paul Éluard, Ernesto Cardenal, and many others. One of its characteristic features is its conceptualization of authorship. The representatives of public poetry do not suggest that the author holds the full force of the authority of authorship, nor do they deny the pivotal role of the reader in the construction of meaning. Thus, their conceptualization of authorship resonates with Olson’s peculiar conceptualization of poetic subjectivity that I introduced in the previous chapter: poet, reader, and the reality that shapes the poem are equally important. From this point of view declaring the death of the author does more damage than good.\(^{30}\)

In this study I will unravel some possible reasons for their discontent. I will analyse the emergence of different models of the public figure of the poet and of the performance of the poet’s subjectivity in his poetry. I will support Beasley’s and Keane’s argument in so far as I will argue that authority prevails in Barthes’ and Foucault’s approaches of authorship. Yet, I will give a different angle on their arguments by demonstrating that in some aspects, Beasley’s and Keane’s conception of the performance of the poet’s subjectivity is not so far from Barthes’. I will rethink the complex issue of authorship and authority under the premise that the question is not whether authority lies with the author or the reader or the text. What really matters is how all the different parties involved in the reading process deal with this authority. Also, many performance poets do not assume that authority is necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, Beasley indicates that the authority of the teacher or the activist can be crucially important for the members of the community in the struggles against racial or social discrimination they often have to fight. Again, the problem is not authority, but the way it is exercised and dealt with.

\(^{30}\) As I pointed out in the introduction to this study, the conception of the public function of the author that I define in this study has its predecessors in the poetic tradition of public poetry in its European and Latin American manifestations. Many other poets and literary critics embraced and embrace the solitariness of the poet and would argue that poetry maintains its integrity precisely because the poet stands above public life (see also the beginning of chapter 4 on “Performance”). I would certainly not want to suggest that the approach to authorship that performance poetry takes is more valid than other possible approaches to authorship; neither, I think, would Beasley and Keane. However, with Beasley and Keane I claim the right for public poetry and performance poetry to maintain and develop its own poetic tradition without this approach being judged as inferior by those who endorse other, dominant poetic and critical traditions.
Academic theorists often have great difficulties with the performance poets’ approach to authorship, which they experience as unsettling. Peter Middleton captures this sense of unsettlement when he writes:

A specter is haunting poetry readings. The “dead author”, risen from the text again and trailing the rags of the intentional fallacy, claims to be the originating subject from which poetry is issuing in front of our eyes. (33)

In this short paragraph Middleton sums up two major sources for the unsettlement caused by the presence of the poet on the site of the performance which is often read as his claim to origin and authorship. For one, Roland Barthes’ 1968 article “The Death of the Author” proclaimed the author dead in the name of the liberation of the reader. For many critics, the underlying logic of Barthes’ article – the death of the author is a step towards the liberation of the reader – still works. However, Middleton indicates that the performance of poetry questions precisely this underlying logic. Does the death of the author really liberate the reader, and conversely, does the resurrection of the author really imply the oppression of the reader? Middleton’s second point is made through the formulation that the author has “risen from the text”. This formulation implies that the author is not an extratextual construction along the lines of the empirical author, as Helena Buescu calls him in a text that I will discuss later on, but that his subjectivity is produced within the text he pronounces during the poetry performance.

Middleton’s thesis finds a strong resonance in the work of the French theorist Dominique Combe who argues that the lyrical subject never has a fixed identity, but is always created anew through the poem in a performative act. After conducting a compelling analysis of the performance of subjectivity in 19th- and early-20th century poetry Combe comes to the following conclusion:

The lyrical subject, far from expressing itself as a subject already constituted which is being represented or expressed by the poem, is in perpetual construction in a genesis constantly renewed by the poem, and outside of which it does not exist. The lyrical subject creates itself in and by way of the poem, which functions performatively. (Combe 63) 31

31 Le sujet lyrique, loin de s’exprimer comme un sujet déjà constitué que le poème représenterait ou exprimerait, est en perpétuelle constitution dans une genèse constamment renouvelée par le poème, et hors duquel il n’existe pas. Le sujet lyrique se crée dans et par le poème, qui a valeur performative. (Combe 63)
Combe’s conclusion goes along with Middleton’s suggestion that during the performance of poetry the author is present in two ways: physically as a person, and as a text-based construction, a lyrical I. The analysis of the relationship between these two poetic manifestations of the author’s presence and a third one, the poet as a public figure, is one of the central goals of this chapter.

My second central goal here is the enquiry into the relationship between the poet’s subjectivity and the creation of meaning. When Middleton contends that the performance poet “claims to be the originating subject” of the text he suggests that there is one subject as a creator, and the creation is in some way an expression of the creator’s subjectivity. Such a point of view does seem to limit the possible interpretations of the text to a search for the meaning originally intended by the creator. However, Middleton’s slightly polemical formulation suggests that we might be approaching the subject as creator from the wrong angle, putting too much emphasis on the subject and too little on the creation process and everything that happens during it. For, if critics such as Combe are right, then one part of the creation process takes part during the performance, before the eyes of and in contact with the audience.

I will take my analysis of the reconfiguration of poetic subjectivity through the performance of poetry even further by arguing that political militancy is one of its constitutive components. I contend that the political militance of many of the first performance poets is one important reason for the insistence of performance poets on the presence of the author either as an autobiographical subject or as one of his figurations. Many of them were engaged – and many contemporary performers are engaged – in organized political struggles for a more democratic society. The search for a change of power relations in society calls for a poet-audience dynamic that does not replicate authoritarian structures and at the same time, requires a thorough analysis and rethinking of different manifestations of authority. I contend that the performance of poetry, rather than re-establishing the poet’s authorial and authoritative position, engages, analyzes, deconstructs or reconfigures the poet’s position through the text and its performance. This theoretical element of performance poetry accounts for the use of many literary devices that feature prominently in performance poetry, and for how they are being employed. It also has far-reaching consequences for the way the poetry negotiates its relationship with society and the social.
This relationship has been on the mind of poets for a very long time. The performance of poetry is only one of many manifestations of poets’ reflections on this relationship. In this chapter and in the following I will trace back the tradition of thinking of the poet as a public figure, and of the impact that different conceptualizations of the public function of the poet have had on his relationship with his readers, at least to the beginning of the Romantic era. Implied in my analysis are suggestions about the genealogy of the ideas that inform the performance of authorship in the performance of poetry. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the conceptualization of authorship performed by performance poets is the most recent occurrence of a tradition that goes back as far as Antiquity and the Middle Ages, almost disappears during Early Modernity, and re-emerges forcefully in the beginning of the nineteenth century. For reasons of space and because of my focus on contemporary performance poetry I will here concentrate on the development of the poet as a public figure since the early nineteenth century. However, much earlier than that the performance of poetry and its implications for the concept and the performance of authorship was already an important aspect of Greek and Western European Medieval literary culture.  

The Cult of the Poet

The type of poetry that re-introduces the poet as a public figure re-emerges in the early years of the nineteenth century along with important economic and social changes. The nineteenth century sees the emergence of the publishing industry. Books could now be distributed widely and on a large scale. The growing rate of literacy ensured that books reached growing numbers of the public, and the improved infrastructure made it possible for poets to travel and give public readings and lectures if they wished to do so. Urbanization led to a different style of public life with large numbers of people who had access to books through bookshops and would discuss the books they read and their authors with each other. The poet now had the option to have a large audience, and the audience had the possibility to make the poet a figure under the public eye. 

The result was the construction of a figure that Frances Wilson in her study *Literary Seductions* calls “the poet with a capital P”. She aptly describes this figure as follows:

32 For the Greek period and its repercussions in the Middle Ages see Nagy 1996. For a relevant analysis of the medieval practice of the literary performance see Zumthor 1984 and 1987.
33 See McDayter 1999.
While a Poet is more than someone who writes poetry, not everyone who writes poetry acquires the status of Poet. Compare with the mythologies around the word “poet” the associations we have with writers known as “novelists”, “essayists”, and “journalists”, and it is easy to see that the poet’s craft is not the most important thing about him. Byron, the most popular poet of the early nineteenth century, remains famous not for his poetry but for playing the role of the poet par excellence, and while that might have involved the writing of some superb poetry, he is remembered principally for his position as a political idealist, for his domination of women, and for dying in the name of liberating an oppressed country. (191)

The poetic figure Wilson characterizes is a rebel. He breaks with the oppressive rules of society and puts his own rules above them, thus living out the fantasies and desires of his readership. Wilson names the British poet Lord Byron as one of the first representatives of a poet with a capital P. The charismatic womanizer with a club-foot, born into a middle-class family and become aristocrat later on through the death of a cousin, was identified with the protagonists of his poems. All of them are nihilistic womanizers, the most famous of them being Don Juan himself. Lord Byron was society’s darling when he published his first book, *Childe Harold*, and became society’s abject when his marriage broke up and his wife accused him of mistreatment and sado-masochistic practices. Byron was also one of the first poets whose success relied on the industrialized capacities of the publishing industry. They made it possible for him to become the best-selling author in England during his lifetime.34

In a collection of essays on Byron and the cult of Byron entitled *Byromania*, several scholars investigate manifestations of Byromania and Byron’s own enactment of it. These articles together give a detailed analysis of what turned the poet Lord Byron into a public figure, and how Byron’s public figure functions. At this point I will focus on three aspects

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34 I focus on the public figure of Byron because of the excellent material that is at my disposal and because I want to establish a connection to European Romanticism. The struggle with the romantic model of lyric subjectivity still informs many literary critics’ reading of the performance of poetry. Kevin McGuirk addresses this in an analysis of the Arnoldian model of Romantic poetry and lyricism on contemporary criticism. Focusing on Tony Harrison and Linton Kwesi Johnson as his case studies, he points out that subjecting Johnson to such a reading makes it impossible to properly understand his poetry. The case of Byron is an early example of a Romantic reading applied to a poetic figure the significance of which seeks to exceed the poem by far.

Seen in a positive light, the poet with a capital P has played an important role in the construction of national identities. The U.S. American poet Walt Whitman, for one, tried to construct a poetic figure that could unite his country which, at the time, was fractured by the Civil War (Reynolds 1995). A slightly different example is the figure of the poet Ossian, through which the Scottish poet James MacPherson tried to promote a Scottish cultural identity (Gaskill 2004).
that are important for my analysis. The first aspect is Wilson’s analysis of the disconnection between the poet and his poetry. The second aspect is Peter W. Graham’s analysis of the myth of mythmaking. The third aspect is Ghislaine MacDaytor’s analysis of the role of the market in the creation and commodification of one of the first celebrities, Lord Byron’s public figure.

In her introduction to Byromania Wilson points out that in the popular perception of Byron as a figure, particularly in the many novels and films that featured him as a protagonist,

it is rarely mentioned that Byron wrote at all, not least that he wrote compulsively or that it was the appeal of his poetry and not of his appearance which first caught the eye of the public. (2)

Consequently,

it is now forgotten that Byron became the master of ottava rima and was Wordsworth’s equal in the consistency and sheer quantity of his poetic output: one of the effects of Byromania is that Byron’s quality as a poet has been left out of his reputation. (5)

The process Wilson describes displaces authorship while simultaneously, in my view, overemphasizing it. In this process the poetic work as a straightforward expression of the poet’s subjectivity is overemphasized. The focus of attention is shifted onto the public notion of the poet (though in fact it is shifted on the poet’s public persona), but the poetry is subsequently forgotten. The poet is fictionalized while simultaneously it is denied that there is any fiction in the poet’s textual persona. This process pretends to do a close intentionalist reading of his work, so close that the work becomes unnecessary once the reader has “understood” its message.

The second analytic criterium that emerges in Byromania is the creation of the Byronic myth by Byron and his readers. Byron himself tried to control it, though he ultimately failed. In a close analysis of letters, essays and texts written by Byron, Peter Graham demonstrates how the poet contributed to the myth of his own self through his “preferred mode of myth-making: the truth in masquerade” (29). Graham argues that one of Byron’s most successful strategies was to evoke the impression of writing confessional
poetry while leaving so many things unsaid or only alluded to that he also gave off the impression of hidden secrets. This strategy stimulated the imagination of his readers. But for Byron, all of this was nothing but a show. Hence, he rearranged the events of life in literature not according to the principles of confession, but according to the principles of a showman:

[. . . .] like a pantomine poet possessing Harlequin’s metamorphic wand (here called a pen), such an author makes the odds and ends of “things existent” look “very grand.” [. . . .] The author contrives a spectacle, but the audience called his readership collaborates in making the myth. (28)

Graham importantly points out the collaboration of Byron’s readership in the making of the myth. In doing so he indicates that the structures of authority that are performed in the making of the Poet’s myth are not imposed one-sidedly by the poet, but that they are invited and collaborated with by his audience. Conversely, the Poet alone cannot break these myths. He needs the collaboration of his audience.

Many contemporary poets insist that their performance is not a spectacle. They do so because the term “spectacle” suggests an unequal poet-audience relationship, and some go so far to even dislike the term performance because it suggests an act of untruth (see, for example, Sissay 1999). Other poets add a little bit of fiction and/or a little bit of secrecy to their persona in order to construct a public figure that can be useful in the causes for which they militate. In some cases poets develop textual personae that recur in their poetry and that stage specific aspects of their identity and the way it is manifested in poetry. For one, Willie Perdomo uses this technique in his work, in his case through the introduction of the character Papo, who figures in one of the poems I will discuss in chapter 8 on “Poetry in the City”. Thus, the relationship between the poet and his textual persona or personae is a complex one. The notions of self-revelation, self-concealment, self-dramatisation and self-creation that Graham introduces in his article are important tools for an analysis of the performance of the poet’s public figure inside and outside of the poetic work, though it is important to point out that the effect these strategies have is not always as negative and disabling as it is in the case of Byron.

Finally I want to point out the relationship between the making and performance of the poet’s public persona and the market. In her article “Conjuring Byron: Byromania,
Literary Commodification and the Birth of Celebrity”, Ghislaine McDayter points out that the nineteenth century, and the Romantic period in particular, sees

a dramatic shift in the relations of production developing between authors, their work and the reading public – a cultural event which marked the industrialisation of Romanticism. (44)

That Byron was able to sell not only poetry but also himself (46) was possible because of a functioning publishing industry and was empowered by his and his critics’ recourse to popular images used to describe his own persona, such as images of vampirism. This common fund of discursive imagery, which is accessible to a large number of people and not only the cultural elite, is one aspect of the emergence of popular culture as we know it today. The market turned Byron into a commodity:

Byron now belonged to his readers, as if by being read the writer were literally purchased. The “Byronic” became public property and Byron found that his identity was no longer synonymous with his image, that there was a severance between the self he experienced himself as being and the self returned to him in the eyes of his audience. (Wilson 6)

As Wilson points out, the market of the poetic persona is an ambivalent benefit. While it ensures the widespread distribution of the poet’s work – which in the conception of poetry that I have just outlined includes the actual poetry as well as the poet’s persona – it can commodify his image to such an extent that it becomes useless for one purpose for which poets frequently try to use it, and that is the use of the poet’s public figure as a tool for political action.

McDaytor points out that Byron did indeed seek to use his image to further his political agenda of social reform. Many of his critics realized this. They were worried that Byron, in creating a “literary mob”, had also created a political mob:

For Coleridge and many like him, poet-magicians such as Byron had created a monster capable of destroying legitimate, authorised cultural rule by pandering to the reading public and its low tastes. (51)
However, it seems that in the case of Byron the Don Juan image finally dominated over any concrete political agenda he might have wished to promote through his poetic persona.

The Byronic image sold well, but the flip-side of its success was Byron’s loss of control over his persona. The reason for this was that it was no longer Byron who marketed his own image, but the emerging publishing industry. McDayter develops these arguments through a reading of the language of consumption in Byron’s self-representation and in comments made by others about his public persona. She demonstrates that Byron initially endorsed the gothic figuration of himself as a vampire. Later on he started to become suspicious of it and even parodied his own public persona in his book *The Giaour*. Unfortunately his satire was lost on many of his readers, who continued to identify the poet with the vampire protagonist of the text (54-55). When Byron went to Italy he felt that control over the production of his work in England slipped away from him. He felt increasingly threatened by his fans who, he felt, consumed him both poetically and personally. At around this time he started to talk about himself as the victim of vampires, the vampires being his reading public.

Thus, McDayter argues, Byron felt vulnerable and disempowered. Strangely enough, the critics and the audience created just the opposite image of the poet. One crucial aspect of the commodification of Byron’s persona is the critics’ and audiences’ insistence on what McDayter calls “the fantasy of poetic control” (45):

[. . . .] it was a commonplace to suggest that the poet maintained an ideal relationship with his products – a sort of professional dyadic union in which Byron, demanding and receiving immediate gratification from his adoring readers, had complete control over his creative products and his fans precisely because he “misrecognised” them as the coherent reflection of self. This construct of Byron’s relationship to his products [. . . .] implied that Byron could make both his poetry and his readers do what he wanted them to do. (45)

Byron’s audience and his critics turned his loss of agency into its precise opposite. They fantasized him as having complete control over them, thus ascribing to him a kind of omnipotency.

Byron’s example demonstrates that the fantasy of poetic control, which figures the poet as the agent, is vital to “the rhetoric of enchantment and seduction” (57). McDayter’s analysis demonstrates that it also sells extremely well. I argue that it does even more.
first place it allows readers and critics to disavow their own power. They posit themselves as victims of the seductive poet-monster. This absolves them from ever admitting that the seducer is also always the seduced, and that therefore they, the audience, are also the seducer. Thus, readers and critics participate in the creation of a circle that deprives them of agency.  

The Cult of Language

It has become clear in the example of Byron how the cult of the poet displaces the attention of the public from the poet’s work to the poet’s public figure. However, the public figure of the poet is relevant not only in the literary field, but also in the political and the economic fields. Many poets wanted nothing to do with these areas. They rejected the demands made on them by an urbanized capitalist society. McDayter points out correctly that

[...] while the Romantic era is usually described as at once the origin and zenith of modern poetic subjectivity, it also needs to be recognised as a time marked by the poets’ growing sense of alienation from both their product and their readership due to the emerging cultural pressures of nineteenth-century literary commodification. (43)

One response to the growing sense of alienation McDayter discusses, as well as a counter-response to the cult of the poet, was an increased focus on language and a problematization of language as a means of straightforward expression of the poet’s subjectivity. The focus on language seemed to provide the possibility to avoid the commodification of literature because the poetry produced was not suitable for mass consumption. Simultaneously, problematizing the capacity of language to express the poet’s subjectivity led to a strong focus on the exploration of the expressive – not so much communicative – possibilities that existing poetic language provided. Poets were looking to broaden the range of these expressive possibilities. One of the most influential poets who developed this poetic tradition was the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé.  

Mallarmé made language the protagonist of his work and rejected the performance of the poet’s subjectivity in his poetic work:

35 For a theorization of reading and writing in terms of seduction see Wilson 1999. I discuss her approach in detail in chapter 3.  
36 Another important representative was Friedrich Hölderlin. For a detailed study of his case see Stierle 1997.
he wants to replace the elocutionary character of verse, which focuses on the subjectivity of the poet, with a method that releases words to their own liberty to align in unequal value according to their natural shocks. (Balakian 31)

In this passage, Anna Balakian points out Mallarmé’s belief in the power of language and his readiness to give himself up to it as if words had an identity of their own. Part of his poetic project was the exploration of all elements of language that were not related to sound, most notably the graphic elements of language. His emphasis on these elements emphasized the separation between poetic language and the elocutionary.

Mallarmé’s seemingly apolitical approach to poetry did leave a strong trace in making poets realize just how very powerful language is, and that the poet’s subjectivity is not or should not be dominating language, but is produced by it. At a later point in this chapter I will quote the example of Mario Jiménez who learns about the power of language from a poet who takes a very different approach to subjectivity, the fictional figure of Pablo Neruda. In chapter 3 on “Speaking and Listening” I will propose to understand language as a trialogue between speaker, listener, and the word itself. This approach resonates with the poetic practice of Chus Pato, a selection of whose work I will discuss in chapter 4 on “Performance”. Language as an independent entity is the protagonist of her poetry, though, different than Mallarmé, she explores the capacities of language under the question of to what extent and in which ways language allows her to participate in public life and relate herself to her surroundings.

For now I want to turn to the consequences of what I have polemically called the cult of language for the poet as a public figure. In his article “Entre Narciso y Filomela: Enunciación y lenguaje poético” the Spanish theorist Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza localizes one of the fundamental struggles of modern lyrical poetry in the “in the not always trusting relationship between language and enunciation, between the words and the person who says them” (19). Language, part of its nature being public, cannot represent the intimacy of the poet adequately because the public aspects of it remain alien to his intimacy and to an extent even distorts what the poet wants to express. Cabo argues that poets reacted in two ways, one of which he explains in terms of the myth of Narcissus, the other in terms of the myth of Philomela.

Cabo quotes Eliot as one of the poets who took the approach of Narcissus. They saw themselves confronted with a situation that Cabo describes as follows:
On the one hand, the anxious and feared dissolution of the poet in some form of superindividual transcendence which makes him the writer of any type of word with an archaic origin; on the other hand side, the necessary mediation of a language that brings with it an accumulation of adherences that necessarily have to disturb the integrity of the word itself. (18) 37

The poet, who earlier used his poetry like Narcissus used his mirror, suddenly realizes that the mirror of language does not return the image that the poet expects to see. In an attempt to deal with this “fatal estrangement before one’s own image” (20), some poets turned to different methods of “staging” the lyrical I. Cabo cites examples such as dialogism, polyphony, poetics of impersonality, heteronymy and apocryphs and the fictionalization of the lyrical I. All these literary devices were used to zoom in on the speaker who is continuously looking for his reflection in the poem. In his search, he emphasizes his connection with what lies outside of the poem through the mediation of time and memory. However, the poet, like Narcissus, is only interested in his own self. Consequently, this type of poetry finally turns into what Cabo calls “a self-abortion and even a paradoxical tendency towards forgetting and silence” (25).

In contrast, the poets that follow the path of Philomela 38 aspire, according to Cabo, to

pure expression, alien to the conceptual, disconnected form the enunciated and the tradicional lyrical I. (22) 39

Rather than searching for their self or the reflection of it in poetic language, these poets focus solely on language and seek to cleanse it of any representation of the self. For them, language represents nothing. It reflects only itself, as Mallarmé put it. Poets like Mallarmé

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37 De una parte, la tan ansiada como temida disolución del poeta en algún tipo de trascendencia supraaindividual que lo vuelva amanuense de cualquier forma de palabra de origen arcano; de otra, la necesaria mediación de un lenguaje que arrastra un cúmulo de adherencias que por fuerza han de disturbare la integridad de la palabra propia.

38 Procne, daughter of the Athenian king Pandion, was given to Tereus of Thrace in marriage. Years later Tereus agreed to travel to Athens and escort Philomela to Thrace for a visit. Tereus lusted for Philomela on the voyage. Arriving in Thrace, he forced her to a cabin in the woods and raped her. According to Ovid, Philomela threatened to tell what happened to her. Tereus cut out her tongue and left her in the cabin. Procne then wove a tapestry (or a robe) that told her story and had it sent to Procne. In revenge, Procne killed her son by Tereus, Itys, and served him to Tereus, who unknowingly ate him. When he discovered what had been done, Tereus tried to kill the sisters; they fled and he pursued but, in the end, all three were changed by the Olympic Gods into birds. Tereus was turned into a raven, Philomela was turned into a nightingale, and Procne into a swallow.

39 una expresividad pura, ajena a lo conceptual, desprendida de lo enunciativo y del yo poético tradicional.
or Rimbaud were looking for ways to make language operate on an emotive level. To do this, they emphasized the musical qualities of language and tried to cleanse it of its bourgeois and traditional baggage. The poet aspires to a “clean subjectivity” – or a cleansed subjectivity – “by way of the destruction of the traditional bourgeois poetic subject, sometimes through ingenuity, childhood or arbitrariness” (24). Under such a point of view

The disconnection from the self, the forgetting of the speaker, imposes itself as a condition for utopia [. . .] of a pure and dazzling language that understands itself as separate from the imminence of the addressed. (24)

The poem is free floating, performing its critical attitude to the establishment mainly by its refusal to participate in it. In the end, both the Narcissus and the Philomela approach remove the poet from his surroundings. The poets following the path of Narcissus are absorbed in the search for a possibility to express their subjectivity, those that follow the path of Philomela absorb themselves in self-referential language. Hence, neither of the two approaches provided poets with a satisfactory way of negotiating their subjectivity through their poetry with their surroundings. For this reason, poets kept looking for different modes of performing authorship.  

**The Poetry of Circumstance**

Especially from the 1930s onwards an increasing number of poets started to connect their poetry with the circumstantial. In a subsequent move, they started defining their own poetic persona not as a closed subjectivity developed in solitariness, but as an open subjectivity developed in contact with their surroundings. This leads to a different attitude towards the representation of the self as the speaking subject in poetry. Their experience of their reality and the way they address it in their poetry leads to an emphasis on the autobiographical (Combe 52) and the subjective. Their desire to speak not only for themselves, but also for

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40 El desprendimiento de sí, el olvido del hablante, se impone como condición para la utopía [. . .] de un lenguaje puro y arrebatabador que se desentiende de la inminencia del destinatario.

41 Many poetry performances do respond critically to the cult of language. Paul Beasley’s passage about the “internal exile of the poet” sums up one frequently alleged and correct point of critique. However, many performers of poetry and critics sympathetic to performance poetry have paid less attention to the cult of the poet. Their blindness towards this poetic practice goes so far that in recent years, the figure of the Poet is increasingly mobilized in an uncritical fashion, which is especially noticeable in the marketing of poetry performances.
those around them, leads to an investigation of their subjectivity and to the careful interrogation of their perception of their realities.\textsuperscript{42}

Combe aptly cites Paul Éluard’s speech “La poésie de circonstance”. I analyse this speech because it brings out the complexity of the representation of subjectivity by these poets. Éluard writes:

True poetry has to express the real world, but also our inside, and this changed world that we have dreamt for ourselves, this truth that is in us if our eyes are really open. If the real world has not soaked the mind of the poet, he could never return anything to the world but abstraction and confusion, unformed dreams and absurd beliefs. His personal poetic reality would not hold before the poetic reality of the world. He would not be in the world because he would not have carried the weight of the human being, his own weight, the weight of the human being in the world and of the world in the human being. The work of reflection would not have been made inside of him. He would speak in a phantom language. (936)\textsuperscript{43}

Éluard speaks about the struggle of relating the many different worlds present in one person – the surroundings, the inner world and the world we dream of living in – with each other. Only a poet who has already related these worlds inside himself can write what Éluard calls “true poetry”, that is a poetry which is informed by the knowledge of the weight the poet has to bear, the weight others have to bear, the impact the human being has on the world, and the impact the world has on the human being. Poetry, and the subjectivity of the poet with it, is not developed by looking at the world from a distance, but by being in it and by being with it. This conception of poetic subjectivity is crucial for an analysis of most of the poetry I will discuss in this study.

\textsuperscript{42} A clear indication of their concern with the development of their own subjectivity in interaction with others is the number of protagonists in their poems. In works like Pablo Neruda’s \textit{Canto general} we encounter a wealth of protagonists. Not all of them are human; Neruda negotiates his subjectivity in relation to other members of society, friends, cities, landscapes, everyday objects and other components of people’s everyday life. In Neruda’s metaphorical language an object can acquire agency.

\textsuperscript{43} La poésie véritable doit exprimer le monde réel, mais aussi notre monde intérieur et ce monde transformé que nous avons rêvé, cette vérité qui est en nous si nos yeux sont vraiment ouverts. Si le monde réel n’a pas imbibé la tête du poète, celui-ci ne pourra jamais restituer au monde qu’abstraction et confusion, rêves informes et croyances absurdes. Sa réalité poétique personelle ne tiendra pas devant la réalité poétique du monde. Il ne sera pas au monde car il n’aura pas porté le poids de l’homme, son propre poids, le poids de l’homme dans le monde et du monde dans l’homme. Le travail de la réflexion ne se sera pas fait en lui. Il parlera en fantôme.
As Éluard continues, he points out that the poet’s possible refusal to develop his poetic subjectivity in communion with the things and the people that are around him has deeper and more far-reaching consequences than being just a personal stance. Éluard continues:

It is easy to be a phantom, easy for one-self and easy for the others. It is just as easy to obey one’s fatigue, one’s grief, one’s weariness, it is easier to seemingly break with the concrete world than to break with the old habits of laziness, of misery and of death, it is easier to kill oneself than to live, especially to live for duty. (936) 

Éluard picks up frequent motives of lyrical poetry such as weariness, grief and discouragement, and empties them of their romantic content. He argues that they are not the expression of a profound personality struggling with the world, but that they are one aspect of the human psyche that the human being has the choice either to give in to, or not. The poet can only reconcile the different worlds present inside and around him if he decides to engage with all these worlds, rather than breaking with “the world” outside of him.

One poem in which the poet returns to the circumstantial, and which addresses his decision to confront the different worlds around him and inside, is Pablo Neruda’s “Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu” (“The Heights of Macchu Picchu”), the second chapter of Canto general. I wish to analyse Éluard’s less well-known speech through a poem by his close friend Neruda because Neruda is one of the poets most frequently cited by contemporary performance poets as a major influence. Also, my integration of Neruda points out that the performance of poetry takes recourse to many traditions, American and European in this case.

Pablo Neruda tends to stand out strangely among other influences which performance poets and the theorists of performance poetry cite for themselves, such as the Beat Poets, the African griots, and storytellers. The reason given for his inclusion is usually the fact that he conducted public readings. Yet, from the recordings and reports of his readings I come to the conclusion that they were mere recitals with little interaction with the public and, as the German-Chilean poet Sergio Vesely once pointed out to me, with little intimacy between poet and audience due to the large venues in which they usually

44 Il est facile d’être un fantôme, pour soi-même et pour les autres. Il est tellement facile d’obéir à sa fatigue, à son chagrin, à son désœuvrement, plus facile de rompre apparemment avec le monde concret qu’avec les vieilles brumes de la paresse, de la misère et e la mort, plus facile de se suicider que de vivre, surtout par devoir.
took place. Also, Neruda (and other important Communist poets like Rafael Alberti) conducted their recitals in an excessively theatrical reading style. I alluded to the importance of tone of voice in the poetry reading and the poetry performance in the introduction to this study. There I argued that the difference between the poetry recital and the poetry performance manifests itself in the difference between the use of the poet’s voice as reading voice or as speaking voice. Considering the example of Neruda’s recitals I qualify my previous statement in the following way: in the poetry performance the poet uses a natural speaking voice, whereas in the poetry recital the poet either employs a voice that replicates the written style of the poem, or a voice that is excessively theatrical. In both cases the poet does not “project” his poem and himself, to employ a term used by Olson.

As a consequence, I contend that Neruda’s contribution to the performance of poetry as it started to emerge in the late 1960s and came to a culmination in the 1990s is related to his conception of authorship rather than to his readings. Neruda was one of the poets most famous for conceiving of poetry as a product of and as a means of intervention in his socio-political context. In his work this poetic-linguistic focus went hand in hand with performing in his poetry a conception of authorship as social and political responsibility, and who created the author and the author’s persona not as a means of limiting and confining meaning in Foucault’s sense, but as an entity for dialogue and debate and consequently, as an entity that allows the reader to engage with and to contest the authority invested in the author-function. This strategy of engaging with authority instead of side-tracking around it fits in perfectly with the strategies of many social movements who have to engage with the powers that create social and political realities. Also, Neruda is probably one of the poets who have most consciously reflected on the split between Narcissus and Philomela, who have most intensely struggled with the feelings of grief and weariness that found their expression in beautiful poetry but that he finally made the decision to resist. In “Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu” he turns these reflections into a poem. Converting his own journey to the ruins of Macchu Pichu in the 1940s into a mythical journey to conversion, the poem recounts the internal journey of the poet from solitude and isolation to a communal experience with his historical and contemporary communities (Santi 1982 and Felstiner 1980, among others).

“Las Alturas” is the second chapter in Canto general. The first chapter “La lámpara en la tierra” narrates the evolution of precolumbian Latin America. The speaker in “La lámpara” is distant from the events he recounts, viewing them with wonderment and
enchantment from a distance. “Macchu Picchu” turns the speaker into the protagonist of the poem. The first stanza of the poem evokes Éluard's image of the phantom:

From the air to the air, like an empty net,
I went on through streets and thin air, arriving and leaving behind,
at autumn’s advent, the coin handed out
in the leaves, and between spring and ripe grain,
the fullness that love, as in a glove’s
fall, gives over to us like a long-drawn moon. (Felstiner 1980)  

“Alturas” paints the image of a wanderer in the world, a person with no foothold who takes the ambivalent small offerings made to him by life. He experiences spring as thorny, and love throws its gift inside a glove, starting a malicious struggle where there should be tenderness. The speaker of the poem remains a stranger to the world and to himself because the world is around him and not inside him.

The poem then recounts the speaker’s arrival at Macchu Picchu. In the ancient city he recognizes his own Latin American roots. He starts to ask questions about the ancient city’s inhabitants, about their lives and about the circumstances that made them live the doubtlessly difficult lives they had to live. All these questions lead to an evocation of the oppressed and exploited workers of the times of the Inca. The speaker asks them to help him sing the past as part of the present of Latin America and to help him find a voice as an expression of his subjectivity from within his community:

Give me silence, water, hope.

Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.

Fasten your bodies to me like magnets.

Hasten to my veins to my mouth.

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46 Del aire al aire, como una red vacía,
iba yo entre las calles y la atmósfera, llegando y despidiendo,
en el advenimiento del otoño la moneda extendida
de las hojas, y entre la primavera y las espigas,
lo que el más grande amor, como dentro de un guante
que cae, nos entrega como una larga luna.
Speak through my words and my blood. (Felstiner 1980)\textsuperscript{47}

In this final evocation of the dead of Macchu Picchu, Neruda proposes himself as their spokesman.

Through the metaphors he employs he binds himself to those who are behind, he connects veins and mouth, words and blood, and what is said with the body that says it. By becoming the iron that attracts and maintains the bodies of the dead, the poet’s speaking body becomes the living link between past and present, between the speaker and his chosen community. In Neruda’s case, this link became so pronounced that for many it was reconfirmed by his natural death only days after the military coup in Chile: when freedom was killed, when the poet was isolated in his house and too sick to struggle, his body gave in. Circumstances no longer allowed for the poet to be the spokesman of his people. His struggle had to be continued with different means. The emphasis on the necessity of the poet’s physical presence resonates with Keane’s and Middleton’s insistence on the poet’s presence as being crucial to the connection between poet and audience. Hence, I contend, it is Neruda’s model of the poet as a public figure and his performance of the connection between poet and audience – and not the fact that he conducted public readings – that made him a truly important influence on contemporary performance poetry.

Thus, Neruda’s example introduces an important category of analysis. The poet’s physical presence makes him the connector between his subjectivity and the world around him. I now want to focus closely on the social element of the poet’s figure. To do so, I provide an analysis of how the figure of the poet is constructed socially.

In his novel El cartero de Neruda (Neruda's Postman) the Chilean novelist Antonio Skármeta theorizes the social element of the poet’s public figure through a fictional story. In a literary example of expository writing he traces the development from Pablo Neruda’s lyrical I into a public figure in a story about the friendship between Pablo Neruda and his postman Mario Jiménez. I call his writing “expository” because Skármeta frames the story

\textsuperscript{47} Dadme el silencio, el agua, la esperanza.

Dadme la lucha, el hierro, los volcanes.

Apegadme los cuerpos como imanes.

Acudid a mis venas y a mi boca.

Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre.
of Neruda and Mario within a preface and an epilogue that call the “truth” of the whole story into question. In doing so he directs the readers’ attention to both the artificiality of the object (the story) and to the way it is being “made up” (his own writing). He also invites the reader to reflect on why the story was written at all if it was not written to tell a true story. Through his story Skármeta staged the development and function of Neruda’s social persona. Thus, both the topic and the mode of writing demonstrate a theoretical and reflexive impulse as well as a literary one.  

Fact and Fiction: Neruda Performs Neruda

As as novelist, Skármeta has invented his case study. The reader never finds out whether the story contains true elements or whether it is made up in its entirety. In writing the novel Skármeta explicitly performs, and in doing so stresses the interaction between fact and fiction by blending fact and invention until they become indistinguishable even to the protagonists. The character “Pablo Neruda”, for example, is not identical with the biographical person Pablo Neruda, who was in turn born under the name of Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto and according to himself underwent several metamorphoses during his lifetime. Yet, none of these figurations is any less real in the social imagination of those that contribute to the construction of Pablo Neruda’s public figure for being fictional. The importance of the fictive element in the novel reflects on the importance of that element in the process of constructing the poet’s public figure. The explicit address and integration of fiction accounts for many of the novel’s twists, one of which allows Skármeta to present “Pablo Neruda” as what he became to the people who made his poetry into a bridge between themselves and others, and between themselves and their social environment: a character. By way of this twist Skármeta manages to capture not who Pablo Neruda was, but what he meant for that very undefined group that I term here “people”. I write “people” and not “readers” because Pablo Neruda means something to people who have never read his poetry, as the main character Mario Jiménez explains when Neruda is wondering what will happen if he is elected president. Mario replies that Neruda will of course get elected because “in my parents’ house there is only one book and it’s one of yours” and “if my dad, who doesn’t know how to read nor write, has a book of yours, that means we’ll win” (39).

48 I borrow the term “expository writing” from Bal, who introduces it in Double Exposures and in her introduction to The Practice of Cultural Analysis.

49 Neruda consolidates his own public persona in his memoirs Confieso que he vivido. The title plays with the genre of autobiography as well as with the genre of confession. The title leaves it open whether the book is one or the other, thus suggesting the mixture of confession and concealment that worked so well for Byron and that Neruda mobilizes in his own context more than 150 years later.
Mario’s remark strongly resonates with Wilson’s observations on the neglect of Byron’s poetry in the construction of the Byronic figure. In both cases, the name of the poet acquires meaning separately from his poetry. However, in Neruda’s case the possibility of neglecting the poetry gets a positive spin because it makes his figure available for illiterate as well as literate people. In societies and cultures where reading books is not a frequent activity, written poetry is inaccessible to most people. It becomes accessible to them only when it is read aloud, or when it is performed in other ways, for example through the public persona of the poet.  

*El cartero* consists of a frame narration and a story. The frame narrator appears only twice, once in the beginning of the novel in a kind of preface, and once at the end of the novel in the epilogue. In both chapters he gives sparse information about himself and more detailed information on the circumstances of the writing of the novel. He explains in the preface that the popular perception of Neruda as the poet of lovers and of eroticism is the starting point of the events he describes in the story. The narrator, then a young journalist, went to Isla Negra in the late-1960s with the assignment from his editor to interview Neruda about his “erotic geography”. Pablo Neruda refuses to discuss the subject because he is happily married and all his escapades are in his past. Because he has nothing else to do, the narrator starts to hang around Neruda’s house and gets to meet all the other people who hang around there, among them the protagonists of the story. In this way the narrator became witness to the emerging friendship between Pablo Neruda and his postman Mario Jiménez.

Mario Jiménez is a shy and lazy 17-year-old who lives in the fishing village Isla Negra. Newly employed as a postman, he finds out that his only client is the poet Pablo Neruda. Mario is delighted – not because he has ever read anything by the great poet, but because, like the narrator, he believes Neruda to be the poet of lovers and of eroticism. Therefore he is convinced that Neruda has a certain impact on women. Mario hopes that some of Neruda’s success might rub off on himself. Initially, he hopes to achieve this by getting Neruda to autograph a copy of *Elementary Odes*, bought expressly for this purpose. The autograph Mario envisions will prove him to be a good friend of the poet, and will, so he thinks, impress all the beautiful women he one day hopes to meet. But like the narrator

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50 I previously argued with Graham the poet’s public figure is related to the commodification of literature in the 19th century. The public figure of the poet in the terms in which I analyse it in this chapter is dependant on the publishing market and the infrastructure that developed with industrialization in the 19th century. David Reynolds clearly brings out this connection in his analysis of the public figure of Walt Whitman (Reynolds 1996).

51 This is one indication of Neruda’s self-construction of a public persona. According to his secretary Jorge Edwards, Neruda went on having affairs even while he was married to Matilde Urrutia (Edwards 2002).
Mario is disappointed: Neruda turns out to be quite inaccessible. He is polite but short with Mario, and fiercely protective of his privacy. When Mario asks for his autograph, he gets a disappointing “Cordialmente, Pablo Neruda”.

Mario, however, does not give up. He buys *New Elementary Odes* in the hope that he might receive a more useful dedication inscribed in this book. Since he has the books anyway, he also reads them. And there comes a day when Mario and Neruda start turning the poems into a bridge between them. The conversation in question starts with Neruda’s refusal to fit into the role that Mario has cut out for him. He refuses the role as seducer, but offers to be a teacher. It is significant that the conversation is held as a dialogue. Neruda is not lecturing, and Mario does not quietly study while he is reading. The point of departure of the conversation is Mario’s question about what a metaphor is. In order to explain it Neruda recites a poem about the sea. Mario responds with the comment that the poem is “strange”, and Neruda asks him to explain what he means. Mario replies:

– It is not the poem that is strange. Strange is how *I* felt when you recited the poem. ... How can I explain it? When you said the poem, the words moved from here to there.

– Well, yes, like the sea.

– Yes, they were moving like the sea.

– This is the rhythm.

– And I felt strange because I felt sick from so much movement.

– You felt sick.

– Sure! I was like a boat trembling in your words!

– Do you know what you just made, Mario?

– What?

– A metaphor.

– But that doesn’t count, because it came to me by coincidence.

– There is no image that is no coincidence, son.

– Do you think that the whole world, I mean the *whole* world, with the wind, the seas, the trees, the mountains, the fire, the animals, the houses, the deserts, the rain…

– … now you can say et cetera.
– …the etceteras! You think that the whole world is the metaphor of something else? (25-26)52

This conversation contains three elements that become characteristic of the relationship between the two: Neruda challenges Mario to explain himself; Mario pushes forward the conversation by speaking his mind, and in this way challenges Neruda; and Neruda takes his postman’s judgement and his questions seriously. But their relationship is not only based on the appreciation of each other’s conversational and poetical capacities. It also functions on a personal level, as the following episode shows.

Shortly after becoming friendly with Neruda, Mario falls in love with Beatriz González, the beautiful daughter of the owner of the village bar. During one of his trips to the poet’s house, he tries to persuade the reluctant poet to help him to conquer Beatriz’ heart. Neruda has just received a telegram asking him whether he wants to run for president of Chile for the Communist Party. He wants to put off the decision and his compassion for Mario offers a good excuse for procrastination. He comes to the bar with Mario to take a look at Beatriz. Mario is enthusiastic: “She’ll die of impression when she sees us together! Pablo Neruda and Mario Jiménez drinking wine together in the bar! She’ll die!”53 (40) Of course Beatriz does not die, and she does not fall in love with Mario because he comes to the bar with Pablo Neruda either. More importantly, the episode shows Neruda to take a personal, though not altruistic interest in Mario’s life and the people in it. Neruda truly

52– Raro no lo es el poema. Raro es como yo me sentía cuando usted recitaba el poema. ... Cómo se lo explicara? Cuando usted decía el poema, las palabras iban de acá pa’llá.
– Como el mar, pues!
– Sí, pues, se movía igual que el mar.
– Eso es el ritmo.
– Y me sentía raro, porque con tanto movimiento me mareé.
– Te mareaste!
– Claro! Yo iba como un barco temblando en sus palabras.
[. . . .]
– Sabes lo que has hecho, Mario?
– Qué?
– Una metáfora.
– Pero no vale, porque me salió de pura casualidad, no más.
– No hay imagen que no sea casual, hijo.
[. . . .]
– Usted cree que todo el mundo, quiero decir todo el mundo, con el viento, los mares, los árboles, las montañas, el fuego, los animales, las casas, los desiertos, las lluvias...
– ... ahora ya puedes decir “etcétera”.
– ... los etcéteras! Usted cree que el mundo entero es la metáfora de algo?
53 Se va a morir de impresión si nos ve juntos. Pablo Neruda y Mario Jiménez tomando vino juntos en la hostería! Se muere!”
sympathizes with his enamored postman and is willing to maintain his moral support even in embarrassing situations. When Mario remains mute after Beatriz’ question of “What would you like to drink?” Neruda’s reply to the same question is: “The same as he” (42).

Neruda’s attitude in the episode indicates that the poet starts to understand how much Mario values his support in his function as a famous poet, and how much Mario believes in its effectiveness. Therefore, Neruda accepts and performs the role of “public poet” that Mario offers him on behalf of his community. Importantly, Neruda never pities or patronizes Mario in the enactment of his public persona. He does not try to solve the problems of Mario’s love life. Instead, Neruda complements his act of publicly showing his support and sympathy by helping Mario to fight his low self-confidence and speechlessness in front of Beatriz. Neruda takes Mario’s questions about poetry seriously, forces Mario to formulate them as clearly as he can, and encourages him to read more. When Neruda leaves for Santiago to start the campaign for the presidential elections, he gives Mario an edition of his Complete Works with a dedication that is even better than the one Mario dreamt of in the beginning of the story. Mario, of course, reads the token of the poet’s friendship conscientiously.

The training bears fruit, and when Neruda returns to Isla Negra, he has to deal with the consequences. Doña Rosa, Beatriz’ mother, requests a meeting with him to discuss “Mario Jiménez, this seducer of minors”, and the “seducer of minors” himself is desperate and needs help, because Doña Rosa has locked Beatriz in the house and will not let her see Mario. Neruda at first wants nothing to do with the conflict between the two, but Mario, now well-read in Neruda’s poetry, beats the poet with his own argument, or poem:

You have to help me because you yourself wrote: “I don’t like the house without a roof, or the windows without panes. I don’t like the day without work and the night without sleep. I don’t like the man without the woman, or the woman without man. I want lives to merge, lighting the kisses that so far have been off. I am the good match-making poet.” I suppose that you are not going to tell me now that this poem is an uncovered check! (63-64)

54 Usted tiene que ayudarme porque usted mismo escribió: “No me gusta la asa sin tejado, la ventana sin vidrios. No me gusta el día sin trabajo y la noche sin sueño. No me gusta el hombre sin mujer, ni la mujer sin hombre. Yo quiero que las vidas se integren enciendo los besos hasta ahora apagados. Yo soy el buen poeta casamentero.” Supongo que ahora no me diría que este poema es un cheque sin fondos!
Neruda gives in: Once again he realizes that if he does indeed want to be the poet of the humble people he has to put into action what he is preaching, and take them seriously. He phones Doña Rosa and arranges a meeting to discuss the “seductor of minors”. During the meeting Doña Rosa confronts Neruda with a piece of evidence that “catches them in the act”. It proves that Mario has seen Beatriz naked and, as Beatriz’ streetwise mother concludes, has therefore slept with her. The piece of evidence is a poem from *100 Love Sonnets*, a recent book of Neruda’s that Doña Rosa obviously has not read, and that Doña Rosa has found on Beatriz. The poem’s subject is the beauty of a naked woman. To Neruda’s careful argument that one must not necessarily conclude from the poem that Mario has slept with Beatriz, Doña Rosa replies:

> I have known her for 17 vientreyears, plus the nine months that I carried her in my womb. The poem doesn’t lie, don Pablo: exactly like this, as the poem says, is my little daughter when she is naked. (69)\(^{55}\)

Thus, Doña Rosa wins on all counts, and by the end of the conversation Neruda confesses to Mario that he now understands how a boxer feels after getting knocked out in the first round. But the conversation confirms Mario’s and Neruda’s friendship, and it demonstrates to Doña Rosa that the poet is accessible and helpful as a neighbour.

His friendship with Mario and his accessibility to Doña Rosa’s concerns allow the villagers to view Neruda as someone who understands the concerns of their community. These experiences of the villagers with Neruda become aspects of the public persona they script together. The novel addresses the scripting and performance of Neruda’s public persona when Neruda receives the Nobel Prize. To approach the construction of Neruda’s public persona in Skármeta’s novel, it is helpful to begin by addressing Neruda’s performance in terms of what Sayre terms an “artistic performance”. Such an artistic performance, writes Sayre, “is […] defined by its status as the single occurrence of a repeatable or preexistent text or score” (Sayre 1995: 91). Conversely, this means that the artistic performance requires a text, and that Pablo Neruda would be performing the role of his public persona on the basis of such a preexistent text. In the chapters leading up to Neruda’s reception of the Nobel Prize, *El cartero de Neruda* shows how the preexistent text for the performance of Pablo Neruda’s public persona is being scripted and how the poet’s public persona is performed on the basis of this text. The scripting of the preexistent text is

\(^{55}\) Diecisiete años que la conozco, más nueve meses que la llevé en este vientre. El poema no miente, don Pablo: exactamente así, como dice el poema, es mi niñita cuando está desnuda.
presented as emerging out of the relationship between Pablo Neruda and his readers, in this case the villagers from Isla Negra. Their relationship is characterized by mutual respect and need and causes the scripting of the role to become a co-operative process between the poet and his readers. This process is exemplified in the cooperation between Pablo Neruda and his postman, Mario Jiménez.

The prescripted role that is so elaborately developed in Neruda’s interaction with the villagers and especially with Mario is being enacted when Neruda receives the Nobel Prize. Skármeta stages the situation: The villagers assemble for the occasion, and sit in a half-circle around the TV of the village bar as if they were sitting in a theatre. Mediated by the TV, they see Neruda standing on a stage, giving his acceptance speech to the audience that is physically present in Stockholm. Thus, by implication they do not only judge the content of the speech, but the performance he puts on for the audience that is actually present. In the speech, Neruda reframes Rimbaud’s famous line “À l’aurore, armés d’une ardente patience, nous enrerons aux splendides villes” within a contemporary context and as a prophecy. In doing so, Neruda reclaims Rimbaud’s legacy for the marginalized and makes it accessible to those “without school and without shoes”.56 By reading the line as a prophecy, he says that better times are on their way in the year 1971, and asks “the people of good will” to hold on in their struggle, assuring them that it will be worth it. Through his rereading of Rimbaud, Neruda performs the role of the poet who is understood to the people, who turns a type of literature that is traditionally considered to be high culture into an element of popular culture. He is able to do so because he has undergone the apprenticeship of speaking poetry with and to people like Mario Jiménez and Doña Rosa.

Neruda’s rereading of Rimbaud calls to mind the French critic Roland Barthes’ differentiation between the “écrivain” and the “écrivant”, translated by Richard Howard as “author” and “writer”. In his essay “Authors and Writers” Barthes argues that Western society traditionally provided two functions for those who write. The function with the

56 This quote is used frequently in connection with Neruda. It comes from Confieso que he vivido:

Curzio Malaparte, who interviewed me some years after what I am about to relate, stated it well in his article: “I am not a Communist, but if I were a Chilean poet, I would be one, like Pablo Neruda. You have to take sides here, with the Cadillacs or with the people who have no schooling or shoes.” These people without schooling or shoes elected me senator [. . .]. (166)

The quote demonstrates the interconnection between poetry and political militancy in its manifestations in journalism and in Neruda’s writing, and its travel between the two genres.
longer tradition is that of the author. The more recent function, which was developed in the 19th century, is the function of the writer. The author writes for the sake of language; he fulfils himself “in language alone” (146). Because society has cut out a function for him, it provides him with the “traditional channels” (148) through which his language comes to the attention of the public. The writer is interested in thought rather than language. He chooses the club of the intelligentsia, as Barthes calls it, over the club of the men-of-letters. His language is intransitive as it “serves a praxis, it does not constitute one” (147).

The difference between author and writer is articulated in their practices of language. Barthes writes that

the social function of literary language (that of the author) is precisely to transform thought (or consciousness, or protest) into merchandise; [...] the paradox here is that “provocative” language is readily accommodated by the literary institution: the scandals of language, from Rimbaud to Ionesco, are rapidly and perfectly integrated; whereas “provocative” thought, insofar as it is to be immediate (without mediation), can only exhaust itself in the no man’s land of form: the scandal is never total. (149)

Considered in the context of what Barthes calls the “total scandal”, Neruda’s evocation of Rimbaud as his predecessor gains a wider dimension. At stake is Barthes argument that neither provocative language nor provocative thought can achieve the total scandal. Rimbaud is one of the examples that prove his point. That Rimbaud’s language was “rapidly and perfectly integrated” testifies to the overwhelming power of the social conventions and institutions that define and restrict the functions of the author and the writer as well as the possibility for language and thought. Barthes does not question their power. On the contrary, not even the recent development of a mixed form, the author-writer, calls these conventions and institutions into question. Consequently, Barthes comes to the conclusion that the recent combination of the two functions has not led to a stronger position for the author-writer, but that it has marginalized him:

[... ] his function in society as a whole is perhaps related to the one Lévi-Strauss attributes to the witch doctor: a function of complementarity, both witch doctor and intellectual in a sense stabilize a disease which is necessary to the collective economy of health. (150)
For Neruda the issue at stake is how to be an author-writer without becoming marginalized. This can be achieved only if the “traditional channels” (148) through which language is distributed are exploded rather than replaced with the institutions that distribute the language of the writer. Neruda’s poetry as it is performed in Skármeta’s novel explodes these channels: it is offered through speech and through conversation, and it is offered to and by people who do not usually have access to the traditional channels through which the transitive language of the author is distributed. Neruda’s language is informed by and complicit with provocative thought to such an extent that it explodes the social context that makes for the division between author and writer: it is transitive and instrumental at the same time. Phrased differently, Neruda’s language demonstrates that transitivity can be instrumental. This is precisely why it is scandalous. However, the scandal is not produced by language and poet alone. The poet on his own cannot explode the channels through which language is distributed; he needs the collaboration of “those without shoes and those without schools”, i.e. those who do not have an investment in the traditional channels of distributing language.

Neruda publicly pronounces the invitation to his listeners to participate in making the scandal of poetry total through his public figure. The use of his public persona makes it clear that the scandal is not only an element of his personal attempt to develop a different type of language. The scandal is an element of his attempt to develop together with others a type of language that is not controlled by those who are traditionally invested with the power to do so, or by any other institutions. Those who bestow the authority on him to pronounce this invitation on an international stage and in pronouncing this invitation, transcend the functions of the author, of the writer, and of the author-writer, are the people of his immediate surroundings, the villagers of Isla Negra. By quoting Rimbaud, Neruda points out that long before him, others pronounced this same invitation. But because they remained isolated, just as Neruda was before the experience of Macchu Picchu, the invitation never had an effect.

In the novel, the villagers burst into spontaneous applause after Neruda finishes his speech. Their applause testifies to the successful performance of a public persona whose preexistent text has been carefully scripted by Neruda and the villagers. Neruda’s performance of his public persona is part of an exchange. While the villagers enable him to overcome his forlornness, he voices their concerns in front of an international audience and points out the important part they have played in his life and in his poetry.
In Neruda’s analysis of Rimbaud the French poet emerges as the spokesman for hopes and struggles. Rimbaud even comes to personify these issues. Neruda, in turn, takes a similar route as Rimbaud. In taking up Rimbaud’s hopes and struggles and framing them within a contemporary context, he becomes the spokesman for the people who maintain these hopes and struggles. Eventually he even comes to personify their dreams and aspirations. Such a tactic is not without its problems because it can encourage the passivity of the listeners. Stephen Henighan argues that Mario is one example of a passive listener. He remains “a ‘letter-carrier,’ the bearer of linguistic forms forged by others, rather than a creative force” (Henighan: 182).

But Skármeta suggests that Neruda and Mario break through the dynamic of dependency and inequality that the position of the spokesman can imply because their need and respect is mutual. The people need Neruda, but Neruda also needs the people. This mutual relationship is epitomized in an episode from the end of the story. After the military coup, the dying Neruda is interned in his house in Isla Negra. Mario learns that he is there. Because he is not allowed to see him, he memorizes all the letters and telegrams that arrive for the poet from all over the world. He manages to break through the lines of the military and to bring Neruda the forbidden messages. Henighan sees this as another instance of Mario’s lack of creativity: “Mario can only memorize” (182). I read the passage in a different way. I have argued that one important aspect of Neruda’s public function is that he seeks to connect to people. Sickness and repression have disrupted the physical possibility of such a connection. Mario takes the idea of a postman or messenger to a different level. He breaks through the poet’s isolation by visiting him in person, but also by establishing a connection to the international world. During this last visit Mario has to physically support the dying poet, so that he can look out of the window and assess the full extent of his situation. This confirms that the poet is not only on the giving, but also on the receiving end. The relationship between him and his audience is, to that extent, equal.

I want to point out one last important aspect of Neruda’s performance, which leads me back to Éluard’s speech and Lord Byron’s staging of his own self. Lord Byron’s performance of Lord Byron the Poet led to the development of the Byronic hero. As Wilson points out, Byron himself acquired heroic qualities for many of his readers. Éluard refers to heroic figures when he reconsiders the figure of the poet in “La poésie de circonstance”. He argues that there are two types of poets, some who were caught up in he struggles and the miseries of their own times, those who struggled and were defeated, such as Villon,
Rimbaud, Whitman, Lorca, Pushkin, Maiakovski and Desnos. Other poets, like Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe and even Victor Hugo became

the conscience of their times, they objectively bore witness for the prosecution and for the defense of the grand pocesses of history, which are the foundations and the fragility of the past at the same time. (932)\(^7\)

After having paid his homages Éluard continues:

Immense voices, but, are we in our weakness often not more susceptible to those that better express our precarious condition and that seem more human to us? We do not so much desire models as equals, as brothers who express our aspirations and our desire for perfection, but also our pain, our common human measure. (933)\(^8\)

Éluard suggests a model of equality and brotherhood that is incompatible with the image of the hero. The hero is always superior to those around him. In Éluard’s description, the poet becomes a Poet because he is equal to those around him. Éluard’s Poet is not “above the humdrum and beyond the law”. He is struggling with the humdrum and is a victim of the law just like everybody else.

Poets like Neruda and Éluard broke with an interpretation of the lyrical I and of poetry that according to Dominique Combe is based on the Hegelian conception of poetry as an expression of the process in which the soul “with its subjective judgements, its joys, admirations, its paints and its emotions, becomes conscious of itself in the bosom of the content” (Combe: 40). Combe argues that from Hegel onwards lyrical poetry became confused with personal or intimist poetry:

In this way the today still wide-spread idea was imposed, the idea that lyrical poetry has the vocation to “express” feelings, the state of the subject’s soul in his “interiority” and his “profundidity”, and not to represent the “exterior” and

\(^7\) la conscience de leur temps, ils témoignent objectivement à charge et à décharge dans le grand procès de l’histoire, ils sont à la fois les fondations et la fragilité du passé.

\(^8\) Voix immenses, mais, souvent, ne sommes-nous pas plus sensibles, dans notre faiblesse, à celles qui expriment mieux notre condition précaire et qui nos semblent plus humaines? Nous ne désirons pas tant des modèles que des semblables, que des frères qui expriment nos aspirations et notre désir de perfection, mais aussi notre peine, notre commune mesure humaine.
“objective” world. Lyricism is being confused with “personal”, i.e. “intimist”, poetry, and therefore privileges meditative introspection [. . . .]. (40-41)

From the Hegelian perspective any reading that does not revolve around the poet has to be untrue. Several poets started to try and work around their own removal from the world in the nineteenth century, with Arthur Rimbaud and Walt Whitman among the most famous, both important figures of influence for Neruda and contemporary performance poets. When Rimbaud writes “Je est un autre” he claims that his lyrical I is no longer identical with the biographical person Arthur Rimbaud. His claim is different than Byron’s, who stumbled over this effect of his poetry and tried to play along with it. Rimbaud makes it clear that he wants poetry to be able to accommodate fiction; Byron pretends that he does not.

In a response to the strategy of creating an “other” as speaker of the poetic text we should expand the vocabulary of criticism in order to be able to analyse the different manifestations of subjectivity in poetry. The Portuguese critic Helena Buescu argues for a triadic perception of the author/reader relationship in the analysis of poetry:

I contend that the move from the binary narrator/reader to the triadic textual author/narrator/reader would allow us to understand the internal figurations of the narrator that are not covered nor by all the hypotheses focused on the text, nor all the genealogical modalities that the textual author allows us to conceive of: a narrator is limited to texts with a visible narrative element, and therefore it excludes an enormous plurality of discourses and texts whose narrative element does not have priority, from the lyrical or dramatic to the essayistic or argumentative, for example. (60)

While I agree with Buescu in principle, I propose to use different terms. The entity that Buescu proposes to call the “empirical author” I propose to call the poet-author in order to make a clear distinction between poetry and narrative. For the same reason I propose to call

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59C’est ainsi que s’impose l’idée communément répandue, aujourd’hui encore, que la poésie lyrique a vocation “d’exprimer” les sentiments, états d’âme du sujet dans son “interiorité” et sa “profondeur” et non de représenter le monde “extérieur” et “objectif”. Le lyrisme se confond avec la poésie “personnelle”, voire “intimiste”, et privilègie ainsi l’intréspection méditative [. . . .].

60 [. . .] coido que o paso do binomio narrador/lector á triade autor textual/ narrador/lector nos permitirá comprender que as figuracións internas do narrador non cobren nin todas as hipóteses de dirección textual nin todas as modalidades xenolóxicas que o autor textual deixa concibir: a narrador está limitado a textos cuxa compoñente narrativa existe e se torna visíbel, e nesa medida deixa fóra una pluralidade enorme de discursos e de textos cuxa subsunción polo narrativo non é prioritaria, do lírico ao dramático e ao ensaístico ou argumentativo, por exemplo.
the entity she refers to with the term “narrator”, the “lyrical subject” or the “textual persona”. Finally, I propose to add a third term to account for the cultural figurations of the poet’s persona, the “public persona”. This last suggestion accounts for the fact that the poet-author is not always in control of the cultural transformations of his textual persona, as we have seen in the cases of Byron and even Neruda.

I do not mean to suggest that the textual persona is a straightforward creation of the poet-author. In the following chapter I will analyse different modes of reading poetry, taking as examples Mario, Doña Rosa, Labbé, and Beatriz. It will become clear that each of the readers encounters a different textual persona in Neruda’s poems: Mario finds a friend and matchmaker, Doña Rosa finds a seducer of women, Labbé a seducer of the politically innocent, and Beatriz finds a constructed persona which is uninteresting to her because it is fictional. In light of the statements of performance poetry that I quoted in the beginning of this chapter I would therefore argue that the performance of poetry places itself in a tension field of different notions of how the identity of the author is constructed by him and by his readers; said differently, it struggles with the relationship between fact and fiction and with the consequences of shifting the emphasis of the poem on either of the two poles. In his essay “Prágmatica y poesía” Arturo Casas explores different theorizations of these two poles and of the effects they have on the relationship between poet and reader. The introduction of a pragmatic approach allows for the inclusion of discourses other than poetic ones. In light of the statements about performance poetry that I quoted in the beginning of this chapter, I argue that the performance poetry is not a straightforward alternative to such models of imposition, but that at least some performance poets use the performance to create different conditions for the production of poetic authority. The important contribution of the performance of poetry is that any figuration of the poet is collectively produced in the moment of the performance. Said differently, the performance tries to comprise the long process of the development of the poet’s different personae within its limits. Thus, the performance does not so much perform a finished product, but documents the struggle for different conditions of the production of meaning.

In my analysis of Skármeta’s demonstration of the emergence of the poet’s public figure I have shown how intricately intertwined fact and fiction are in the construction of the poet’s public figure. My use of a fictional text as theoretical object emphasizes that the decision of whether to treat a text as fact or fiction depends on the moment of reading it (Casas 1994: 260). Nevertheless, this fictionality is collective, social. My choice of a novel
as a theoretical text has underlined the importance of the social imagination in the process I have analysed.

The Poet as Author
Social responsibility is a key element of the figure of the poet as performed by Neruda and as conceived of by many performance poets. In literary and cultural theory the writer in interaction with his social environment is figured as author. Therefore, I will now focus on the term “poet-author” and analyse how the poet and the author interact with each other. So far I have mainly discussed the figure of the poet and its performance within the text and as a cultural figure. I now relate the conclusions drawn from these discussions with some approaches to authorship from literary and cultural studies. I have chosen to focus on the approaches taken by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault because of the strong influence they have had on theories of authorship, and because both Keane and Middleton explicitly address the approaches taken by these two theorists. In the following paragraphs I demonstrate that a critical engagement of the approaches of Foucault and Barthes on the one hand, and of Middleton, Beasley or Keane on the other, allows for the development of concepts that facilitate a differentiated approach of different figurations of poetic authorship.

When Middleton writes that the author “claims to be the originating subject of the poem” he suggests that the performance of poetry is a direct contradiction of Barthes who writes that

writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (142)

The performance of the poet’s public figure and the performance of poetry seem to demonstrate that Barthes is mistaken. Writing is not the destruction of every voice, but can lead to the recovery of voices, as we saw in Skármeta’s fictionalized analysis of the relationship between Neruda and his postman. Skármeta constructs a character that does not ever worry about the point of origin of the poems he recites to Beatriz because in the moment of speaking, they originate from his lips and that is all that matters to the lover. Drawing from these observations and analyses, I suggest that the poet’s presence in front of us – either as the performatively emerging speaker of the poem or as the physical speaker of the poem in the performance – challenges the audience into thinking about his identity
rather than creating “a negative where all identity is lost” (Barthes 142). When we look at it from this point of view, as Jayne Fenton Keane and many others do, Barthes’ proclamation of the death of the author is led ad absurdum by the reality produced by the performance of the poet’s public figure and the performance of poetry. However, there are other points that Barthes makes and that are not so far away from what the performance poets and many of their predecessors would have to say about authorship.

One such point is the emphasis on the present moment in the construction of meaning. Barthes argues that if the reader or critic looks for the meaning of a text by deciphering what the author meant for it to mean, his or her view is directed towards the past:

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. (149)

A critic who reads in this way has to learn about the Author’s world, his life and his thoughts in order to discover the meaning of the text. As a result, the past dominates the present and the figure of the Author dominantes the reader. Barthes proposes a different mode of reading, one that anchors itself in the present moment:

[. . . .] a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (148)

Meaning is made when the reader engages all the different writings that make up the literary text. Since he is (virtually or metaphorically) dead, the author does not have access to all these different writings. The reader is the only person who has access to them and can unite the different writings in a process of meaning making that takes place in the present.
Since Barthes conceives of writing and reading in that way, it is only consistent that he declares the death of the author and reconfigures the figure of the Author into the figure of the scriptor:

In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now. (145)

Many performance poets would claim precisely what Barthes is claiming for the scriptor: The poet’s voice is born simultaneously with the moment of enunciating the text and thus, “there is no other time than that of enunciation”. Like Barthes, they would say that every text is committed to the here and now because it depends on the response of the audience present during the performance. Yet, the two approaches are incompatible with each other because the performance of poetry emphasizes the presence of the author and claims to have effects such as its attachment to the present moment and the empowerment of the audience. According to Barthes, it cannot have these effects because the living author jeopardizes any literary project that seeks to empower its readers: “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148).

I propose to stop approaching the struggle about the death or the aliveness of the poet-author through the keyword of empowerment. This approach immediately leads into already deeply dug critical and theoretical trenches, as my previous two paragraphs demonstrate. At the heart of the conflict lies the question about the relationship between subjectivity and authority. Barthes and the proponents of the performance of poetry would agree that the author is invested with a certain authority. They would disagree on the question whether he uses this authority to impose his own subjective views and demands on others. Barthes seems to suggest that he does, or that the critic uses it to impose the views of authors that agree with those of the critic. My argument is that according to many performance poets he does not, and this suggestion is related to the poetry of circumstance and the way the author’s subjectivity is constructed through it.

The crucial point is that Barthes imagines the author as someone who is always alone, and he imagines the production of meaning as a solitary process. The poetry of circumstance and the performance of poetry do not imagine the construction of subjectivity, and in particular of poetic subjectivity, as a closed-off process. As Neruda theorizes in
“Alturas de Macchu Picchu” and as his endless discussions with Mario in Skármeta’s novel demonstrate, the subjectivity of the performer’s voice is constituted through a process of negotiation with those who surround him. This conceptualization of authorial subjectivity as a communal construction seems to be almost impossible to conceive of for North-Western critics at the present moment. 61

The modern scribe like the author is alone, and precisely this position of aloneness (the “internal exile of the poet” as Beasley calls it more polemically) makes it difficult to contest the authority that Barthes sought to undermine. The dead author continues to reside in the text:

The fact is (or, it follows) that writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, “depiction” (as the Classics would say); rather, it designates exactly what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense) in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered – something like the I declare of kings or the I sing of very ancient poets. (145-46)

In this evocation of kings and very ancient poets Barthes compares a text that supposedly functions without recourse to any authority outside the text to an enunciation whose felicity or infelicity rely on the enunciating subject being in the correct position of authority. 62 Even if Barthes wants to limit his argument to self-referential performatives like “I declare” and “I sing” he still cannot deny the existence of the enunciating I. Furthermore, by means of citing kings and poets as possible enunciators he writes figures of authority back into the text; only now, since they are supposedly dead as authors, their authority can no longer be addressed.

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61 I limit my statement to the present moment because in Greek and medieval poetry and music authorial subjectivity was constructed communally (see Attali 1985, Plato…). This observation reaffirms my earlier point that the conceptualization of authorial subjectivity has to be seen in the context of the evolvement of poetic and literary traditions that has led to a privileging of one particular notion of subjectivity and, in its consequence, to the conflation of the poetic and the lyrical.

62 Austin distinguishes two types of infelicitous speech acts, based on rules A.1 and A.2: “Let me first remind you of rule A.1, that there must exist an accepted conventional procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances; and rule A.2, of course, completing it, was that the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.” Specifying rule A.2, Austin explains: “We turn next to infringements of A.2, the type of infelicity which we have called Misapplications. … ‘I appoint you’, said when you have already been appointed, or when someone else has been appointed, or when I am not entitled to appoint, or when you are a horse…” (34) Consequently, felicitous speech acts are always invested with an authority that exceeds the text.
I propose to shift the perspective and think of the poet-author, with Foucault, in terms of his author-functions. The term author-function permits the disconnection of the author from the writer while still accounting for the functions he fulfills. Foucault identifies four main author-functions. He summarizes these as follows:

(1) the author-function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses; (2) it does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization; (3) it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer, but rather by a series of specific and complex operations; (4) it does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects – positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals. (182)

Foucault focuses on the social functions of the author. He argues that the concept functions in a controlling way. It is linked up with the juridical and institutional system and is developed in a specific way by the society concerned. Furthermore, Foucault seeks to break with the notion of the author as originator of the text by pointing out that the author-function can be fulfilled by several individuals.

Like Barthes, Foucault sees the author-function primarily as a means to limit and control the reader. Other than Barthes, Foucault places the author in a social context. His emphasis on the social leads him to posit the author-function as necessarily complicit with dominant power structures:

He [the author] is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. (186)

In Foucault’s interpretation, the author-function exercises violence over the readers. Like Barthes, he creates a model in which the author’s authority is almost impossible to contest because of his structurally overpowering position. Poets like Neruda, Éluard and many of
their contemporaries seek to rescue the useful aspects of the author-function from this scenario. To do so, they take recourse to their own social environments and to the Philomela-model.

Foucault does not include the Philomela-model of the poet as singer of personal lament among the author-functions. The exclusion of the Philomela-model is related to Foucault’s contention that the poet cannot function as a “philosophical author”, i.e. as the personification of authorship. Considering that lyrical poetry was first and foremost read as a straightforward expression of the poet’s subjectivity and that Foucault’s analysis is concerned with the social functions of the author, Foucault’s argument makes sense. The poet would be too removed from the exterior world to take up the functions that according to Foucault are performed by the author. However, if the poet creates a lyrical subject that defines itself through its linguistic interaction with its surroundings, then it can conceivably fulfill author-functions. Combe makes a useful observation that indicates that there are poets who construct an author-function for themselves:

it seems that the “lyrical” subject does not oppose itself so much to the “empirical”, “real” subject – that is to say, to the person of the author – which is by definition exterior to literature and language, as to the “autobiographical” subject which is the literary expression of this “empirical” subject. The lyrical poet does not oppose himself as much to the author as to autobiography as subject of the enunciation and of the enunciated. (50)\(^63\)

Combe differentiates between narratives about the self and social functions of the author. The lyrical subject is not adverse to those; however, it is reluctant to figure as an expression of the autobiographical subject of the author and hence, monopolize the text as medium for his personal expression. The example of Neruda makes this more concrete. In his discussion with Mario on the poem about the naked woman that set off Doña Rosa’s preoccupation, Neruda initially defends his poem from Mario’s parasitical appropriation by accusing him of having taken a poem that Neruda had written for Matilde. Mario replies that poetry is for those who need it, not for those who wrote it, and reminds Neruda of his promise to be the “good match-making poet”. At this moment, Neruda says goodbye to the

\(^63\) il semble que le sujet “lyrique” ne s’oppose tant au sujet “empirique”, “réel” – à la personne de l’auteur –, par définition extérieure à la littérature et au langage, qu’au sujet “autobiographique”, qui est l’expression littéraire de ce sujet “empirique”. Le poète lyrique ne s’oppose tant à l’auteur qu’à l’autobiographie comme sujet de l’enonciation et de l’énoncée.
narcissistic impulse of finding his own story reflected in his poetry and its reception. Instead, he takes up the function of the author who stands in for his poetry.

However, his readiness to stand in for his poetry requires a personal investment. Only if he constructs a textual persona and a public persona that indicate that the poet is a brother to humanity – to speak with Éluard – and not an impersonal abstract conceptualization, can he provide a figure whose authority can be scrutinized, contested, and discussed. This figure is also capable of learning and of changing, hence, it is profoundly human at least in the social imagination of the people.

Conclusion
In this chapter I have focused on figurations of authorship that were developed before the 1970s. I have demonstrated that the poetry I analyse in this project continues a discussion on the conceptualization of authorship through the construction of the poet’s public figure. The distinctly social function of the poet’s public figure makes it clear that the poet does fulfill author-functions and can therefore be considered an author. However, the poet-author does retain his subjectivity and his humanity; he does not turn into a textual figuration. Both are vitally important in the complex negotiation between the poet’s subjectivity and his social environment that leads to the construction of the poet’s public figure. The emphasis in this figure lies on responsibility and community and not on the imposition of authority. The three figurations of the poet that I identified in my analysis of the example of Neruda return all through the poetry performances that I will discuss in this study. In some cases, for example in Saul Williams performance of “Act III Scene 2 (Shakespeare)”, the identity between textual I and poet-author is crucial for the validity of the pledge made in the poem. In other cases, for example in Jean Binta Breeze’s performance of “Ordinary Mawning”, textual I and poet-author need to be separate from each other in order to create a text-internal situation of speaking and listening that transcends the text itself and invites the listeners to turn this situation into a cultural practice.

Before I turn to an analysis of poetry performances I will continue in a meta-theoretical vein in the next chapter, in order to develop a useful conceptual framework for my analysis of performances in the later chapters. In the following chapter I will specifically focus on the notion of dialogue. In this chapter we have seen that dialogue is crucially important for the emergence of the poet’s public figure. In the next chapter the relationship between the poet and his interlocutors, i.e. his audience, will be the central object of analysis. As I demonstrated through the example of Neruda and Mario, this
relationship is constructed through dialogue. I will now analytically and theoretically discuss the conceptualization of a form of dialogue that focuses on the negotiation of power relations and not on the imposition of authority.
Chapter 3: Speaking and Listening

Introduction
In the previous chapter I have analysed the figure of the poet in its different textual, social, and cultural manifestations. We have seen that the performance of poetry reconfigures both the figure of the poet and his tasks and responsibilities as author. The reconfigurations suggested by the performance of poetry, it turned out, are the most recent development in a tradition of public poetry that posits the poet as a public figure and that goes back as far as the early Romantics and continued through the 19th and 20th centuries until today. These poets construct poetic personae that present the poet as a brother or sister to their fellow human beings, not as their superior. In this chapter I will pursue this argument but shift the focus of my analysis to the addressee of performed poetry and to the communication process between poet and listener.

As in the previous chapter, the question who has power over whom plays an important role. There, I argued that in poetic texts, power is expressed through authority. In this chapter I will discuss seductive writing as an expression and performance of power. I will first analyse the model of reading as “literary seductions” proposed by Frances Wilson in her book of that title. Revisiting Neruda’s readers in Skármeta’s El cartero de Neruda I will connect Wilson’s approach with Shoshana Felman’s model of writing as a performative act of seduction, and of reading as succumbing to the seduction. Through a short discussion of Eduardo Galeano’s essay “La defensa de la palabra”, I make a transition to the political field. In a third move I engage the model of speaking and listening proposed by the Subcomandante Marcos. As I mentioned before, he proposes to understand communication as an interactive process of speaking and listening. Speaking and listening as a conceptualization of communication is appropriate for the performance of poetry not only because of the theoretical implications, but also because it emphasizes the actual situation of the performance. During the performance, communication takes place through speaking and listening and is thus as ephemeral as a spoken conversation.

I have deliberately chosen examples from both literary theory and political practice because many of the poets whose work I analyse in this study stand with one foot in the literary field and with the other foot in the political field. An adequate analysis of their poetry will therefore take both environments into account.
Literary Seductions or Literary Dialogue

In her 1999 study *Literary Seductions: Compulsive Writers and Diverted Readers* Wilson discusses couples that fell in love with each other’s writing and only afterwards started a relationship with each other. She addresses questions such as “What happens to our subjectivity when we read?” and “Does reading empower or disempower the reader in relation to the writer and to other people?” In three detailed case studies – Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller, Robert Graves and Laura Riding, and Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam – she demonstrates how reading and writing turn into an appropriation of the reader’s subjectivity by the author through his or her writing. Wilson argues that in a literary seduction, writing and particularly reading lead to a loss of subjectivity, and consequently, of agency:

No writing is without what Roland Barthes calls the love-me element, and this desire to be desired is writing’s appeal. By appeal I mean both the magnetic attraction of the words as well as their plea, and writing’s appeal is for the reader’s submission and devotion: come with me, absorb me, give yourself to me, it urges, and in this sense all writing attempts to seduce, and all seduction is an invitation to let go. (xv)

The desire to seduce comes from knowing the pleasures of succumbing to seduction.

Seductive writers, writes Wilson, have themselves in turn been seduced by the seductive allure of writing; writing is their object of desire. [. . . .] These seduced writers are what I call compulsive: they feel compelled to write, addicted to the thrill of words and controlled by the power of written language. (xv)

For the seductive (and seduced) writer, language has a power of its own, just as it had for poets like Mallarmé and in his aftermath, for Neruda. But in the case of compulsive writers the power of language, once activated, evokes a thrill that compels them to write more, until they start writing for the sake of the thrill. They do not write to establish a communicative link with other members of their society, as Neruda and Éluard tried to do. Nor do they write to explore the power of language and master it, as Mallarmé and Eliot did. Instead, they become dependant on what the thrill of language does to them, not on how it relates them to others. For the compulsive writer there comes a point when he only feels real when writing.
Wilson demonstrates this in an analysis of the case of Anaïs Nin:

When she began her journal she decided not to write about herself but to write herself, and she dealt with the pain of her father’s rejection by opting to become her writing. [...] Anaïs felt that by being absorbed in inky signs she could reinvent herself, and her journals are a monumental endeavour to trade flesh and blood for a life as blotches and specks on a page. (26-27)

Wilson’s rendition of Nin’s self-production is in some respects compatible with Combe’s analysis of the lyrical I discussed in the previous chapter. Combe argues that the lyrical I is constructed in a performative act every time the text is activated. But while the lyrical I in the performative action analysed by Combe creates itself or is created by others in reference to the circumstances of its construction, compulsive writers perform their textual persona even when they are not writing. In extreme cases like that of Nin and Henry Miller writing even comes to supplant physical reality:

Both Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller saw writing and reading as something solid, corporal, and erotic; a form of living and not just a reflection of it. (53)

Thus, the texts of compulsive writers do not constitute the writer in relation to the world he or she lives in, but solely in relation to the words on the page. They disembody the writer to such an extent that she almost ceases to exist as a physical presence in her own conception of herself, along the lines of Barthes’ analysis of the author.

This summary already indicates that there is a flip side to the pleasures of seduction. Wilson accounts for the flip side of seduction in terms of the victim's diversion from his or her own path:

To seduce also means to divert from one’s path, and the implication is that the diversion directs one away from the truth and into the realm of deceit. Like seduction, diversion has risky connotations too and the pleasure yielded includes an element of danger: both reading and seduction lead one astray. [...] In diversion, as in seduction, there is a pleasure involved with putting yourself in someone else’s hands and letting go, and this is the pleasure of reading as well: it is a form of abandonment. Once you are diverted from the straight and narrow, there is no
guarantee of return, and if you lose yourself in a book you might not find that same self again. (xxi)

While such a thought is itself seductive and seems to promise pleasure and adventure, being diverted has a negative connotation in Wilson’s formulations. “Away from the truth and into the realm of deceit”, being led “astray”, “abandoning oneself” all imply the loss of subjectivity and agency. In giving in to seduction the reader turns agency over to the writer, or rather, to the writing. For, the diverted readers Wilson describes do not fall for a person, they fall for someone’s writing. Consequently, most of the relationships that are the result of such diverted readings are lacking a second person. Writer and reader are intimate with the same writing and this intimacy devoid of agency is what they share.

When Wilson discusses the film Il Postino, which is based on El cartero de Neruda, her assessment of what happens between Neruda, Mario and Beatriz is very different from mine:

Il Postino plays with the idea that it is not the man who seduces but the writing. While they are Neruda’s metaphors that divert her, Beatriz is unmoved by the poet himself. At the same time Mario discovers that he is spoken by Neruda’s language rather than speaking it: what he says has nothing to do with him and is no more than a tissue of quotations. (xvii) 64

Wilson interprets Mario’s reaction as that of someone who is taken over by words that are not his. She views Mario in search of a language that is as authentically his own as his feelings are. By writing poetry in this language Mario would perform his own self and his own feelings in his very own language. The fervor with which he embraces Neruda’s poetry takes Mario outside of himself or, in Wilson’s words, “diverts” him. My reading differs from her’s in that I will argue that Mario becomes a critical and empowered reader and an empowered speaker when choosing those words he finds applicable to his own life and his feelings. During this process the words change. Issues such as authenticity or origin are irrelevant to Mario’s practice of reading. 65

64 The script of Il Postino remains very close to the novel, especially in the passages that are of interest here. Therefore, Wilson’s analysis of the film can be directly compared to my analysis of the novel.

65 Wilson’s reading of Mario’s story as one of personal poetic success or failure is informed by liberal imaginaries of subjectivity and individual success. Mike Chasar in his article “The Theater of the Unattainable: Hope and Bitterness in Antonio Skármeta’s The Postman” performs an even more extreme reading of the novel in this line of thought. He argues that Skármeta sets up a story of success for Mario,
Wilson’s approach to the power of writing and to the complex relationship between seductive writers and diverted readers is one of many approaches that departs from and produces an understanding of writing without a writer. She has to come to her conclusion because her analysis suffers from the lack of the analytical categories of the textual I and of the writer’s public persona. Seduced readers clearly do not fall for the writer (the poet-author), and Wilson consequentially argues that they must fall for the text. However, my introduction of the analytical categories of the textual I and the public persona makes it possible to read the same dynamic differently. It now becomes clear that the readers do not necessarily fall for the text, but that they might fall for the textual I and/or the public persona of the poet.

In either case reading a text becomes a performance and perpetuation of power relations. An alternative conceptualization of the interaction between reader and writer conceives of reading and writing as a dialogue. The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano clearly articulates the premises for such a dialogue in his article “La defensa de la palabra” (1976). In this article Galeano discusses the social and political responsibilities of the Latin American author in times of crisis. Galeano addresses questions such as what the writer can do in these times to fight the manifold types of oppression that he and his people are suffering. Since the writer’s only weapon is his word, Galeano sharpens his questions to ask how the word can be used in a way that supports the struggles of the people.

In his essay Galeano argues that the word in itself does not have an effect on the political situation. But a particular literature can have an effect on the people who read it because it intervenes with the images that the oppressor produces:

The oppressor wants the mirror to return to the oppressed nothing but a stain in the glass. Which process of change can a people initiate that does not know who it is, nor where it comes from? If it does not know who it is, how can it know what it deserves to be? Can literature directly or indirectly help this revelation? (9)

which is then cut off by the violence of the coup. His line of argument excludes the notion of collective and social change; he insinuates that the violence lies mainly in the denial of personal success, not in the denial of social change. I contend that one of the most important points made in the novel is that for a poor person like Mario personal success is dependant on and cannot be separated from social and political change. Because Chasar leaves out this important point his reading is complicitous with an ideology of personal success, the egotism of which crucially informs Doña Rosa’s opportunist attitude towards the government of Allende.

El opresor quiere que el espejo no devuelva al oprimido nada más que una mancha de azogue. ¿Qué proceso de cambio puede impulsar un pueblo que no sabe quien es, ni de donde viene? ¿Si no sabe quién es, cómo puede saber lo que merece ser? ¿No puede la literatura ayudar, directa o indirectamente a esa revelación?
The oppressor, argues Galeano in this passage, makes sure that the oppressed have only a blurred image of themselves. Thus, they cannot initiate change because they have no basis on which to recognize themselves as dignified human beings that deserve a better life, and therefore they cannot formulate their demands. Literature, argues Galeano, can disturb the blurred image of the oppressed that the oppressor conveys to them. It can raise people’s consciousness of who they are, and in doing so can help them to develop a space from which they can initiate change based on self-respect.

Such a literature can clearly not be written by a writer who is removed from the people, because if he was, he would again impose an image of the people from above onto them:

To a large part [. . . .] the possibility to contribute depends on the degree of intensity of the communion between the writer and his roots, the paths and the fate of his people. Also on his sensitivity for the pulse, the sound and the rhythm of the true counterculture on the rise. (9)

In the process of writing that Galeano outlines the people around the writer are not addressees or recipients; rather, they are equal partners in a dialogue out of which emerges, and which is nourished by, literature:

We are looking for interlocutors, not admirers; we offer dialogue, not spectacle. We are writing from an attempt of encounter, so that the reader shares into the words that come to us from him and that we return to him as breath and prophecy. (11)

In the relationship between reader and writer Galeano envisions the dynamic between the two parties undergoes a profound change. The audience is no longer considered inferior to or dependent on the writer, who in turn is thought to be superior in his command of language or depth of thought. In the model that Galeano suggests writing is based on an exchange between writer and reader: the audience passes words and thoughts to the writer and nurtures him in that way. The writer works with these words and returns them,

67 En gran medida [. . . .] la posibilidad del aporte depende del grado de intensidad de la comunión del escritor con las raíces, los andares y el destino de su pueblo. También de su sensibilidad para percibir el latido, el sonido y el ritmo de la auténtica contra-cultura en ascenso.
68 Buscamos interlocutores, no admiradores; ofrecemos diálogo, no espectáculo. Escribimos a partir de una tentativa de encuentro, para que el lector comulgue con palabras que nos vienen de él y que vuelvan a él como aliento y profecía.
inspiring new words and thoughts and thus nurturing his audience. The text is both the
document and the product of this interaction. Thus, writing itself becomes a process of
meeting and engagement and, at the same time, propels the writer and the audience forward
in their exchange and development of new words and thoughts.

Galeano wrote his article at a point in time when a growing number of poets in
Europe and North America started to use the performance of poetry for purposes similar to
his. As Beasley analyzes in his article “Vive la différence!” these poets, too, sought to
change the relationship between poet and audience:

Performance poetry is designed for oral transmission and so necessarily implies the
presence of an author-speaker and an audience. It does not properly exist in any
other sense. The audience is a necessary element of the art – it is possible to say that
the audience is needed to contribute, participate, and to finish the poem. [. . . .]
Performance poetry requires the active involvement of others – it solicits, conjoins,
provokes and incorporates people. It does not tolerate a passive or consumerist role
for the receiver. (32)

Some points in Beasley’s comments bear striking similarities to Galeano’s demands. One is
the incorporation of the audience into the poem to an extent that makes the existence of the
poem impossible if the audience is not incorporated into it; the location of the poet within
his social context is another, and the necessity to converse with the audience a third.

In terms of content, another similarity between Beasley’s and Galeano’s approach is
the importance they assign to cultural identity. Galeano speaks about the important role of
literature in the development of a sense of dignity and identity by the Latin American
nations and especially the lower classes. Performance Poetry has mainly emerged in the
U.S. and in the U.K. in a multicultural context, as Beasley emphasizes repeatedly in his
article. It has very much served as an affirmation of minority cultures and marginalized
identities, and has claimed social spaces for their art forms, for their accents, and for their
dialects. Thus, both theorists assign literature an important role in the creation of positive
images of marginalized and oppressed groups; literature ought to counter the blurred image
that the marginalized receive from those in power, and either substitute it with a clear
image, or provide the people with the possibilities to create a clear image of themselves.

In this subtle shift – either substituting the image provided by those in power by a
clearer image, or providing people with the possibilities to create a clear image themselves

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lies the difference between dialogue and spectacle, which is also one of the central questions of this study. For, if the writer already provides the people with a prefabricated image – however positive – literature becomes spectacle and the public remains audience. The only choice they have is to decide whether they adopt the image the writer offers or not, but they do not create their own images of themselves. Galeano distinguishes between the two possibilities and clearly favors the second one. Beasley, on the other hand, does not distinguish between the two, though from the general trajectory of his article I would argue that he, too, favors the second option. But because he does not address this difference explicitly, he presents the performance of poetry as a self-evidently secure device to get rid of the passive consumerist role of the receiver, and the performance poet as such as someone who seeks to establish a dialogue with his audience. This assumption seems problematic to me. The performance of poetry can easily become a spectacle, and often does. However, in this study I focus on the examples in which it does not become a spectacle. Therefore I now want to focus on the poet-audience interaction proposed by the dialogue and the seduction model of reading.

Both models have a political dimension. In the model of reading as seduction, both writer and reader succumb to the seductive appeal of language. Wilson argues that they nevertheless are on equal footings because both reader and writer have relinquished agency in a game of mutual seduction. I will make the argument that this mode of reading becomes politically dangerous when seduced readers encounter writers who are not seduced by the text, who have not relinquished agency, and who exercise writing or speaking as one way to gain power over the reader. I oppose his way of reading to the dialogical mode of reading. Different, but related models of such are mode of reading are proposed by Galeano, Marcos, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, and the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In the dialogical mode of reading, reader and writer engage in a dialogue in which each is equal to the other. The difference between the two emerges in my analysis of different modes of reading in *El cartero de Neruda*. I will analyse Mario’s, Doña Rosa’s, Labbé’s and Beatriz’ modes of reading.

**Seduced, Diverted and at Home: Mario’s Mode of Reading**

Mario’s way of reading differs from Doña Rosa’s and Labbé’s in that he indulges in the pleasures of reading and seduction. But in his case, seduction is a game and does not need to be a conquest. I will demonstrate that there are two things taking place when Mario
reads. One is that he develops a friendship with Neruda. The second is that he learns to speak.

In the beginning of the story, Mario does not read and hardly speaks. After having read *Elementary Odes*, he identifies his main problem as being unable to express himself. I quote from one of his conversations with Neruda:

– How I’d like to be a poet!
– Man! In Chile everybody is a poet. It’s more original if you keep being a postman. At least you walk much and don’t get fat. In Chile all the poets are fat.
[. . . .]
– It’s that if I was a poet I could say what I wanted.
– And what is it that you want to say?
– Well, that’s exactly the problem. Because I’m not a poet, I can’t say it. (24)

In my reading of the story, everything that follows this scene deals with Mario learning to express himself, and with Neruda’s contribution to this process.

Mario starts to feel better about himself when he starts to use the metaphors he read in *Elementary Odes* to characterize situations and actions that occur in his daily life. According to Wilson, this way of reading turns him into “a tissue of quotations” (xvii). She suggests that, to be successful, Mario needs to transcend his own world and become a poet who is recognized by his peers or by the literary establishment. I do not find her reading fully satisfactory. The notions of originality and authenticity Wilson evokes are deconstructed by Mario’s and Neruda’s practice of poetry, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter. Also, these notions shift the focus from the connection between personal expression and political agency to social recognition and conservative, romantic notions of literary quality. An analysis that seeks to engage with the actual focus of the novel needs to take recourse to a social and political framework. I propose to conceptualize the relationship between Mario and Neruda as analogous to a teacher-student relationship. In this particular case the teacher is not interested in merely conveying knowledge, but in the

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69 – ¡P’tas que me gustaría ser poeta!
– ¡Hombre! En Chile todos son poetas. Es más original que sigas siendo cartero.
– Por lo menos caminas mucho y no engordas. En Chile todos los poetas somos guatones.
[. . . .]
– Es que si fuera poeta podría decir lo que quiero.
– Y qué es lo que quieres decir?
– Bueno, eso es justamente el problema. Que como no soy poeta, no puedo decirlo. (24)
emancipation of the student. In his seminal book Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972) the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire proposes a dialogical student-teacher relationship. The political aims and strategies of Freire are compatible with those of Neruda as conceived of by Skármeta. Furthermore, Galeano’s conceptualization of a dialogical writer-reader relationship resonates powerfully with Freire’s approach.

One of the most important points of Freire’s approach is his insistence on letting the learners’ life experience determine the horizon of any skill they want to acquire. To acquire a skill successfully means for the learner to acquire it without violence through the horizon of their very own experience, and to assimilate it into their own world. According to this approach, Mario is a very successful learner. However, his success is easily missed. Even Neruda distracts Mario from this path. At one early point in their relationship the poet tries the easy way out and sends Mario off with the request to come up with his own metaphors. But the romantic, idealistic, and easy narrative of the poor and neglected person who is so inspired by the work of the great master that he starts writing his own beautiful poems, becomes a literary star and wins the Nobel Prize, does not unfold. Mario does go off in search of metaphors, but he does not find them. Instead, he finds Beatriz and falls in love with her.

Mario views his falling in love within a larger context: “Poet and comrade”, he says at one point, “You got me into this mess, you get me out of it. You gave me your books, taught me to use my tongue for something else but licking stamps. It’s your fault that I fell in love” (Skármeta: 72). In this statement Mario connects reading with speaking and both of these with his falling in love. One has to appreciate Skármeta’s tongue-in-cheek metaphor of the tongue in this passage. “Lengua” in Spanish means both “tongue” and “language”. Mario uses his tongue for several things in the novel: to lick stamps, to seduce Beatriz, to contradict Labbé, to argue with Neruda, and at one particular moment to pleasure Beatriz, who has responded to his verbal seduction with a physical one. As the critic Stephen Henighan suggests, the metaphor indicates the inseparability of the individual and the public life, the inseparability between politics, love, and personal expression.

The structure of the story confirms this connection. After Neruda sends Mario off to make his own metaphors, Mario tries, fails, and instead falls in love with Beatriz. He then reads more poetry and acquires the reputation of writing poetry himself. Subsequently he has a conversation with the conservative campaigner Labbé, who comes to the village
during the campaign for the presidential elections in which Neruda is the presidential candidate for the Communist Party:

“Here we are, working for Alessandri”, he [Labbé] said, while he handed out leaflets to the group. The fishermen took them with the courtesy that is the result of years in the left and illiteracy [...] and put the leaflet in their shirt pockets. Only Mario handed it back. “I am going to vote for Neruda”, he said. (45)

Labbé does not take Mario’s refusal kindly. He humiliates Mario in front of the other fishermen by making him look like a fool and then tries to bribe him with a present, a beautiful empty book waiting to be inscribed. Mario understands that, had he not contradicted Labbé in the first place, he would not have pushed Labbé into bribery. It is this realization that at the end of the episode allows him to accept the present and “say, with a truely proletarian smile: ‘Thank you, Mr Labbé’” (47).

This episode indicates that Mario has found his own place within the public life of the village. After the incident with Labbé, Mario starts reciting Neruda’s poetry at meetings of the Communist Party. His recitals are much appreciated by the party members, and he gets invited to attend more meetings and give additional recitations. Mario starts to make choices and commitments and affiliates himself with a political party. He realizes that he is someone with talents that are valued by others, and that he can defend his opinion. After all these experiences, he decides that his strength is not writing poetry, but reading and applying it. He pursues Beatriz quoting Neruda’s metaphors, and finally wins her heart.

The point I seek to make is that the power of Neruda’s poetry does not inspire Mario to step out of his environment or to become a different person. Instead, it encourages him to develop within his environment and as the person that he is, finding a place, a meaning, and a function for Neruda’s poetry in his daily life. Bakhtin conceptualizes this process as the appropriation of the word. He writes:

> The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he

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70 – Aquí estamos, trabajando por Alessandri – dijo, mientras extendía volantes al grupo. Los pescadores los tomaron con la cortesía que dan los años de izquierda y analfabetismo [...] y metieron la hoja en los bolsillos de sus camisas. Sólo Mario se la extendió de vuelta.

– Yo voy a votar por Neruda – dijo.
appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language […] but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (293-294)

This is precisely what Mario does. He learns how to interpret it, how to apply it, and he learns to answer back. When he himself is lacking the words to articulate his feelings or opinions, he uses the words of someone else. But the selection is his choice and the words are those that he considers dignified to express what he feels. Mario ceases to be a blind receiver of words, a mute victim of other people’s actions.

I want to end this section with a reflection on the quote from the first conversation between Neruda and Mario in which Neruda tries to convince Mario not to become a poet. Both Wilson and also Stephen Henighan in his article “The Metaphor War and the Proverb Artillery: Language and Power in Skármeta’s Ardiente paciencia” argue that Mario is fundamentally uncreative and a poetic failure (Henighan), or a helpless victim of seduction (Wilson) because he never really starts to write his own poetry. Their argument is based on the assumption that in the beginning of the book Mario knows what he wants: he wants to become a poet. But he does not become one, and in the end of the story he is still a simple postman. Using Wilson’s metaphors, Mario became diverted and in the end does “not find that same self again”. Wilson, who uses a psychoanalytical model of analysis, reads Mario’s loss of self as a failure. However, the reason Mario initially gives for wanting to become a poet is that he wants to be able to say what he means. In the end of the novel he can express himself while being a postman, so there is no more need to be a poet. When Mario initially tells Neruda about his wish to become a poet, Neruda advises him to continue being a postman because in Chile everyone is a poet and being a postman is much more original. With this example Skármeta argues that the point of Neruda’s poetry is not, or not only, that it produces other poets. Neruda’s poetry works in a Freirean sense. It seeks to empower people in the position they are in while changing their position to being a more dignified one. And as the example of Mario and Neruda shows, the poets’ poetry is paralyzed without real and metaphorical postmen who spread the words of their poetry.
The Corset of Language: Doña Rosa’s Mode of Reading

Doña Rosa, Beatriz’ mother and owner of the village bar, admires Neruda’s poetry. She admits to her daughter that when she was Beatriz’ age she copied Neruda’s verse into her diary, and when she writes to Neruda to request a meeting with him, she introduces herself as “admirer of your poetry”. But in spite of her personal appreciation of it, Doña Rosa feels that poetry’s power works to the detriment of its readers, because poetry has the power to manipulate and delude.

As soon as she finds out that Mario Jiménez tells Beatriz beautiful metaphors, Doña Rosa realizes that “We are in front of a very dangerous case. All men who first touch with words later on get much further with their hands” (54). And when Beatriz says that a few words cannot cause any harm, Doña Rosa declares:

There is no worse drug than the bla-bla. It makes a village waitress feel like a Venetian princess. And then, when the moment of truth comes, the return of reality, you realize that words are an uncovered check. (54)

Doña Rosa has a clear idea of what the poetry quoted by Mario Jiménez will do to her daughter. It will delude her until she falls for the postman, who of course only wants to sleep with her, and will leave her once Beatriz is pregnant.

From the impact Doña Rosa believes poetry to have on Beatriz, I conclude that Doña Rosa understands poetry to be an illocutionary speech act of seduction. Her way of reading resonates with Felman’s analysis of the performative function of the promise in the Don Juan myth in her study The Literary Speech Act (1982). Felman argues that Don Juan’s success relies on his systematic breach of promises. According to Felman, Don Juan can delude women and parents with broken promises because the people he addresses read what he speaks as referring to truth. His lovers and their parents do not realize that Don Juan’s language is performative and self-referential. According to Felman, the Don Juan myth performs the consequences of a clash of opposing views of language,

one that is cognitive, or constative, and another that is performative. According to the cognitive view, which characterizes Don Juan’s antagonists and victims, language is an instrument for transmitting truth, that is, an instrument of knowledge, a means of knowing reality. [. . . .] Don Juan does not share such a view of language. Saying, for him, is in no case tantamount to knowing, but rather to doing:
acting on the interlocutor, modifying the situation and the interplay of forces within it. (27)

In distinction to Don Juan’s opponents in Molière’s play, Doña Rosa understands perfectly well that the Don Juans speak for the pleasure of speaking and for the physical pleasures that according to Doña Rosa are the rewards for skillful talk.

Thus, Doña Rosa thinks that Mario, the story’s Don Juan, uses language to “act on the interlocutor and modify the situation”, to paraphrase Felman, or, as Doña Rosa would put it, to deceive and manipulate Beatriz. Doña Rosa’s remedy for the situation is to not listen to such talk. She evades it, tries to shut it out of her life, and attempts to protect Beatriz from it by trying to send her to her aunt’s house in Santiago. When Beatriz refuses to go she tries another way of protecting her daughter from Mario’s metaphors. She phones Pablo Neruda and asks him for an appointment, explaining to him that Mario is plagiarizing Neruda’s poetry in order to seduce her daughter. When she meets him she argues against the power of poetry from a moralistic point of view: poetry should not be used for immoral acts like the seduction of minors. Therefore she asks Pablo Neruda to make sure that Mario does not see her daughter anymore so that he cannot talk to her, and Beatriz cannot listen to him.

Doña Rosa submits herself and her daughter to the structure of authority that performative speech acts carry within them. In the performative speech act the one wielding the power by way of the word is the speaker or the author: “In the last analysis, the authority of the performative is nothing other than that of the first person” (Felman 51). In Doña Rosa’s world, the authority of the first person is uncontestable. Consequently, the only way to escape being mastered by the speaker’s language is to escape language. But escaping language leads to silence.

“Silence” does not mean that Doña Rosa does not say anything. She replies to the “war of metaphors” with the “artillery of sayings” (Skármeta 82), as Neruda terms it. As the novel moves on Doña Rosa practically stops speaking in anything but sayings. At this point Doña Rosa falls into the trap of unacknowledged performativity. To make my case for this argument I will start with two simple questions: what does Doña Rosa actually say? And what does the speech of a woman who is so conscious of the performative power of language do?

A crucial passage in the novel is Doña Rosa’s meeting with Neruda and her reading of his poem. After her affirmation that the poem must be about Beatriz, the conversation
between Doña Rosa and Neruda ends. Nothing remains to be said because the poem is being pinned down to one particular meaning that is imposed by one particular person. The beauty of the poem and the beauty of the person described are being subsumed by a purely referential reading that is based on the erroneous assumption that Mario wrote the poem. Because of this Doña Rosa’s logic subverts itself, even though she never realizes it. Doña Rosa thinks that the meaning of the poem is determined by the author, whereas in fact it is she herself – the reader – who determines the meaning of the poem.

The unacknowledged performative power of Doña Rosa’s sayings take her refusal to confront the authority inherent in performative speech acts to a different level. Henighan describes Doña Rosa’s sayings as “a frustrated widow’s attempt to stifle her daughter’s burgeoning sexuality”, whereas “for Mario, metaphorical speech and sexual prowess are indivisible” (179). He then establishes a connection between language, sexuality and politics: “The subtext, though, emphasizes the tension between metaphors and proverbs, with their respective consequences for questions of political power” (179). 71 Henighan locates the ideological charge in Doña Rosa’s sayings in several incidences – which he quotes – where they oppose measures introduced by the Unidad Popular, or demands that the fishermen make on the basis of a left-wing ideology:

The policies of the Popular Unity government, and the right’s resistance to many of Allende’s measures, intensify the political struggle between metaphors and proverbs. Rosa’s proverbs take on an ideological charge they previously lacked. [. . .] Where before they were broadly reactionary, her barbs now become advertisements for the right-wing resistance to the Allende government. (181)

So far I go along with Henighan. However, I would go further than he does and argue that Doña Rosa’s explicit opposition to certain socialist policies is just the tip of the iceberg. The main force of the artillery of sayings lies in its subtle enforcement of a structure of authority that manifests itself in language. Following my previous line of argument – that Doña Rosa recognizes language to be inherently performative, that she is scared of its power but rather than contesting the speaker’s authority, avoids the speech – I argue that Doña Rosa resorts to sayings because they are based on and help to perpetuate the only social and political structure in which Doña Rosa knows how to function.

71 Henighan translates the Spanish word “refrán” with “proverb”. However, the expressions that Doña Rosa uses are sayings rather than proverbs. The term saying suggests a socially determined meaning.
In her study *Excitable Speech* (1997), Butler discusses the connection between the authority of performative speech acts and linguistic conventions. She argues that if a performative provisionally succeeds [. . . .], then it is not because an intention successfully governs the act of speech, but only because the action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices.* (51)

Doña Rosa’s proverbs by their very nature quote what they present as uncontestable past experiences that have to repeat themselves in a similar constellation of circumstances. The proverbs are posited as originating from a situation that, for being the natural state of the human being, cannot be changed. Thus, they are nothing else but the refusal to acknowledge that the Unidad Popular is trying to change the circumstances in which people can develop themselves. And any party, movement or person can try to change any given situation as much as they want to; if the people involved in this situation refuse to live according to the new circumstances, but cast them as being identical to the old ones, the attempt to change will fail.

In the article quoted, Henighan argues that Doña Rosa prepares the ground for those who will later on kill her son-in-law. While Henighan does have a point here, I think it is necessary to bring out the sad, even tragic dimension of Doña Rosa’s character. Personifying the reaction of a large portion of the Chilean population towards the Allende government, she acts the way she does out of insecurity and not out of malice or conviction. Doña Rosa spends her life in the corset of her language and through it, in her traditional social role. She never manages to step out, not even when policies try to give her the chance to do so. The terrible aspect of what in other circumstances might be “only” a personal tragedy, is the societal dimension. In the political situation depicted in the novel Doña Rosa’s refusal becomes inherently political. The refusal to confront and contest traditional power relations turns into their affirmation, as it is concretized in her political support of the conservative party, whose representative Labbé is later on present at Mario’s arrest. This attitude leads to her terrible complicity with the conservatives, Labbé, the military coup, and the suffering of her own family.

Doña Rosa does indeed vote for the people who confirm her view of language. In the novel, the conservatives are personified by the politician Labbé. Like Doña Rosa, Labbé realizes the danger of poetic language and fights it wherever he can. He charms the
fishermen by means of a chatter that demonstrates his superior education and emphasizes his wealth, and makes the fishermen turn against one of their own. He ridicules Mario in front of them because he knows that Mario is a friend of Neruda’s. Labbé then seems to change sides and secretly bonds with Mario against the fishermen’s contempt for his love of poetry, and gives him a beautiful album in which to inscribe his metaphors. The book as such, for all its beauty and with Mario never writing anything in it, is also a symbol of how Labbé sees poetry: removed from daily life.

Labbé wants to keep poetry that way. He realizes the political implications of people like Mario learning to use their tongues. An attitude like Mario’s would require Labbé and his party to put forward real arguments why the fishermen should vote for them. So far, he has been able to manipulate the fishermen by using his language, but if Neruda’s poetry enables people like Mario to speak up for themselves and to answer back, and if it encourages dialogue rather than monologue, it works to the disadvantage of Labbé and his class. Therefore, Labbé needs poetry like Neruda’s to be contained in a space that has no bearing on political life. To keep up the separation of poetry from public life, Labbé discredits those who write it. When Labbé says: “Neruda is a great poet. Maybe the greatest of all the poets. But gentlemen, frankly I don’t see him as president of Chile” (45), he implies that someone who writes poetry by the very nature of what he does cannot be of any use in politics. Two interpretations are possible. Either poetry is something so abstract and remote that people who are good at writing poetry cannot possibly be good at anything as concrete as being a president. Or poetry is something so frivolous and deceptive that people who write it should not be involved in politics.

With Bakhtin one can characterize Labbé as a representative of those groups that want to maintain a monologic practice of language:

Philosophy of language, linguistics and stylistics [. . . ] have all postulated a simple and unmediated relation of speaker to his unitary and singular “own” language, and have postulated as well a simple realization of this language in the monologic utterance of the individual. Such disciplines actually know only two poles in the life of language [. . . ]: on the one hand, the system of a unitary language and on the other the individual speaking in this language. (269)

The politician Labbé articulates an attitude that Bakhtin analyses in the case of academic scholarship. On the one hand, reading the incidence through this passage by Bakhtin
addresses the complicity between academic knowledge production and political and economic interests that I referred to in chapter 1. On the other hand, it demonstrates how dangerous Mario’s and Neruda’s dialogic practice of language is to those who see their privileges and their power under attack. As a result of their dialogic practice Mario, whose social status would make him one of the people who speaks the unitary language proposed by Labbé, refuses to do so any longer. Therefore, Labbé must try to confine both Mario and Neruda to the practice of a “unitary and singular ‘own’ language”, one that is not useful for politics and social concerns, one that maintains the speaking individual in the isolation of monologic speech.

The three different modes of dealing with poetry acknowledge the power poetry can have over people, but because the conceptions of language of the three characters are different, this power is evaluated very differently. Mario democratizes poetry. To do this, he does not even care about the author’s intention. However, he does care about authorship and the promises the author makes. Doña Rosa understands poetry only as being in the service of authorial intention. This authoritative concept puts the reader at the mercy of the author, and Doña Rosa is naturally defensive about this. In evading the problem rather than tackling it by so-called “learning to read”, she refuses herself and others the opportunity to seize control of language, rather than language made by others seizing control of her. Her politically powerful counterpart Labbé masters and instrumentalizes language. He uses it for deception and humiliation and is compelled not to let anyone use it for anything else.

**Journey of A Different Kind: Beatriz’ Mode of Reading**

In most analyses of Skármeta’s novel the character of Beatriz is hardly mentioned. Henighan only quotes Lampugnani who argues that “Beatriz stands in for the Chilean nation. Analyzed through the prism of language, the struggle for Beatriz’ honor is a battle to decide whether Chilean society will be organized according to the solidarity embodied in the metaphor or the sterility represented by the refrán” (179). By making such arguments critics easily cast Beatriz in the traditional female role as the novel’s male protagonist’s prey, or, as Lampugnani does, read her as a symbol, but not as a character in her own right. Readings like Lampugnani’s also cast the Chilean nation as being devoid of agency, that is as the prey that the power-hungry were battling over in order to universally victimize it afterwards. Viewed within the historical context I find this interpretation of the Chilean nation historically incorrect and politically dangerous. To posit the Chilean nation as one uniform group is historically incorrect. There were groups in society that supported the
coup actively, groups that fought it actively, and a large group who tolerated it and who, while not overtly fighting the government of the Unidad Popular, jeopardized it whenever they could. To identify all these groups as victims of a power struggle that took place above their heads strikes me as preposterous. Furthermore, such a reading is politically dangerous because it implicitly argues that only the military were responsible for the crimes committed during and after the coup.

I argue that Skármeta in this passage proposes a different understanding of female readers in particular and of the Chilean nation in general. According to my argument, Beatriz is of pivotal importance to the novel because without her, the story would never have been written. In the frame narrative (a part of the novel that has received very little critical attention) the narrator states clearly that he started writing the novel because Beatriz asked him to do so.

At first sight it seems that Beatriz’ character is overburdened with the expectations and erotic associations of the male protagonists. However, a few of her character traits are quite clearly developed: she does not talk much, is quite head-strong, and has a flawless memory. Her rendition of her first personal encounter with Mario in a conversation with her mother is the following:

– He said... He said that my smile spreads like a butterfly over my face.
– And what else?
– Well, when he said that, I laughed.
– And then?
– Then he said something about my laughter. He said that my laughter was like a rose, a lanceflower that sheds its grains, water that explodes. He said that my laughter was like a repeated wave of silver.
[. . . . ]
– And what did you do then?
– I was quiet.
– And he?
– What else he said?
– No, daughter! What he did to you! Because your postman does not only have a mouth, he must also have hands. (53)72

72 — Me dijo… Me dijo que mi sonrisa se extiende como una mariposa en mi rostro.
– Y qué más?
It seems that Beatriz did not do very much at all. She was looking, listening closely and liked what she was hearing. Or, put differently, she was enjoying the compliments, but also the beauty and the fluidity of the language. She liked them so much that she defends them against her mother, who says that words are an uncovered check: “The words that Mario told me did not turn into thin air. I know them by heart and I enjoy thinking about them while I'm working” (54).

This small exchange between Doña Rosa and Beatriz is important if we think of the notorious breach of promise that Doña Rosa believes to be at the basis of language. When Beatriz says that “words don’t disappear into thin air” she emphatically contradicts her mother’s view of language. Beatriz feels that words have an enduring value and that promises will be kept. While she has a genuine appreciation for the beauty of poetry, it does not seduce her into losing control. In her attitude towards Mario’s pursuit of her she proves to be independent in that she relies on her own judgment rather than on her mother’s. What she appreciates, and why she finally falls in love with Mario, is his going through the trouble of choosing just these particular metaphors for her. Who authored them does not matter to Beatriz. She values them as an expression of Mario’s feelings.

When Doña Rosa cannot get her obstinate daughter to travel to the safety of her aunt’s house in Santiago, she locks her in her room. Beatriz is finally being released from captivity because the Unidad Popular wins the election and so many people have come to the bar to celebrate that Doña Rosa needs Beatriz’ help. Mario manages to send her a message – symbolically enough, Mario’s boss, the telegrapher, acts as messenger – asking her to meet him in secret. Beatriz leaves the bar to meet him, having made up her mind to seduce him. The first sexual encounter between the two is described explicitly. Beatriz figures as the more active part, Mario as rather clumsy. The physical satisfaction is Beatriz’, not Mario’s. I contend that the scene is key for an understanding of Beatriz’ role in the novel. It is one of many indications that the overburdening of Beatriz’ character with...
erotic and sexual associations and projections says more about the narrator than about Beatriz. It is unlikely that the narrator was present at the moment he describes. It is also unlikely that either Mario or Beatriz told him all the salacious details. This must mean that the narrator made them all up. Consequently, the reader needs to question how much of what the narrator tells his readers is truth, how much of it is fiction, and how much of it is fantasy. The narrator’s dedication to erotic detail when it comes to Beatriz betrays his own unacknowledged fascination with her and his ambivalent attitude to women as social agents. On the one hand, he is psychologically and emotionally dependent on Beatriz’ request to write the story. On the other hand, he sexualizes her in a way that recasts whatever social agency she holds into sexual terms. The terms of her sexuality are not defined by Beatriz’ desires but by the narrator’s fantasies about her, thus returning social and literary control to the narrator.

With Beatriz, Skármeta constructs a character that exposes his own frame narrator and by extension, many representatives of the Latin American – and, as I contend, also of the European – left as profoundly hypocritical when it comes to gender equality. While they insist on the equality of all human beings, they cannot deal with women who are agents equal or superior to men in their daily lives. Writing literature and telling stories is one way of creating and confirming world views that depend on and perpetuate the factual inequality of men and women. Thus, Skármeta self-reflexively invites questions about the literary representation of women by male writers, and about the consequences that such representations have both for the writer and the reader. The character of Beatriz shows clearly that women readers of poetry are not helpless victims of poetic seduction but that they are just as or more alert readers then men. However, men like the narrator cannot accommodate them in their stories. Hence, the only function left to Beatriz’ character in *El cartero de Neruda* is to call his bluff.

**Dialogue and Trialogue**

I have outlined these modes of reading in such detail because poetry performers are trying to find poetic languages that avoid or in some cases, openly contest and confront the authoritarian ways that these modes of reading replicate and perpetuate. The power relations between poet, narrator, and the different types of readers that I outlined in the previous section are thrown into relief and are being reconfigured in Neruda’s poetry through the practice of dialogue. Dialogue or conversation, the component of Neruda’s poetry that activates the connection between the poetical and the social, seems to be one of
the points on which listeners really do begin to disagree about the use of such techniques in poetry. For all the theorists I have quoted in this chapter, dialogue and conversation are much more than a more or less acceptable stylistic device. Its use in poetry takes on political significance. For Galeano, dialogue is indispensable to relate the writer with those who struggle for a more humane world. For Beasley, it is one way of democratizing poetry. Wilson conceives of a poetic practice that integrates dialogue as “noisy”, as a “violent experience” and as a danger to subjectivity because reading is no longer a quiet activity and the poet physically – by way of his voice – invades the reader’s personal space. In her analysis, a speaking poet immediately becomes overbearing and silences his reader. Wilson gives preference to a silent way of reading, one in which the reader “read[s] her way into profound isolation, inspiration and wisdom” (196). However, all three critics recognize that dialogue is the privileged device that relates the writer to the reader.

In his article “Reflections on the Art of Conversation” Jonathan Rée proposes to rethink the concepts of voice and conversation through the term “voice-to-voice.” Rée suggests that the use of this term might shed new light on the conceptualization of conversations and the voices engaged in them. He writes that:

it may turn out that a conversational voice – wheter “literal”or “metaphorical” – does not have the connotations of self-assertive subjectivity that make so many narratologists and literary historians shy away from it: it need not, that is, lead back to any notion of a “unified speaker position,” let alone one that has to be conceived “as origin, as pure self-presence.” (Rée 789)

Rée proposes to think about conversation not in terms of the speaker asserting their subjectivity towards the listener, and a consecutive switch of roles, but to think about conversation as a two-way interaction that does not reaffirm power structures, but constantly renegotiates them, and often even does without them. I want to take up his invitation to rethink conversation or dialogue in my study of poetry.

I will now introduce a model of dialogue that might soothe at least some of Wilson’s misgivings about dialogue and that, as I indicated, strongly resonates with Galeano’s and Beasley’s approaches and therefore allows me to make the bridge from pedagogy to poetry. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), Freire argues that dialogue is central to any successful process of liberation. I cite Freire’s model of education because its methodology by far exceeds the schoolroom. As he himself points out, anyone who seeks to initiate
political change needs to be an educator and simultaneously, must let himself be educated by his comrades, in Freire’s model the oppressed. Freire argues that any process that is to lead to liberation must not reproduce any form of domination. Therefore, he is fiercely critical of left-wing movements that have neglected or discarded the liberatory action of dialogue and have modelled their movements according to the ideas of its leadership. Freire argues that a movement, if it is to be truly liberatory, must be constructed with those it seeks to liberate, not without them and certainly not against them. The process of liberation comes about through praxis, i.e. the simultaneous practice of reflection and action. Freire identifies dialogue as the central component of praxis.

According to Freire, “dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (76). That means that in dialogue, the different dialogue partners make their world knowable to them and to others by means of words. Only at the moment in which people begin to understand their world and are able to analyse it do they actually acquire the agency to change it. Before they have “pronounced” their world, they are so deeply involved in it that they can only function according to its rules, but cannot recognize, question, and finally change these same rules. The task of the educator is to help the oppressed recognize their world in their own terms. Conversely, the educator is always being educated by those he is supposed to be educating. This approach proposes a model of not only education, but really of human interaction, one that is based on equality and respect for others.

The equality of the dialogue partners is absolutely crucial to the process:

Because dialogue is an encounter among men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some men name on behalf others. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one man by another. The domination implicit in dialogue is that of the world by the dialoguers; it is the conquest of the world for the liberation of men. (77)

In this passage Freire rules out the possibility that one of the dialogue partners “conquer”, i.e. convince, persuade or coerce, any of the others. If any of the dialogue partners did that, the dialogue would become an instrument of domination and not of liberation. And any

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73 Dado que el diálogo es el encuentro de los hombres que pronuncian el mundo, no puede existir una pronunciación de unos a otros. Es un acto creador. De ahí que no pueda ser mañoso instrumento del cual eche mano un sujeto para conquistar a otro. La conquista implicita en el diálogo es la del mundo por los sujetos dialógicos, no la del uno por el otro. (108)
element of domination jeopardizes and finally destroys any process that could become liberatory.

The challenge that many politically committed performance poets have set themselves is to find a way to practice dialogue as a form of liberation in poetry. This is why I make dialogue one central category of analysis in this study. In the following chapters I will elaborate the concept in more detail in my engagement with poetry. For now I would like to add another, contemporary perspective to Freire’s elaboration on dialogue as an instrument of liberation. For, I do have some issues with Freire and I clearly wish to distance myself from some aspects of his theory.

One of my issues concerns Freire’s model of revolution. Freire wrote in the late 1960s and bases his reflections on Marxism and Leninism, with a strong commitment to the praxis of the Cuban model. His Marxist-Leninist approach makes him start from an idea of revolution that leads to the oppressed taking power. As a theoretical framework of my analysis I find this approach unhelpful. While some poets whose work I discuss here take a traditionally Marxist approach or are influenced by it, the great majority of them is very critical or outrightly unsympathetic towards a Marxist notion of revolution. Freire himself problematizes the idea of the oppressed taking power in the revolution through his notion of cultural synthesis. However, as I will discuss later on, his problematization of the conceptualization of power relations in revolutionary Marxism does not go far enough for the purposes of this study.

My second issue with Freire concerns the cultural synthesis that ideally is the result of liberatory dialogue. As I have indicated in chapter 1, I am very critical of models that propose outcomes of synthesis and hybridity. I am more convinced by – and in the performance of poetry have found more convincing examples of – an approach that insists on the differences between the dialogue partners. These differences call for a permanent continuation of dialogue and thus lead to a permanently unfolding change. Therefore, I return to the work of the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos as the main representative of an alternative, namely neozapatista theory. Marcos’ approach contains many elements of Freire’s theory, but he has critically developed them. Through an engagement with his approach I can resolve the issues outlined above, and develop an analytical model of a poetic dialogue in the social sphere.74

74 In his analysis of heteroglossia Bakhtin rejects the development of a unitary language through synthesis. He argues that it is indeed impossible to create such a language: “The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance” (272). Thus, language has to maintain the individuality of the speaker. Otherwise it would become static and could no
The text I quote is an extract from a letter written to the Basque terrorist organisation ETA in February 2003. The exchange between Marcos and ETA took place between September 2002 and March 2003. The passage I focus on is part of Marcos’ response to a highly condescending address by ETA to the Zapatista children, explaining to them the correct Basque word for “dignity” (which Marcos said was “Euskal Herria”) and speaking about the children of ETA who understand their parents’ struggle without explanations. Marcos replied the following:

Let me make it clear that the boys and girls of the EZLN do not understand everything without words, as you erroneously suppose in your letter. We talk to them. We teach them that the word, along with love and dignity, is what makes us human beings. We do not teach them to fight. Well, to fight, but with words. They learn. They know that if we are in this it's so they won't have to do the same. And they speak and they listen too.

Contrary to what you say, we teach them that words do not kill, but that words can be killed, and with them, the human being.

longer accommodate any experiences or expressions that are deviant from the unitary language. The argument of Marcos that I will discuss now strongly resonates with Bakhtin’s notion that a dialogue, rather than achieving completion in the construction of a synthesis, has to continue indefinitely.

The correspondence was started by Marcos’ endorsement of the struggle of the people from the Basque country (note: not ETA!) – from where the EZLN receives a lot of support – in a public letter to the musician Juan Angel Lara “El Ruso”. In this letter Marcos criticized the judge Baltasar Garzon, who has played a vital role in the illegalization of Batasuna, the Basque party accused of being ETA’s political arm. Marcos called Garzon a “grotesque clown” and “hand-holder of the Spanish political class”, which he in turn accused of State terrorism. He also said that Garzón shows “his true fascist vocation by denying the Basque people the right to struggle politically for a legitimate cause”.

In his reply Garzón accused Marcos of harbouring sympathies for the ETA because he endorsed the Basque peoples’ struggle but did not condemn the ETA’s terrorism, and of being a coward and shying away from an open debate because he never shows his face. Responding to this accusation, Marcos suggested holding a conference on the Canary Islands about the situation of the Basque country. He and some of his compañeros were going to come, but only to listen; except that Marcos was going to take up Garzón’s challenge for an open debate. Marcos also wrote to the Spanish people, the Basque people, ETA, and Basque organizations, and invited them to participate in this conference.

Garzón never replied to Marcos’ invitation. Batasuna responded positively, and so did a number of Basque and Spanish artists and intellectuals, who issued a statement supporting the initiative. The ETA responded, too. They addressed some condescending paragraphs to the Zapatista children and the Zapatista elders and then addressed themselves to the men and women of the EZLN, specifically excluding Marcos. For the complete correspondence (with the exception of the letter written by the ETA) in English see www.counterpunch.org, which is also the source of the following quotes; for Marcos’ texts in Spanish see www.fzln.org.mx.

“Euskal Herria” is the militant term for Euskadi, usually employed by sympathizers of ETA. Marcos’ use of the term in the original letter to Lara backfired on him, as he found himself supporting a movement that did not consider itself compatible with his own politics. By no means do I condone the implications of Marcos’ original use of the term. I also strongly disagree with his interpretation of it. However, his use of the term led to an exchange of letters in which he finally found himself obliged to make some important clarifications about the relationship between language and politics; it is these clarifications that I am interested in. My paraphrasing of the debate merely serves to provide information about the context.
We teach them that there are as many words as there are colors, and that there are so many thoughts because the world itself exists so that words can be born in it. That there are different thoughts and that we must respect them.

That there are those who want their thought to be the only one, and who persecute, imprison and kill (always hiding behind reasons of State, illegitimate laws or “just causes”) thoughts that are different.

And we teach them to speak truthfully, that is, with the heart. Because lying is another form of killing the word.

In the tongue of the bat men, those who speaking find their way, the Tzotziles, to speak with truth is “YALEL TA MELEI”.

We teach them to speak and also to listen. Because anyone who only talks and does not listen, ends up believing that what he says is the only thing that counts.

In the tongue of the Tzotziles, those who listening find their way, to listen with the heart is “YATEL TAJLOK ‘EL COONTIC”.

Speaking and listening to words is how we know who we are, where we come from, and where we are headed. It is also how we know of others, their way and their world. Speaking and listening to words is the way we listen to life. (2003c)

77 Les aclaro que los niños y niñas del EZLN no entienden todo sin palabras, como ustedes suponen erróneamente en su carta.

Nosotros los tratamos de por sí como niños. Es el poderoso con su guerra el que los trata como adultos. Nosotros les hablamos. Les enseñamos que la palabra, junto con el amor y la dignidad, es lo que nos hace seres humanos. No les enseñamos a pelear. O sí, pero a pelear con la palabra.

Ellos aprenden. Saben que si nosotros estamos en esto es para que ellos no tengan que hacer lo mismo. Y hablan y también escuchan.

Contra lo que ustedes dicen, nosotros les enseñamos que las palabras no matan, pero que sí se puede matar a las palabras y, con ellas, al ser humano.

Les enseñamos que hay tantas palabras como colores, y que hay tantos pensamientos porque de por sí el mundo es para que en él nazcan palabras.

Que hay pensamientos diferentes y que debemos respetarlos.

Que hay quien pretende que su pensamiento debe ser el único y que persigue, encarcela y mata (siempre escondido detrás de razones de Estado, de leyes ilegítimas o “causas justas”) a los pensamientos que son diferentes.

Y les enseñamos a hablar con la verdad, es decir, con el corazón. Porque la mentira es otra forma de matar la palabra.

En la lengua de los hombres murciélagos, los que hablando se van orientando en su caminar, los tzotziles, hablar con la verdad se dice “YALEL TA MELEI”.

Les enseñamos a hablar y también a escuchar. Porque aquel que sólo habla y no escucha, termina por creer que lo que dice es lo único que vale.

En la lengua de los tzotziles, los que escuchando se van orientando en su caminar, escuchar con el corazón se dice “YATEL TAJLOK ‘EL COONTIC”.

Hablando y escuchando palabras es como sabemos quiénes somos, de dónde venimos, y a dónde va nuestro paso. También es como sabemos del otro, de su paso y de su mundo. Hablando y escuchando palabras es como escuchamos la vida.

For the complete text see La Jornada, 6th January 2003
In this passage three concepts are crucial: “The word”, “listening” and “speaking”. The three of them exist independently of one another but come to life because they interact. I will now analyse how Marcos elaborates the three concepts.

“The word” is essential to the human condition because together with love and dignity it makes us human beings. This is because it allows human beings to express their thoughts. One can use the word for struggle, but not in the last resort, because it cannot kill. On the other hand, the word itself is vulnerable and can be killed. When this happens it does not die alone, it takes thoughts with it. Killing the word means to kill thoughts because they manifest themselves through the word. The word is also something that has a certain life of its own. It is something to delight in. When Marcos says that there are as many words as there are colors he implies that “the word” is beautiful and faceted, that it is surprising and never static. The world and the word construct each other mutually. The word allows for the creation of ideas that then enter the world. The world in turn provides stimulation for human beings to develop new words in order to engage with reality. Consequently, the world and language are always changing in a process of mutual inspiration.

This very poetic and performative conception of words resonates with Mario Jiménez’ feeling that he turned into a boat trembling in the poet’s words, as well as with Mallarmé's belief in the power of words. It strongly resonates with Freire’s conceptualization of the word. Freire writes:

As we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.(75)

Marcos submits some of the concept that Freire introduces to closer scrutiny. Most importantly, he redefines Freire’s conceptualization of the “true” word. In Marcos’ writing, truth is determined by “speaking with the heart”; hence, it is subjective in that it is an expression of honesty and not of the knowledge of some absolute truth. He endorses the
connection Freire establishes between reflection and action as well as the performative power that Freire assigns to the word.

Marcos’ text suggests that words are always present in the world and that the speaker and the listener merely activate them. “Speaking” according to Marcos is an invitation to others to follow the speaker on her path. It indicates that the speaker opens up her world for others to enter it, that she exposes herself and her territory to the curiosity of others. When we start to speak we make the promise that we will carefully and safely guide those who listen along the paths that are ours, that we will be honest about what our paths include and where they lead, that we will make our visitors’ journey worth their while. Such an invitation implies that we know our own territory very well.

“Listening” is the acceptance of this invitation. When someone starts to listen she signals her willingness to leave her own world and enter the speaker’s. The act of listening includes the promise to be open and respectful, to come without defenses, and to allow oneself to be touched by what one sees and hears. Listening is the act of following the speaker into her territory and to trust oneself into her capacity as a guide.

In this process the subject as listener or speaker never becomes an object. Following Freire’s approach, Marcos’ text is phrased so that there is no object of speaking or listening, or, put more simply, people are not being talked to or listened to. Marcos’ text is about two subjects who interact with each other. Each of them takes the decision to perform the acts of listening and speaking, the very two actions that begin and continue to enable the speaker’s and listener’s interaction with each other.

These two subjects are entirely separate entities and while they learn about each other, they do not take over one another. The journeys that the speaker and the listener make show no over-identification and no instrumentalization. Speaking and listening means to learn about other peoples’ paths, to visit their territories, but not to walk in their shoes. What would be the consequence if people were to start the process with the intention to learn about someone else by “identifying” with them? The interaction of speaker and listener relies on a personal investment of each of them, an investment that Marcos terms “speaking and listening with the heart”. This is emphatically not the same as being seduced. If the subject was to lose herself, or if she was to be effaced, or if she was to relinquish her subjectivity, or identify with her interlocutor, then she could not speak or listen “with the heart” because it is the heart that would be abandoned. Consequently the process would turn into a “lie” – or “mentira” – another key term in the Neo-Zapatista vocabulary.
Importantly, Marcos does not introduce dialogue as a means to achieve a synthesis. I contend that instead he suggests a “trialogue” between the speaker, the listener, and the word. The word is an equal partner in this triologue; thus, it is never unquestioned and never above those who use it and the world they live in. This means that the word cannot be used for persuasion and deception; it is always available for a responsible rethinking. Furthermore, Marcos suggests that this triologue is an ongoing practice of negotiating differences. This makes the usurping of power impossible because there will never be a synthesis, or a unified opinion, of those who are struggling for liberation. At this point Marcos departs from Freire, who argues precisely for cultural synthesis. The use of triologue, he suggests, can only lead to the destruction of power, which is one of the central aspects of Neozapatism and which differentiates it from Marxism.

Both Wilson in her description of what a “diverted reader” is, and Marcos use the metaphors of walking and of paths. In the metaphorical language of each theorist the reading subject has her path that she follows. Reading diverts her from it. But both theorists conceive of the diversion in different ways. For Marcos the “diversion” is an opportunity to learn about others and to relate oneself to them. The diversion enables exploration and personal growth. However, such a practice of dialogue is only possible when the poet does not seek to “conquer” his interlocutors, but seeks to collaborate with them. Their different approaches to power are of decisive importance for the different conclusions they come to. Wilson quotes Denis Diderot to pin down a question that critically informs her approach: “But who shall be the master? The writer or the reader?” (190) Wilson wants to find out who the master is. Marcos wants to do away with mastery.

**Conclusion: Learning Not to Master**

Speaking and listening as a practice of dialogue are crucial for the positioning of the poet in relation to his interlocutors. If he wants to start a dialogue that makes a contribution to

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78 Freire argues that “in cultural synthesis, the actors who come from ‘another world’ do not come to teach or to transmit or to give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people’s world” (181). Nevertheless, the synthesis that Freire proposes will at one moment entail an unequal relationship between the interlocutors and it will lead to a loss of worlds. The Neozapatistas, coming from the indigenous communities of the South of Mexico, could not possibly endorse such a position. Furthermore, Freire’s notion contains a problematic conception of the relationship between “the leader” and “the people”: “In cultural synthesis – and only in cultural synthesis – it is possible to resolve the contradiction between the world view of the leaders and that of the people, to the enrichment of both. Cultural synthesis does not deny the differences between the two views; indeed, it is based on these differences. It does deny the invasion of one by the other, but affirms the undeniable support each gives to the other” (183). Freire’s theory of synthesis is clearly based on movements in which there are leaders. The Neozapatistas are trying to construct a society in which the “leaders” (it is very problematic to talk about “leadership” in Neozapatism without problematizing the notion; I do it here for pragmatic reasons only) come out of the people; hence, the “synthesis” would be in the beginning and not in the end.
liberation, the poet must not position himself above, but among them. For many poets who perform their poetry, the practice of performance very literally recovers the practice of listening and speaking as the base of poetry. Reading poetry, the most “seductive” of all literary genres, the one that, according to the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, “disturbs meaning”, opens up an arena in which we can learn and rehearse the practice of speaking and listening if both the speaker and the listener are interested in it. Poetry’s careful investigation into the meaning of words, the raw material of conversation, can open up new means for the participants of the conversation to relate to each other. These new means of relating to each other can include a renegotiation of power relations in the act of speaking and listening.

To characterize the interpersonal relationship that speaking and listening is based on and develops, I will introduce the concept “critical intimacy”. Mieke Bal develops this concept in her essay “Critical Intimacy” through her reading of Gayatri Spivak’s Critique of Postcolonial Reason in order to account for a practice of teaching that does not accommodate the authoritarian and hierarchical structures that traditionally underpin communication in the classroom. In her response to Spivak, Bal works through the concepts of subjectivity, personification, and the concept of the teacher. All three concepts have played a role in the cases I have analysed so far. Subjectivity and the engagement of different subjectivities with each other are at stake in the trialogical practice of reading. Personification is an important element of the performance of the poet’s public figure. In my analysis of Neruda’s public persona I demonstrated that the poet may come to personify a political movement, causes, or even a social class. However, I argued that public poetry makes one addition to the traditional readings of poetry: it invites the audience to critically engage with the power wielded by personification. The figure of the teacher, finally, has come up several times in this study. Paul Beasley names it as one of the possible functions of the performance poet, Mario asks Neruda to be his teacher and Neruda teaches Mario “how to use his tongue”, and Marcos employs metaphors of teaching in his letter to the ETA. Bal argues that the practice of critical intimacy connects these three concepts and the different realms – philosophy, rhetoric, and the academy – in which they originate.

Bal develops the concept of “critical intimacy” through several analyses of Spivak’s productive “misreadings” of texts with which she has an intimate knowledge. One of Bal’s central examples is Spivak’s development of the figure of the native informant by “foregrounding the extent to which it [Kant’s Critique of Judgement] is not what it would

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79 In her development of the concept Bal also draws on Catherine Lord’s analysis of the interaction between intimacy and influence in the work of women writers in The Intimacy of Influence (1999).
like to be.” The *Critique of Judgement* is meant to be the philosophical development of a “pure” aesthetics. Bal demonstrates how Spivak shows that it loses its purity by muddling an argument on aesthetics as the product of “culturing”:

> [. . .] by using the term “human nature” for the agent of “culturing”, he irreparably muddles the issue of the distinction on which the entire argument rests. For if culture is the product of human nature, nature is cultural, and so is “human nature”- defined culturally. [. . .] That the very notion of human *nature* confuses the distinction between *nature* and *culture* is all the more significant because the further attempt to define human nature brings in – and casts out – the figure of the native informant. Standing for a fleeting moment at the boundary of culture and nature, and falling between the cracks of that division, the *Neuhollander* and *Feuerlander* look on, as *man* defines himself narcissistically. (302)

Hence, Kant’s aesthetic silences the voice of the figuration of the other. As a consequence, it “brings into reason what Spivak calls the *axiomatics of imperialism*” (Bal 303). Spivak exposes that Kant’s reasoning – and therefore, his notions of aesthetics – are bound up with imperialism. Because it perpetuates imperialist logic Kant’s aesthetics are not pure, as Kant wanted them to be, but inherently political.

In her next argumentative move Spivak engages Kant’s aesthetics with texts by John Coetzee and Jean Rhys. She develops the figure of the “native informant”. This figure neither collapses the colonized subject into a universalizing but unspecific enlightenment notion of humanity, nor does it silence the colonized subject.

After her analysis of Spivak, Bal contextualizes the practice of critical intimacy in the context of teaching practices at North-Western universities. This move is important because it allows me as a user of the concept to situate myself within the academic context in which I deploy and develop the concept. Bal argues that teaching is the process of “learning not to master”. This expression refers to Shoshana Felman’s analysis of the practice of teaching in her essay “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable”, in which Felman argues that teaching is in fact a process of learning to un-master. Felman argues that in a pedagogical situation speech works performatively (24). Therefore, the most important learning process in the pedagogical situation is based on the way of teaching. This thesis has a resonance in the emphasis the performance of
poetry places on form and on the situation of enunciation in particular. In the learning process that unfolds during the pedagogical situation the educator recognizes herself as learner and the learner teaches her in mutual engagement with the text. Thus,

dialogue is [...] the radical condition of learning and of knowledge, the analytically constitutive condition through which ignorance becomes structurally informative; knowledge is essentially irreducibly dialogic. (Felman 33)

According to Bal, critical intimacy sets this learning process in motion and provides the arena in which it can take place. Vital to the construction of this arena is the teacher, a figure who encourages the development of a critical intimacy. This person has to “advocate agency over intention and ... [this person’s] trade is critical intimacy.” This newly developed form of teaching “is communicative, dialogic; it operates on an authority constantly questioned in its work, but also accepted and enjoyed on principle, in critical intimacy.” Such intimacy “assumes that the parties remain critical but trusting.” (Bal 2002: 319) This describes the relationship between Mario Jiménez and Pablo Neruda from a theoretical perspective. Framing the practice of critical intimacy within a teaching situation also leads me back to my own use of the concept.

Central to my use of the concept of critical intimacy is the critical and intimate dialogue that Spivak maintains with her texts. In traditional modes of reading, particularly of reading poetry, these two crucial elements are usually considered to be antagonistic practices. An intimist reading is often overemphasized, as I pointed out by quoting Combe in chapter 2. Critical reading is often considered to be part of the academic practice of philosophy or of the public reception of political speech, but unsuitable for poetry, which requires an intimist mode of reading that does not question the benevolence of the poet. In the first three chapters of this study I have argued that the practice of public poetry requires a different mode of writing and reading, or speaking and listening. For my purposes I rephrase Bal’s formulation of the three different realms in which the three components of critical intimacy are produced to the adjectives of the personal, the public and the analytical. Thus, critical intimacy provides a theoretical conceptualization of a mode of reading poetry that includes dialogue (between the three conversation partners) within its principles and that makes the critical engagement with authority part and parcel of intimacy with a text, whether the text consists of words, sounds, or a performance.

For a collection of essays that specifically addresses the politics of poetic form in the performance of poetry see Bernstein 1990.
In this chapter and the previous ones I have developed some important concepts for the analysis of poetry that seeks to fundamentally renegotiate the relationship between poet and audience. Through the use of these concepts I can situate the performance of poetry on the crossroads of the social, the political, and the personal. In the following chapters I turn to the performance of poetry. I will analyse how the performance of poetry through poetic devices that are very specific to it work with and continue to develop in a contemporary context the poet-audience relations introduced by public poetry.
Chapter 4: Performance

Introduction

I now turn to the most obvious of the poetic devices mobilized by performance poetry: the performance itself. In the introduction to this study I made the point that the performance of poetry makes poetry spill over into the cultural sphere. In this chapter I will provide the analytical basis for this point by exploring how the performance achieves the effect of spilling over. My cases are poems by Gil Scott Heron, Lemn Sissay, and Chus Pato. In both poems the artists stage the connection between the social, the personal and the political as it is expressed through spoken poetic language.

In the introduction to this study I proposed that the performance of poetry stages, and in doing so, addresses, the moment in which human beings relate themselves through words to the world and to each other. Furthermore I argued that by putting the strategies we use to do so up for discussion, the performance poet makes these acts transparent and changeable. This can make the performance a powerful tool for political intervention and it has indeed been deployed and developed by many performance poets for precisely this aim. The most important early representatives of such a use of the performance of poetry were associated with the Black Arts Movement, the Black Panthers, and the anti-racist movement in Britain. I am referring to Amiri Baraka, The Last Poets and Gil Scott Heron, and Linton Kwesi Johnson. Allen Ginsberg may also be counted among early performance poets who developed the performance of poetry as a tool for political intervention. These political impulses have been constitutive of performance poetry as we know it today, and therefore my analysis of the performance of poetry is inflected through the inquiry into the political implications of the performance as an act of verbal staging.  

For a study of the political and social context and significance of Ginsberg’s “Howl” see Raskin 2004. My analysis in this chapter and in this study as a whole focuses on the contribution that Black and African-American writers have made to performance poetry. The reason for this is that the Black and African-American tradition is better documented and more clearly visible than the white tradition of performance poetry; most poetry performers in English speaking countries are black, and their poetry has a political and social charge that the work of white performers is largely missing. With a figure as powerful as Ginsberg as a possible role model it is difficult to explain why white performance poets have not developed the intense engagement of performed poetry, politics and sexuality that he proposes in his own work. This question deserves a detailed analysis that would have to take its point of departure in the 1950s and therefore by far exceeds the chronological framework and the comparative approach of this study. Two possible explanations that would be worth exploring are the failure of white poets to problematise the social and political significance of whiteness – which leads to a less situated locus of enunciation –, the “consecration” of Ginsberg as a poet canonized by a subculture using the mechanisms of the literary establishment and therefore, making him not addressable in the dialogical fashion which I outlined through the example of Neruda, and possibly the shying away of contemporary poets from his engagement with sexuality. It is noticeable in performance poetry by black and white poets that male homosexuality is not addressed, that female homosexuality is grossly underrepresented (exceptions being Alix Olsen and Lenelle Moise), and that heterosexual sexuality is almost never problematized in a critical manner that matches Ginsberg’s address of
My approach locates a special interest in the political and social involvement of the performance of poetry to the extent that I define it as constitutive of the practice as a whole. By taking this approach and by arguing that performance poetry deserves academic interest and analysis precisely because (and not in spite) of its political and social involvement I position myself in opposition to many colleagues who reject performance poetry as a topic for academia because of its political and social involvement. In her article “Was that ‘Different,’ ‘Dissident’, or ‘Dissonant’? Poetry (n) the Public Spear: Slams, Open Readings, and Dissident Traditions” Maria Damon gives a brief outline of the positions that have difficulties with the notion of connecting poetry with political struggle through the performance. She identifies four different lines of argument that approach the subject from different angles.

Proponents of the first position argue that at least certain types of performed poetry privilege the link with public life and political involvement over the work with words and the subjectivity of the poet, and can therefore no longer be considered poetry. The second, opposite position maintains that poetry is a priori “corrupted by its ‘high art’ origins and connotations” and can therefore never be a public medium of critique. The third position argues that performed poetry often engages with political issues only on a superficial level and as a consequence, distracts from the search for a solution of the real problem:

Far from pointing beyond themselves toward activism for just economic or social solutions, these expressions’ existence is mistaken for a meaningful solution in and of itself. (327)

The fourth position is closely related to the Frankfurt School and Adorno’s position. Their argument is that a public orientation of poetry creates a tendency towards a utilitarian, semantically overdetermined “message,” in which language is commodified, subordinated, and consumed as either spectacle or propaganda (“false consciousness”), both of which are considered to be epiphenomenal to “real poetry”. (328)

In opposition to the proponents of these different angles of critique, many defendants of performance poetry argue that the political and social connection is a point in its favour. In gay sexuality (exceptions being most Galician female performance poets, for example Chus Pato and Ana Romani).
his essay “Poetic Pugulisim” Terry Jacobus makes a typical contention. He argues that beat and slam poetry

[... ] brought poetry back to the street in massive doses. Through bouts and slams, Chicago was at the root of a performance poetry revolution, giving a huge adrenaline shot in the arm to an art form that touches youth from a different angle, and gets poetry followers and activists involved in an engaging atmosphere. (89)

In this passage Jacobus suggests that bringing poetry back to the streets is a value in itself, that performance poetry is by definition a revolutionary art form, and that it connects “poetry followers” and activists. This might be a valid argument for those that share Jacobus’ convictions about the public function of poetry, but it does not efficiently counter the arguments outlined by Damon because the proponents of those take a different point of departure. The qualifier in Jacobus’ logic is whether a poetic strategy can get poetry a wider audience. The critics of performance poetry – each for different reasons – fear that the performance will commodify poetry and make it superficial. Jacobus does not argue against this charge; he merely denies it. It is questionable whether bringing poetry back to the streets is a value in itself. Most critics of performance poetry would not contradict Jacobus’ contention that slams and bouts brought poetry back to the streets; in fact, this is precisely what they reject, each for different reasons. As for my own position, I stick with my line of argument from chapter 1: I question the revolutionary potential of any type of poetry. As I said before, language is an important tool, but the revolution can only be made by people through taking action that exceeds language. Getting “poetry followers and activists involved in an engaging atmosphere” in my experience hardly ever leads to such actions.82

My objective in this chapter is to develop conceptual tools for the analysis of the poetry performance that do justice to the inseparability between the performance and the social and political. However, precisely because I recognize this inseparability I do not accept the contention that the performance of poetry per se is political or politically effective. Its political effectiveness is carefully constructed by some poets who deploy certain elements of language and of the performance. Hence, it is the result of the skilfullness of certain poets. Thus, what is needed is a methodology that permits the inquiry

82 Another highly problematic aspect of Jacobus’ argument is his use of “revolution”. A revolution is defined as a drastic change in the structure of society. By talking about a “performance poetry revolution” Jacobus claims that such a drastic change has taken place without saying what precisely has changed. Thus, he inadvertently empties the term revolution of its content of structural change.
into the specific strategies and effects of the political and social dimension of performed poems, and into the implications of these strategies and effects. Such a methodology does not subsume the analysis of poetry under a political and ideological agenda. Instead, it will bring out that in the committed poetry performance the poet’s social and political agenda and his skill as an artist are equally important components of the poem; neither dominates the other. Only a differentiated and committed analysis that avoids polemics will make it possible to properly respond to such a complex art form.83

I have chosen Scott Heron’s and Sissay’s poems as case studies because they are an early and a late example of committed Black poetry from the U.S. and the U.K., and because they both allow me to address particular strategies of the performance that respond to a social and political context. The tradition of politically militant performance poetry created by African-Americans and Black British poets deserves special attention because it has been extraordinarily innovative and influential. The work of Langston Hughes with Blues, and the work of Amiri Baraka, Gil Scott Heron, and others, with Jazz, has done important groundwork for the work with spoken word and music. The Last Poets who work with spoken word and percussion instruments are now considered among the founders of rap and HipHop. Louise Bennett and Edward Kamau Brathwaite from Jamaica worked with vernaculars and their speech rhythms. Brathwaite introduced the important concept of Nation Language to poetry. Their and the early dub poet’s consciousness of racial and cultural identity and, as a consequence of this consciousness, their effort to express their identity and the political issues connected to it through a particular art form has provided performance poetry with a theoretical framework that is still valid and in use today.

Because Amiri Baraka’s most active period was before 1970 I choose to analyse a poem by Gil Scott Heron as an example of politically committed African-American poetry.

Lemn Sissay is a representative of the second generation of performance poets who started to become famous in the late 1980s. His poetry would make for a case study of how committed African-American poetry crossed the Atlantic for Britain and mixed with influences of Linton Kwesi Johnson and a peculiarly British situation. They influenced Sissay among some other highly original Black British poets of his generation. Sissay takes

83 The development of this methodology is also my contribution to the debate on the topic “Is Performance Poetry dead?” which was started in October 2006 during the Poetry International Festival at the Royal Festival Hall in London by an event of the same name. The event consisted of a debate between the poets Lemn Sissay and Luke Wright. Sissay argued that performance poetry is indeed dead because in recent years the element of entertainment, of show and, in the case of slam poetry, of competition, has come to dominate the work with words. Wright took the opposite position and argued that performance poetry is “alive and kicking” because it has gained popularity and continues to develop the work with layers of signification that are not mobilized in written poetry. I comment on their debate in Gräbner 2006b.
a stance against any dogmatism whatsoever and, like many contemporary young poets, is not associated with any movement or group in particular. However, his poetry is informed by his commitment to certain ideals and therefore rightfully deserves to be discussed in the context of politicized performance poetry. In the poem I selected in this chapter he explicitly addresses the performance, its social situation, and its political implications.

**Interactivity and Ideology**

In chapter 1 I introduced Beasley’s approach to performance poetry. In the article I quoted he argues that interactivity is an integral element of the performance of poetry because it performs the democratic impulse of performance poetry. In this section I will explore the function of interactivity in greater detail and link it with an enquiry into the ways ideology informs the performance of poetry. In his study *Para una semiótica de la ideología* (1987) Carlos Reis develops a method of analysis of the way ideology informs literature. He defines ideology with Guy Rocher as:

\[\ldots\] a system of ideas and judgements, explicit and generally organized, which serves to describe, explain, interpret or justify the situation of a group or a collective entity and which, taking its inspiration largely from values, proposes a specific orientation towards the historical action of that group or that collective entity. (Rocher in Reis 1987: 21)\[^{84}\]

Ideology is expressed in literature through an ideological code. The ideological code more or less defines the form, content and language of the literary work. Applying Eco’s definition of the open work in *Opera Aperta*, Reis argues that the more “open” the work is, i.e. the more possibilities there are for interpretation, the less ideologically efficient is it:

The more inherently open a literary discourse is, the less ideologically efficient it will be, simply for granting ample freedom of interpretation and, consequently, the possibility to escape from a doctrine which is thus put into question; on the other hand, if the literary discourse articulates very transparently the ideological framework in which it orients itself, its openness will diminish considerably because

\[^{84}\] un système d’idées et de jugements, explicite et généralement organisé qui sert à décrire, expliquer, interpréter ou justifier la situation d’un groupe ou d’une collectivité et qui, s’inspirant largement de valeurs, propose une orientation précise à l’action historique de ce groupe ou de cette collectivité.
the meanings that one has to respect in the act of decodification are in certain ways defined and imposed from the beginning. (64)\textsuperscript{85}

In a move similar to Adorno’s, Reis establishes a connection between a closed meaning and ideological efficacy. In the following I will investigate the connection between the two. As a case study I chose the live version of Gil Scott Heron’s poem “Whitey on the Moon” as released in the album The Revolution will not be televised (1988).

Gil Scott Heron’s poetry has to be read in the context of the Black Arts Movement and the specificities of African-American poetry performances in the U.S. Lorenzo Thomas traces the history of this art form back to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, when much of performed poetry had mainly an entertaining and commercial purpose, even though some performers, particularly Frances Ellen Watkins Harper had a strong political agenda and combined an abolitionist or feminist speech with poems on appropriate topics (300).\textsuperscript{86} Thomas then follows the development of African-American poetry performances to Langston Hughes and the important influence of Jazz, Blues and preaching styles, to the Beat poets and the Black Arts Movement. According to Thomas the latter two movements are deeply connected with each other through Amiri Baraka, who was a key figure in both movements, and through the essay “Projective Verse” by Charles Olson, which was recovered from oblivion by Amiri Baraka and “expressed the poetic theory of both movements” (308). In his essay Olson made the point that “poetry is an act of speech, that its element is breath, and writing it down is a skill” (Lorenzo: 308). Apart from these formalistic concerns, Olson argued that such an act of poetry leads to a different relationship to reality.\textsuperscript{87}

The artists involved in the Black Arts Movement thought along very similar lines. Their project was the creation of an aesthetic and of artistic form that allowed Black people

\textsuperscript{85}Cuánto mayor sea la apertura inherente al discurso literario, más débil será su eficacia ideológica, justamente por ser muy amplio el margen de libertad interpretativa y, en consecuencia, la posibilidad de escapar al alcance de una doctrinación así cuestionada; por otra parte, si el discurso literario enuncia con mucha transparencia los marcos ideológicos que lo orientan, su apertura disminuirá considerablemente porque están en cierta manera definidos e impuestos desde el comienzo los sentidos que hay que respetar en el acto de descodificación.

\textsuperscript{86}Poets like Gil Scott Heron often set up their performances in a similar way; they will mainly perform poems, but introduce and accompany them by talks on their political context. For an analysis of the device of conversation in poetry performances see Middleton 2005b and my own analysis of the performance of La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís in chapter 8 “Poetry in the City” of this study.

\textsuperscript{87}Because I focus on the 1970s and after, and because of the comparative analysis of this study, I do not provide an analysis of the work of Baraka. He is one of the most important representatives of the performance of poetry in the U.S. Similar to Linton Kwesi Johnson in the U.K. (see chapter “Accents and Translations”) he inseparably connects style and content. His importance cannot be underestimated. However, since I do not focus on U.S. American performance poetry I refer to the dissertations of Adrián Arancibia and Alwin A.D. Jones for more complete analyses of Baraka’s importance for U.S. American performance poetry. See his essay “The Black Arts Movement” from 1994 in Harris 1999 for further information on this movement.
“to define the world in their own terms” (Neal in Lorenzo: 308). The connection of their art to reality was immediate; art was informed by reality’s limitations and sought to change reality. Thus, they needed to find a form that reflected content’s connection between the political and social reality, and art. Lorenzo argues that the three factors that most influenced the development of Black Arts Poetry were the model of African-American music, particularly jazz, the “interest in finding and legitimizing an ‘authentic’ African American vernacular speech; and [...] the material or physical context of Black Arts poetry readings” (Lorenzo: 310).88

Many of these characteristics can be found in the live performance of “Whitey on the Moon”. The text of the poem is the following:

A rat done bit my sister Nell.
(with Whitey on the moon)
Her face and arms began to swell.
(and Whitey's on the moon)
I can’t pay no doctor bill.
(but Whitey’s on the moon)
Ten years from now I’ll be payin’ still.
(while Whitey’s on the moon)
The man jus’ upped my rent las’ night.
(‘cause Whitey’s on the moon)
No hot water, no toilets, no lights.
(but Whitey’s on the moon)
I wonder why he’s uppin’ me?
(‘cause Whitey’s on the moon?)
I wuz already payin’ ‘im fifty a week.
(with Whitey on the moon)
Taxes takin’ my whole damn check,
Junkies makin’ me a nervous wreck,
The price of food is goin’ up,
An’ as if all that shit wuzn’t enough:

88 Interestingly, Beasley argues that all these characteristics are defining features of performance poetry, a further argument for the strong African American influence on the contemporary British performance poetry scene.
A rat done bit my sister Nell.
(with Whitey on the moon)
Her face an’ arm began to swell.
(but Whitey’s on the moon)
Was all that money I made las’ year
(for Whitey on the moon?)
How come there ain’t no money here?
(Hmm! Whitey’s on the moon)
Y’know I jus’ ‘bout had my fill
(of Whitey on the moon)
I think I’ll sen’ these doctor bills,
Airmail special
(to Whitey on the moon).

The poem offers an African American reading of the first moon landing in 1968. After a long and costly competition with the U.S.S.R. during the space race, the U.S. finally did beat the Russians and were the first state to land a team on the moon. This was celebrated as an ideological victory over Communism. The space race had, however, been enormously costly at the expense of important social reforms within the U.S. Scott Heron, a sympathizer of the radical wing of the Civil Rights Movement led by Malcolm X, and a sympathizer of the Black Panthers, brings the expenses of the space race to the attention of his audience in an attempt to mobilize them to protest against the treatment they received and still receive from the U.S. government.

As a narrative framework in which to develop his criticism he has set up a simple scenario: the speaker, easily identified as African-American by his accent, complains about the problems he is facing because his sister Nell was bitten by a rat and needs medical treatment. Her brother does not know how to pay for this and starts wondering what has happened to all the tax money he has paid, and which has not helped to improve his and his family’s living conditions. Nell’s brother tells his story in simple sentences with the last words rhyming. Each sentence is commented on by another person who tries to raise Nell’s brother’s awareness about his situation by interjecting sentences that establish the connection between Nell’s brother’s poverty and the money spent on the space race. In my analysis I will refer to him as the teacher-activist, borrowing a term from Beasley. These two voices are not easily distinguished on the recorded version of the poet, but would easily be so in a live performance, as the reaction of the audience shows.
The dialogue between the two voices is developed to a quick percussion rhythm. The rhythm is pronounced and captivating but repetitive, thus giving space to the words while at the same time maintaining the fast speed of the recital. Once one gets into the knack of it one can groove along with the poem quite easily. The repetitiveness of the rhythm emphasizes the repetitive structure of the poem: The lines of Nell’s brother rhyme, and in every second sentence something will be said about Whitey. Also, the repetitive rhythm allows for improvisation and possible interjections from the audience, which the percussionist could incorporate easily, then leading back to the rhythm of the poem. The emphasis on the voice – which the repetitiveness of the percussions bring out even further – encourages the listener to focus on the voice’s intonation, inflection, timbre and tonality. This is important because irony and sarcasm emerge much more strongly in the performed version of the poem than they do in the written version.

The tone for the dialogue between the two speakers is set as quick and lively, moving from Nell’s brother’s disturbed but somewhat helpless seriousness and despair to the sometimes sarcastic, sometimes ironic, and often funny commentary of the teacher-activist. The teacher-activist, conceivably the poet’s textual persona, contextualizes the “achievement” of being the first nation to have landed on the moon within a social and political context – rather than in a geopolitical one – and asks who truly benefited from the event, and who lost out on it. He does so by slightly modifying the same sentence “’cause Whitey’s on the moon” as many times and in as many ways as it is necessary to awaken Nell’s brother’s critical spirit. That the “Whitey on the Moon” part of the sentence never changes indicates that his argument always stays the same, and that Whitey being on the moon is indeed the cause of a range of social grievances from exorbitant rents and unhygienic living conditions to insufficient or the denial of access to medical care.

The use of the term “whitey” is strategic. “Whitey” is a stereotyped and depersonalized characterization of white people. As such, the term emphasizes the division between Black and White interests. However, it is much less scary than “the man”, the term that Nell’s brother uses to complain about his rise in rent. “The man” is used in colloquial American English to refer to an unspecified, often governmental agent who makes decisions that affect everyone, but against whom the people on the street – with whom the person using the expression usually identifies – are powerless. By suggesting the use of “whitey” instead of “the man” the poet frames this powerful agent within a context of racial discrimination, opposing interests, and conflict. Attributing a skin colour to him makes him more tangible, contextualizing him makes him more open to attack. Moreover, the term
“whitey” has a note of ridicule to it, thus disempowering the formerly powerful agent and presenting his authority and power as contestable.

Nell’s brother responds positively to the suggestions of the teacher-activist, both in terms of understanding his own situation as a situation constructed by social and political interests, and in terms of moving away from the feeling of powerlessness against “the man” towards rebellion against “whitey”. His conversion is indicated by a merging of his voice and the teacher-activist’s voice: as the poem develops, and as Nell’s brother assimilates the lesson of the teacher-activist, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two voices. Finally, when Nell’s brother asks himself the question “Was all that money I made las’ year/ for Whitey on the moon?” the two voices merge into the voice of one speaker. In the last two lines of the poem the brother indicates that he does not want to put up with his situation any longer, and will make those who are responsible for it face up to their responsibility.

The last line shows not only the final conversion of Nell’s brother, but the recorded version of the poem also indicates that something happened between performer and audience. As the poem develops, and as the gap between the two speakers closes, the audience becomes increasingly lively. One hears them laughing, applauding, and interjecting comments as the poem unfolds. In the end of the poem, before the last line, one hears a woman saying “to Whitey on the moon” at the moment when the performer would have said it. The other members of the audience react with laughter and applause. The poet keeps silent for a moment after her interjection, while the percussions keep playing. This moment allows for the attention of the audience to linger on the other audience members, rather than on the poet himself. Only then does the poet say the last line of the poem.

Rephrasing my argument that the poem mainly relies on auditive understanding one can say that the poem appeals to the conversational capacities of the audience and not to their capacities for analytical reading. This focus is crucial because it indicates that the poem appeals to people who probably do not usually read or who do not usually read in a traditional manner, but it is sophisticated enough to capture those who do. Thus, the poem dissolves the separation between more and less educated audience members. It indicates that the educational standard of a person is not what the poem is mainly interested in. Instead, it solicits engagement, response and the disposition to dialogue, based on active understanding beyond class divisions.89

89 Race divisions, however, are being maintained. A white audience member would have to start reflecting on his own position as “whitey”, and the trajectory of political mobilization that the poem implies would move
At this point I return to the concept of dialogue that I introduced in chapter 3, where I focused on the theoretical implications of it. Now I need to ground it within the analysis of “Whitey”. To do this I appeal to the concept of interactivity. Scott Heron uses interactivity to start a dialogue with his audience. Hence, I propose to see interactivity not as dialogical in itself but as a poetic device through which dialogue can be encouraged and in some cases, achieved. I have remarked earlier that Beasley reinterprets interactivity as a literary tool in the service of a political agenda. He writes:

Performance poetry requires the active involvement of others – it solicits, conjoins, provokes and incorporates people. It does not tolerate a passive or consumerist role for the receiver. [. . .] It relies on and demands feedback. It is an interactive, two-way, give and take thing. (Beasley 1994:32)

Consequently, a performance poem could be considered a political intervention because it makes consumerism impossible for the audience, and instead shows them as active parts of the process. Beasley rightly insists that call-and-answer devices and structures that encourage audience participation can lead to interaction with the audience. However, I do not think that they necessarily do so. The audience always has the possibility to refuse cooperation with the performing poet and the performed text. More importantly, the poet can encourage different forms of interactivity.

In this respect, call-and-answer devices are paradoxical. They leave the audience little choice in the form or the content of the interaction because the audience’s response is usually decided upon by the poet, before the audience has even heard the poem. A less coercive possibility for interactivity is spontaneous interaction and response, the kind of interactivity that Beasley places under the term “response”. It seems crucial to me to distinguish between these two forms of interactivity. Such a distinction is necessary because whether or not one agrees with Beasley’s conclusion that performance poetry does not allow for a consumerist attitude of the listener, and whether or not this takes the form of an “anti-consumerist genre” depends on what we reject about consumerism. If we reject the lack of participation, then Beasley’s conclusion is correct. If we reject the numbing and stifling effect that consumerism has on people, with one of its results being a lack of participation, then I find Beasley’s conclusion problematic because I believe that it is

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into a different direction. I will address the issue of race later on, in my discussion of the work of Linwon Kwest Johnson.
unwarrantedly optimistic. For, people can be made to participate in a poem by way of its structural devices, while in fact they have very little agency.

To describe the two forms of interactivity, and in order to make the difference between them more tangible, I propose the pair of terms “closed interaction” and “open interaction”. To flesh these terms out theoretically, and to make them more efficient tools for analysis, I propose to bring them to bear on some aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of dialogue in “Discourse in the Novel”. In this essay Bakhtin argues that a dialogical interaction relies on understanding. He distinguishes between active understanding and passive understanding. The passive understanding of a discourse “is an understanding of an utterance’s neutral signification and not its actual meaning” (281). The actual meaning of the utterance, which is “understood against the background of other concrete utterances in the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of views and value judgments”, escapes the passive understanding of discourse. Moreover, passive understanding does not have any effect on the word or on the people who use it. Even when it is more concrete,

even [. . . .] an understanding of the speaker’s intention insofar as that understanding remains purely passive, purely receptive, contributes nothing new to the word under consideration, only mirroring it, seeking, at its most ambitious, merely the full reproduction of that which is already given in the word – even such an understanding never goes beyond the boundaries of the word’s context and in no way enriches the word. (281)

The word stays firmly within the context of the speaker, the listener does not assimilate it into his own context and as a result, does not understand nor is able to respond with or to it. Closed interaction like prescriptive call-and-answer devices can do perfectly well with a passive understanding because it does not necessarily seek to establish a dialogue, it merely seeks to reaffirm its point.

“Open interaction” designates an interaction that is not decided upon in advance, but is a spontaneous result from the performance. It requires active understanding because it relies on response, and according to Bakhtin, “understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (282). Active understanding “assimilates the word to be understood into the listener’s own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions”
A speaker who wishes to achieve active understanding or the part of his listener directs his utterance precisely towards his interlocutor’s background:

Thus an active understanding, one that assimilates the word under consideration into a new conceptual system, that of the one striving to understand, establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements. [. . . .] The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener’s apperceptive background. (Bakhtin 282)

Thinking about the interaction between poet and audience, and between Nell’s brother and his teacher/activist interlocutor as an engagement with different perceptions and horizons that Bakhtin describes in this passage enables us to understand more clearly what happens in the poem. To get a clear conceptual hold of it I will look at the change of the word “Whitey”.

As I have said before, the term “Whitey” is a politically loaded term. It refers to white people, but in a belittling and ridiculing sense. This connotation of its meaning is opposed to the overwhelming power of “the man”. The adoption of the term “whitey” by Nell’s brother demonstrates that the teacher/activist has broken “through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener” and has effected a change at the horizon. This change not only affects the understanding and use of a term but also has an impact on the speaker’s self-respect and on how he positions himself in a social and political situation. The use of the term “whitey” indicates a shift from a passive and overwhelmed attitude to one of self-defence, social critique and self-respect.

Returning to Reis’ argument that ideological efficacy limits the margin of interpretation, I conclude that in the concrete case of “Whitey” this is certainly true. The semantic part of the poem does not leave much room for interpretation. However, it is important to note that freedom of interpretation is not equivalent to the freedom of the interpreter or, to return to Brennan, that creative agency is not necessarily conducive to civic agency. Moreover, Reis’ argument – and by implication also Adorno’s – rests on the assumption that the person doing the interpretation is not limited by ideologies that are imposed on him from outside of the literary work. But as the poem demonstrates, Nell’s brother's possibilities for interpretation in the beginning of the poem are certainly limited by an ideology of white supremacy. The poem seeks to expose and counter an ideology that
confines African-American people to a subaltern position. Rather than replacing the dominant ideology with another confining ideology, the poem acts out the conviction that its (presumably African-American) audience ought to be able to empower itself in order to resist confinement of any sort. The ideology that informs the poem is made very explicit, as Reis says. However, while this explicitness might limit the possibilities for interpretation, it increases the possibilities for the empowerment of the audience because it invites the audience to take their own stand in relation to the matter presented.

Adorno’s analysis of committed literature refers to literature informed by an ideology that is considered to be the completion of a process of consciousness raising and empowerment. The ideology that informs Heron’s poem, in turn, seeks to start a process of consciousness raising and empowerment. The performance and the direct interaction it allows for does in this case contribute to the process that the ideology seeks to initiate. The performance allows the poet to construct forms of openness of a different kind than the openness that Reis and Eco refer to explicitly, and Adorno implicitly. These forms of openness work against a possible confinement of the audience by way of the ideology informing the artwork. Like the work itself, they are at the beginning of a process, and not at its completion (Freire).

In terms of political intervention, privileging open interaction over closed interaction is indicative of a very particular approach and aims. The poet aims at making his audience aware of linguistic structures they use that lead to their own disempowerment (“the man” as opposed to “whitey”) and introduces a discourse that enables rebellion. He appeals to those capacities of understanding that allow them to reflect on issues by themselves, encourages social interaction and appeals to those communicative and receptive abilities that are important in social interaction. The structure of his poem allows for the audience to perform interaction and articulation in the form they choose, but it does not oblige them to interact. This approach suggests a shift from the emphasis on a protagonist – the poet – as an agent, to the empowerment of the audience, who develops agency during the performance.

**Performance and Performativity**

The point of my analysis of “Whitey on the Moon” is that the poem seeks to empower its audience rather than solely convince them of a specific ideology. The performance opens up possibilities for immediate interaction between poet and audience and is, therefore, conducive to empowerment. The presence of the poet on the site of the performance is
crucial for the process I analysed because he initiates the interaction with the audience. I will now turn to a performance in which the body of the performer – because of the performer’s race – becomes what Bernstein calls nonsemantic signs within the text. Furthermore, the use of the performer’s body in this particular performance invites a discussion of the concept of performativity and the way it functions within the performance. If performance poetry had an immediate political effect, then the concept of performativity would be a way to explain how the link between the poem and political action is constructed and put to work. However, I will argue that the connection between the performed poem and the agency that leads to political action is more complex and less immediate and hence, cannot be explained only through the concept of performativity. Before I turn to my case study for this section, I will therefore outline the theoretical concept of performativity.

As is well know, John Austin outlined his theory of performative and constative utterances in *How to do Things with Words*. Austin differentiates between constative and performative speech acts. Constative speech acts make a statement, performative speech acts perform an action. Both constative and performative speech acts contain locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. In a locutionary speech act, the speaker performs the act of saying something; in Austin’s example, the speaker “said to me ‘Shoot her!’ meaning by shoot ‘shoot’ and referring by her to *her*” (101). Thus, the speaker seeks to achieve precisely what he says he will achieve. In an illocutionary speech act, the speaker performs the act he wants to perform in saying something (99). In Austin’s example, the speaker would urge the listener to shoot the other person. Thus, the effect of language is understood not by focusing on what the speaker says, but by focusing on the effect his speech act had on somebody else, in this case, the listener. Here, the analytical focus is on the speaker’s attempt to make somebody else do something. Thus, the intention of the speaker, him having the necessary authority to perform an illocutionary speech act, and the existence of a context in which the speech act can be felicitous, are crucial to the speech act and its effect. Felman refers to this in the passage I quoted in chapter 3 in which she points out that the illocutionary speech act is in the final consequence always about the authority of the speaker. The perlocutionary speech act shifts the focus again. A perlocutionary speech act shifts the attention further away from the intention of the speaker to the action of the listener. “He made me shoot her” or “he persuaded me to shoot her”, posits the listener as the one who did the deed, even though somebody else might have designed and planned for it. Thus, Austin’s model of locutionary, illocutionary and
perlocutionary speech act facilitates subtle but complex shifts in the analysis of speech acts and of the power relations that are at work in speech acts. Through the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts he makes clear that the intention of the speaker can be imposed upon the listener, and can be responded to by the listener, in different ways.

The force or success of the speech act relies on a number of circumstances surrounding the situation in which it is uttered. For the present purpose, the categories of felicitous/infelicitous speech act and of the authority of the speaker are particularly important. Austin argues that a performative speech act can “misfire” or be “infelicitous”. This means that the speech act does not have the desired effect or no effect at all. One of the circumstances that can lead to the infelicity of a performative speech act is that the speaker does not have the necessary authority to perform the action he wishes to perform. For example, only an officer of the registrar can perform a marriage; if someone else uses the same words “I declare you husband and wife”, the effect is nil because this person does not have the necessary authority. Originally, Austin limits his theory strictly to “serious” utterances, in particular from the area of law or public discourse or seriously speaking individuals. However, the concept of performativity is by now widely used in literary analysis and in gender studies, even though Austin cited literature as non-serious.90

For my purposes, it is important to note that performativity can be related to, but not conflated with performance – the execution of a script, score, or even improvised utterances. The productive tension between the two has been addressed by Mieke Bal in her article “Performance and Performativity”. There, she analyses the interaction between performance and performativity in an art installation. She argues that in this particular installation, photographs of the preparations for a theatre performance and a voice performance interact with each other in order to address the socio-cultural force of performativity and its impact on the construction of subjectivity. The installation stages the interaction between performance and performativity so as to expose it. The viewer is invited to understand and engage with the dynamics thus exposed. The installation finally achieves intersubjectivity between the artwork and the viewer and thereby opens up a possibility of agency for the viewer. Bal’s argument can potentially be developed to establish a link between creative and civic agency because it allows for the argument that social or cultural agency can link creative and civic agency. Bal’s case is an art installation.

90 See Culler 2000 for an account. In this study I analyse examples of politically militant performance poetry that practice poetry as a form of public discourse, or as a response to public discourse. Hence, this type of poetry does not fall under Austin’s definition of “non-serious”.
Since I am focusing on the spoken word and its surroundings, I will integrate Butler’s *Excitable Speech* into this discussion. I already quoted this work in the previous chapter in order to demonstrate how language has the power to shut down, and finally manipulate, processes of iteration. I will now return to Butler’s text in an analysis of the potentially positive, empowering effect of language. Butler’s detailed argument mainly addresses hate speech; she asks why and how the human being is vulnerable to speech, and comes to the conclusion that subjectivity is partly constituted by speech. Those who have or assume the authority to use speech in such a constructive – or, in Butler’s examples, destructive – manner, therefore have the possibility to greatly impact on another, more vulnerable person’s subjectivity by way of hate speech. Butler’s analysis goes into great detail and shows the different ways in which speech can impact on subjectivity. At this point I am interested in the question whether her argument would also work the other way around. In other words, does Butler’s convincingly argued contention that language has the power to oppress also mean that language has the power to liberate? If it does, is the liberatory function of speech inversely comparable to the oppressive mechanism that Butler analyses in her study? Performativity is the key link between the act of enunciation and the effects it takes. The performance I will discuss now explores precisely this question.

Staging as a means to the address of performative speech acts – or rather, in this particular case, their failure – is at the centre of my analysis of a performance of Lemn Sissay. The performance I will discuss, was set up to be recorded and broadcast on television. My argument is that this particular performance is so emphatically staged that it invites a discussion of different aspects of staging, such as the venue and the community that is addressed. This brings it closer to Bal’s case. The performance took place in a Birmingham trance club with an all-white audience. It was recorded for the TV program *New Brit* in 2004, and broadcast by BBC Choice. The program, which Lemn Sissay also presented, was broadcast on the occasion of the Queen’s Golden Jubilee and scrutinized British national symbols such as the Union Jack and the national anthem to find out if they are still relevant to contemporary images of Britain. The show also invited artists to design alternative flags and anthems. Most of the contributions responded particularly to the emergence of a multicultural society. Sissay himself wrote one of the “alternative” national anthems and performed it at a trance club against a track by DJ Nick Rafferty. The text of the piece is the following:
In the name of the islands
In the name of the sea
In the name of four seasons
In the name of history
In the name of women
In the name of men
In the name of children
God save them all.

In the name of the Irish
In the name of the Jewish
In the name of justice
In the name of what truth is
In the name of Mecca
In the name of Jerusalem
In the name of Rome
Save them, save them, save them, save them all.

In the name of past wars
In the name of future peace
In the name of immigrants
In the name of release
In the name of the Commonwealth
In the name of the Asians
In the name of Equality
Save them, save them all, save them all, save them, save them all.

In the name of the traveller
In the name of the shores
In the name of the defender
In the name of the cause
In the name of the people
In the name of the waves
In the name of the spirit
God save us all, all, all.

In the TV broadcast of the performance the first line of the poem appears on the screen in writing. In the following lines, the key word of each sentence appears as well, for example “islands”, “sea”, “four seasons”, “history”. The keywords always appear in the moment that Sissay pronounces them, thus complementing the rhythm of the poem and the music. This mode of presentation frames the performance, makes it recognizable as staged, and in doing so, invites even the homebound television viewer to engage with the text of the poem in relation to how it was performed.

The structure of Sissay’s national anthem is simple; the lines consist of the formulation “in the name of”, followed by the object, and the chorus “God save them all” as the last line. The objects at first seem to be an eclectic collection of terms. However, they turn out to be a metaphorically charged and very specific text. Sissay’s national anthem first of all changes the protagonists of the national anthem. In the British national anthem “God Save the Queen” the singers remain outside of the text. They ask God for protection of their queen and with her, for their land. Nation and Queen are identified with each other. The queen’s subjects do not figure and therefore do not matter. Furthermore, the national anthem contains the plea that the queen’s glory should not only be known on the British Isles, but also in other countries, and that all men should realize that they should be brothers. This insight would conceivably convince them to unite in loyalty to the British Queen.

Sissay turns the structure of the text around: he asks after those in whose name the saving is to be done and makes them the central focus of his poem. Instead of identifying the well-being of all of them with the well-being of the unifying figure of the Queen, he defines his nation as consisting out of a multitude of very different people whose well-being depends on the circumstances under which all of their communities live. Sissay goes so far as to leave the Queen out of the poem altogether, thus making it available as an anthem for a monarchy as well as a republic because what matters are the people and not the political system. In stanza 2 and 3 God disappears, too. Instead, the last lines turn into a plea to whatever entity to save those who need saving.

The protagonists of the poem make for a diverse combination of ideas, geography and different communities. Justice, truth and equality are invoked as values. Major religions, men, women and children figure equally. Standing up to history and the past wars one has caused, generates a commitment to future peace. Travellers and immigrants are welcome. So are beliefs (causes), defenders and “the people”. That they are all distributed equally across the different stanzas suggests that they are equally important and that none
of them would work without the others. Asking to save the British in the name of the Irish and the Asians adds a clear ironic touch, because that the British need saving certainly has something to do with the atrocities they have committed in the past toward, among others, the Irish and the Asians. Saving equals forgiving; the British really do need to be forgiven by the Irish and the Asians. The architecture of Sissay’s Britain is characterized by openness about the past and by equal rights in the present. There is no sense of pressure on anyone to conform to anything because nobody and nothing is any more powerful than any of the others – says the poem. But the performance provokes contradictory reactions.

I have pointed out repeatedly that in approaches like Beasley’s and Dawes’ the positioning of the poet within his community is considered an important aspect of the poetry performance. This is necessary, I can now add, for the performativity of the performance to be felicitous. Through this emphasis the performance claims a public function for the poet. As Beasley outlines:

And, just as performance reclains a social space for poetry, it reinvents and promotes a poet’s public function, perhaps especially as guardian of or challenger to cultural values, and redefines the poet’s role to include, for example, community historian, teacher, broadcaster, agitator and entertainer. The specialist conception and myth of the poet as separate from and above people is mercifully exploded. (1994: 33)

The possible public functions of the poet are in turn connected to his presence within his community. He is addressable and takes an active part in the development of his community. In “Whitey on the Moon” the poet appears as teacher and agitator, or activist, as I prefer to call him. Sissay’s performance seems to break with this tradition in a brash manner by performing as a Black performer in front of an exclusively white audience. This raises the question if such a performance can succeed in its performative ambition.

Once I used this performance for a presentation at a conference. One of the responses it solicited was directly related to the presence of the poet on the site of the performance: Lemn Sissay is Black, the audience in the trance club was, as far as one can see on the video, exclusively white. The participants of the conference considered trance to be “white” music, and questioned why a black poet adjusted to the stereotypes of the white music and was catering to the needs of white kids who probably were not listening to the words. The participants of the conference argued that Sissay was making himself available
as a token. As an alternative mode of protest the conference participants were suggesting that Sissay could have contested the dominant racial stereotype provided by the national anthem from within his own cultural tradition, for example by using Jazz music and drawing on the Black poetry tradition of Amiri Baraka. As it was, many participants felt that the appearance of the poet on stage seriously jeopardized the integrity of all the other aspects of the poem and its performance, such as its venue, audience, and finally, the credibility of the poet’s project. This would cause the performativity to fail.

I myself had come to a different conclusion. My argument was and still is that Sissay’s choice of location made a particular reference to the politics of Performance Poetry in drawing attention to the effect of the poet’s presence on the site of the performance. However, he does not do so by doing what he should be doing, i.e. performing in a Black Arts Centre in front of Black people. Had he done that, his presence on the site of the performance would have been taken for granted and nobody would have asked any questions. Instead, he displaced (and misplaced) himself into a context where he as a Black performer of poetry is not supposed to be, especially not performing a poem about the multicultural future of Britain. This intentional misplacement created anger and discomfort among my colleagues at the conference and made the presence of the poet on the site of the performance the main topic of our discussion.

I contend that one of the sources of the participants’ anger and discomfort were concerns with the performativity of the performance. Their comment about Baraka suggested that they embraced the idea that performance can have an empowering effect only if it is performed in the “right”, that is, same, identity-based, context. Sissay being in the wrong place raises the uncomfortable question of what happens when a performance takes place in the “wrong” environment. Does that mean that the performance falls short, that it is infelicitous, as some students of mine – equally angry and disappointed – once suggested about the same performance? Or does it mean that those who form the hostile environment are reaffirmed performatively, as the argument about tokenism suggests? Sissay leaves these questions open and suspended. In doing so, he creates another source of discomfort and disturbs generalized patterns of meaning making regarding the empowering effect of the performance of poetry.

To further probe this issue, I would like to reframe the issue within a discussion that is not purely in an academic environment, like the two with colleagues and students that I just mentioned. After all, Sissay’s performance is the last one in a TV program that reaffirms Britain’s multicultural identity and celebrates cultural interaction and mixture.
Completely missing in the program is a discussion of whiteness in terms of race. Yet, Sissay’s blackness in the white trance club foregrounds the whiteness of the club’s visitors and makes the audience notice what many Black activists have been saying for a long time: that white, too, is a colour. Sissay’s white audience in the trance club seems to be oblivious to race, in contradistinction to those watching the recorded performance. If we look at it in this way, then the performance invites the question of how deep tolerance and cultural hybridity really go. Fifty years ago it would probably have been impossible to have a black artist perform an alternative version of the British national anthem in a white club.

Nevertheless, it is doubtful that the audience in the trance club actually reflects on what Sissay has to say. They do not seem to realize that he is, at least at times, talking about the crimes that have been committed in the name of their race and their nation. For those watching the recorded version, Sissay’s presence does change the meaning of the poem. The text by itself does not give away the race of the poet, so that only because he is present does anyone without previous knowledge about him know that he is Black. Conversely, only the fact that he is Black and his audience is white makes the poem controversial.

When we look at it from this angle, the poem brings to mind just how much race still matters. Hearing the poem from a black person is not the same as hearing it from a white person, and hearing it from a black person talking to white people makes it completely different from hearing it from a black person talking to black people. Sissay’s choice of location might be an expression of the black man’s desire to be accepted by a hip white crowd. Conversely, Sissay might have tried to find a very white place in order to explore how multiculturally the members of British society really think.

At the base of the discussion lies the uncontrollability of the perlocutionary aspect of the speech act. Sissay’s performance makes his audiences – both in the trance club and in front of the TV – realize that there might be a flip-side to performativity because the ending of the speech act is always open. As he often does in his poetry, he goes against the grain of what is considered to be politically correct or opportune. Instead, he uses an almost universally endorsed aspect of the performance poetry – the presence of the poet on the site of the performance – to unsettle not only the positive connotation of this feature of the performance of poetry, but also to undermine the text of his own poem – which turns from an affirmation to a question – and to interrogate his viewers’ notions of what makes for a multicultural society. This is the performative success of this performance.

Furthermore, the performance shows just how dependent the performative effect of language is on context and authority. A national anthem is usually considered to
performatively acknowledge the national cohesion of those who sing it. Sissay’s performance of the national anthem, however, demonstrates that his poem creates deep division and disagreement, rather than the tolerant atmosphere he evokes. The national anthem remains a dream, a vision, because Sissay is not invested with the necessary authority to speak it as an illocutionary felicitous speech act, and the context is not the one in which the performance would be admitted as such a speech act. Referring back to the question of whether speech has the power to liberate just as it has the power to oppress, the performance gives a clear “No” for an answer. There are three reasons for this negative answer.

The first two reasons are connected with each other. One reason is related to the controllability of the effect of the locutionary aspect of the speech act, the second reason is related to the authority of the poet. The two reasons are connected in the effect they have. The effect of the speech act, especially of its perlocutionary aspect, has been shown to be very much beyond our control; an uncontrollability which, according to Butler, may be a source of insecurity for those abusing language. However, in the particular example of Sissay’s performance the uncontrollability of the speech act jeopardizes the power of the poem. Instead of rejecting this uncontrollability as a lack of ideological efficacy, however, Sissay posits the speech act’s uncontrollability as its most democratic moment. He recognizes clearly that in the diverse society that he proposes in his poem he will not have the sole authority to “make the poem happen”. Therefore, he and the poem need the cooperation of his audience to do so. However, the audiences refuse their cooperation by tying in the message of his poem with a need for an authoritarian stance and a position of authority taken by the poet. Both are defined by the conventions of the respective audience. Sissay refuses to take a position or posture that is based on the conventions of any set audience. He has to, because his poem proposes a society that does not obey to the conventions of any one group or person in particular. Therefore, his poem must fail as a performative speech act. However, it successfully points out the reasons for its failure by staging them.

The demonstrative infelicitousness of Sissay’s alternative national anthem also reiterates Gil Scott Heron’s contention that civic agency is always put into practice outside of the performance. It demonstrates that social and political change takes much more than enunciation. If it wants to be truly democratic, it has to be accompanied by an in-depth discussion about values and conventions. Thus, Sissay’s poem demonstrates the
connectedness of the poetic with the social and the political. Thus connectedness implies that neither of the three can be effective without involving the other two.

Like Scott Heron, Sissay does not give answers but is encouraging discussion on several levels. In terms of the discussion of literary traditions and genres he presents an example of a poem in which text-internal and text-external elements are inseparable, thus emphasizing the contextual nature of poetry. In terms of the politics of performance poetry he makes an equally strong point about the importance of the physical appearance of the poet on the site of the performance because his performance in the trance club demonstrates that his presence can entirely change the perception, hence, the perlocutionary aspect, of the poem as speech act. Furthermore, he emphasizes the theatrical aspect of the performance as a staged event, by way of the emphatic framing of the recorded version of the performance. In doing so, he suggests that a poetry performance is not always a spontaneous interaction with the audience, but that it can be a planned and well thought-through performance like a theatre play. Finally, the relationship between subjectivity and community that he suggests differs profoundly from the one that was performed by the Black poets of the 70s. The notion of community and of belonging to one community (or several communities?) is difficult in many ways. His international d/misplacement of himself opens up questions of who assigns a person to a community and of how a sense of “belonging” is developed.

Performing Poetry, Performing Poetics

As I indicated previously, Scott Heron and Sissay represent a current of performance poetry that has been crucially influenced by the Black Arts Movement. The poetics of the Black Arts Movement are most clearly articulated by Amiri Baraka in his text “The Black Arts Movement” (1991). However, apart from Baraka’s text there are almost no others in which performance poets articulate their poetics. This is particularly noticeable among the group of poets I have termed the second generation of performance poets, to which Sissay belongs, and even more so among the third generation. This lack of a clearly formulated poetics indicates that in the Anglo-Saxon context there has been a rupture between poetic practice, theoretical analysis, and the pursuit of explicit political goals in performance poetry.91

91 The reasons for this rupture are diverse and complex, and require a detailed analysis that would exceed the scope of this study. I address some of them in Gräbner 2006a, Gräbner 2007a and Gräbner 2007b. My arguments in these texts are connected by the contention that the capitalization of the cultural field has had a dramatic impact on a genre as recent as performance poetry. In the same measure that the state has cut down its budgets of subsidies for cultural events, particularly a young genre such as performance poetry has become increasingly dependent on private initiative and on the market. Both make certain demands as far as marketability of the poetry is concerned. Subsequently, the state has increased this effect by adopting market-oriented criteria for subsidies and grants. In 2006a I argue that academic theory, rather than working against
The poetic practice of the Galician poet Chus Pato sets a counterpoint to this
tendency. In the beginning of this study I introduced Chus Pato as a member of the second
generation of performance poets because of her year of birth and her poetics. However, she
became well known later than most of the poets of this generation. Arturo Casas counts her
among the members of the so-called “Generation of the 1990s”:

In insist, therefore, [. . . .] that from the sociological-systemic perspective that is
used here, we need to locate Chus Pato in the “generational situation” of the 90s.
And in relation to this framework we need to situate her in two epistemic spaces at
the same time. These two spaces are not disconnected because she connects them
(and only because of this): 1) literature written by women who are organized in
feminist groups, 2) the core of poets who are closest to the cultural, aesthetical,
literary and ideological ideas, and the “vital reason” of Méndez Ferrín. (1996:
133)92

According to Casas, the characteristics of the Galician “Generation of the 90s” are very
different from those of the generation that became famous in the Anglo-Saxon world at
around the same time: the Galician “Generation of the 90s” is characterized by
politicization, especially through the influence of Xosé Luis Méndez Ferrín. Casas argues
that one of Pato’s particular contributions to the “Generation of the 90s” was the
establishment of the connection between the group around Méndez Ferrín and their politics
and poetics on the one hand, and militant feminism on the other.93

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92 Insisto, pois, [. . . .] en que desde a perspectiva sociolóxico-sistémica pola que aquí se avoga deberíamos
ubicar a obra de Chus Pato na situación xeracional dos 90. E en relación con ese marco, de maneira
simultánea, en dous espacios epistémicos que non son disxuntos porque ela os enlaza (e só por iso): 1) o da
literatura escrita por mulleres militantes no feminismo, e 2) o núcleo de poetas máis pródixos ós presupostos
culturais, estéticos, literarios, ideolóxicos e raciovitais de Méndez Ferrín.

93 “Vital reason” refers to one of the theories developed by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. Reason and
all other elements of life are integrated with each other; reason is not superior to any of the others.
Méndez Ferrín, born in 1938, is one of the most famous poets of Galicia and has been suggested for the
Nobel Prize for Literature. He is also professor for Spanish literature, a well-known novelist, and frequent
contributor of newspapers. Under the Franco dictatorship he was repeatedly imprisoned for his political
activities and had to live underground for a while. He continues to be active as a poet as well as in politics.
The politicization of Galician poetry was accompanied by a profound change of the cultural field. One of the changes was the growing importance of poetry recitals, which found an enthusiastic audience and turned into one of the most important media of the Generation of the 90s (Casas 1996: 131). Pato’s attitude towards the recital is ambivalent. In an interview she says:

When I recite and I sit down, I feel that it is going to give me vertigo and that I will fall over. I am not prepared for public functions and when I fill them I have to make an effort, I do it with trouble, with difficulties, and because I understand that it is my duty. It is an act of militancy.

The poet has to be socially responsible for her work. On the other hand, the contact with people was tremendously enriching. Being able to recite changed my way of writing, I acknowledged that the people are there without compromising my style, now I try harder to make my poetry clearer.94 (Vidal 1997 in Casas 1996: 134)

Pato sees the recital as a political act and only tolerates it as such: in the recital she assumes public responsibility for her poetry. She considers this act her duty, and she acknowledges that it has had an impact on her poetry, teaching her to make it clearer without compromising its style.

In Pato’s performances, her politics and poetics are mobilized by her personal presence to interact with her poetry; the result is the “event Chus Pato”, as Casas calls it. Importantly, he points out that the consolidation of the conceptualization of the “event Chus Pato” depend not only on the poetry but also on the texts that surround it: such as interviews, readings, reviews, and articles. Thus, the “event Chus Pato” becomes a performance that does not need a stage, but that relies on the social and cultural consensus that the performance of poetry is indeed a cultural and political practice. In this respect her practice of the poetry performance resembles that of Neruda, as I analysed it in chapter 1 and 2. However, Neruda did not articulate his poetics in his poetry as Pato does.

Such a practice questions the definition of the poetry performance that I elaborated in the introduction to this study. I argued that one of the most important criteria for the
distinction between the poetry recital and the poetry performance is the mobilization of layers of signification additional to the words and the poet’s voice by the poetry performance. These elements make the effect of the poetry performance spill over into its surroundings, and this effect of spilling over creates a dependency and at the same time, an interaction between performed poetry and its context that are proper to poetry performances, but not to the poetry recital. According to this definition many of Pato’s poetry performances would have to be classified as poetry recitals. Yet, they do depend on the contextual elements of the performance.\footnote{I refer to performances in which Chus Pato recites her work. She has also done other performances, most famously with the performance artist María Ruído. Other members of the “Generation of the 90s” who are particularly interested in exploring the possibilities of the performance of poetry are Antón Lopo and Ana Romani. For an analysis of the work of Ana Romani see Bermúdez.}

The difference between Pato’s poetry performances and those of poets such as Scott Heron comes about because she appeals to her context on a different register than do Scott Heron, Sissay, or most other poets whose work I will discuss in this study. Her appeal to her context hinges on the fact that her position on important cultural and political issues is well known through her cultural and political work. Two very important strategies she employs are the use of different characters and discourses, and the explicit or implicit expression of her poetics. In my analysis I will focus on the latter.\footnote{Pato uses many different characters in her poetry. Some are historical, some are fictional, and some are friends and family members. In doing so, she distributes the enunciative function between her own textual persona and the other characters that figure in her texts. Thus, she subverts the power assigned to the enunciator through the staging of dialogue.}

In his article “La función autopoética y el problema de la productividad histórica” Casas argues that “autopoetic” texts are one effective element of the communicative function of poetry. Important for my purposes in this section is his remark that all auto-poetic texts are associated with an ‘autopoetic function’ that maintains a direct dependence with the illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of the macro-act of generating speech in the enunciative act in question, and that may lead to the representative, the committed, the directive, the expressive, or the constructive” (211).\footnote{Todo texto autopoético se asocia a una función autopoética que mantiene una dependencia directa con las dimensiones ilocutiva y perlocutiva del macroacto de habla generador del enunciado en cuestión, y que potestativamente propenderá a lo representativo, lo comisivo, a lo directivo, a lo expresivo o a lo instaurativo.}

Thus, autopoetic texts do not provide autoanalysis or explanations for the poetic work, but provide an additional layer of signification, to apply my own terminology. I will
now briefly discuss three texts by Pato that are representative of her use of auto-poetic text, and that bring me to a definition of the poetry performance through its appeal to its political and social context, rather than through its use of the layers of signification I referred to as decisive for the definition of the poetry performance in the introduction to this study.

Thus, I will define a type of poetry performance that is situated between the traditional poetry recital and performances in the style of Scott Heron and Sissay. This task brings me back to the concepts I developed in chapters 2 “The Poet as Author” and 3 “Speaking and Listening”. The text “é vostede unha persoa que escribe para outras persoas?”, published in the anthology *Un Ganges de Palabras* (2003), recalls various of these concepts and allows me to place them in the concept of the poetry performance.

“¿É vostede unha persoa que escribe para outras persoas?” is set up as an interview:

– are you a person who writes for other people?
– no, i’m not a person who writes for other people
– so who do you write for?
– i write because language imposes itself on me
– like on all others?
– not like on all others: many among the others do not produce language

The introduction of the journalistic discourse recalls Casas’ contention that the “event Chus Pato” is constructed not only through her poetry, but also through interviews, articles, recitals, and reviews. Furthermore, it indicates that not only does she accept that the poem forms part of this context, but that she also allows for such discourses to enter into the poem and expand the definition of what poetry is. Thus, she makes it clear that what the poem says exceeds the limits of poetic language. At the same time, she problematizes the co-existence of the two discourses by emphasizing the clash between them.

The clash manifests itself in the different registers of language that interviewer and interviewee employ. The interviewer’s language invites preconceived and straightforward answers, while the interviewee refuses to comply with the interviewer’s expectations. She uses a language that cannot give the answers the interviewer is looking for. This becomes

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98 – ¿é vostede unha persoa que escribe para outras persoas?
– non, non son unha persoa que escriba para outras persoas
– ¿entón, para quen escribe?
– Escribe porque a linguaxe se me impón
– ¿Como aos demais?
– Non como a todos os demais: moitos entre os demais non producen linguaxe
clear when the interviewee avoids the question “who do you write for?” and instead replies to the (unasked) question “why do you write?” In doing so, the interviewee refuses the interviewer’s invitation to conceptualize her poetic endeavour in terms of a straightforward process of communication from speaker to reader. Instead, she shifts the focus of the interview on language itself, and on poetry in its relation to language.

This shift has several important consequences. One relates to the concept of the fantasy of poetic control that I introduced through Wilson’s discussion of Byron. With the first question the interviewer indirectly appeals to the fantasy of poetic control. She invites a simplified answer: yes or no. If the poet were to give this answer, she would either relinquish her power in the process of speaking and listening – something like: “no, I do not write for other people, therefore do not speak to anyone, and do not care whether anyone listens” – and practice the Philomela approach or, she would assume the pose of a narcissistic poet who is in control of what she says and of her environment. In the latter case, her answer would mean something along the lines of “yes, I do write for other people, I have something to tell them and I want them to share my convictions”. By rejecting both approaches, the poet indicates that there is another model of poetic and political communication. In this model communication takes place because speaker and listener share the passion for producing language. Thus, the poet writes “for some, for those that decide to accompany me on the adventure”.

Now the interviewer changes her strategy. Rather than suggesting that the poet wields all the power in the communicative situation, she indicates that the poet is a compulsive writer and a diverted reader:

– this duty, is it a way of seduction?
– no, it can only be a flirt
– does it seem to you like an act of love?
– like a passion, rather, like a vocation, a moral action, an affliction, pain
– your inclination corresponds to this?
– within the possibilities of my talents

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99 – ¿esa obriga é un xeito de apareamienento?
– no, pode ser tan só un galanteo
– ¿preséntaselle como un acto amoroso?
– como unha paixón, máis bien, como se ofrece un edificio, unha acción moral, un padecemento, unha dor
– ¿su inclinación, es correspondida?
– en la medida de mi talento
Now the interviewer attempts to conceptualize the poet’s relationship to language and to her audience in terms of seduction and diversion by deploying metaphors of love and sexuality. If she were correct, then the poet would be seduced by language and in turn would attempt to seduce and divert her readers, just as Wilson describes it in Literary Seductions. However, the poet rejects this view of her activity. Her own metaphors (a vocation, a moral action, an affliction, pain) suggest an intense involvement from her part, but not a romantic, sexual, or playful one. The type of involvement that she suggests implies initiating actions against strong and powerful resistances for other reasons than the pleasure that one takes in them.

The exchange between the poet and her interlocutor brings out a very problematic aspect of employing dialogue in politically militant poetry: the concept of dialogue in itself does not question the way in which power relations between the partners in a communication process are negotiated. Usually one of the two has the upper hand. Hence, in an analysis of such a process one is compelled to assign the unmediated control over the dialogue to one of the dialogue partners. In chapter 3 I argued that the concept of speaking and listening attempts to do without this notion of power. I introduced the concept because it conceives of a different way of thinking power relations in communication processes, particularly when it comes to poetry and politics. I indicated there that one of the strategies to construct such a different way of thinking is the engagement in a trialogue, rather than a dialogue. This is precisely what Pato suggests: when her textual persona says that she does not write “for everybody, for some, for those who decide to accompany me on the adventure” she argues that the communication is initiated and maintained by the engagement with a third partner, language. Thus, she writes for those who decide to accompany her in the adventure to “produce language” or, phrased differently, who are willing to participate in a trialogue with her and language.

It is important to note that Pato does not understand language in the same way as the practitioners of the Philomela approach understood it, even though she emphasizes the “absolute protagonism of language” (Casas 1996: 134) in her work. Pato’s conflict with language is not – or not mainly – that language fails when she tries to express her feelings or relate to reality. Or rather, language does fail before reality, but different than the practitioners of the Philomela approach, Pato looks at the reasons for this failure and finds them in the power relations that create the conditions for the use of language. A very short poem about her native language makes this clear:
My native language is fascism
the impossibility of fascism to say the names of the real.
Perturbation

Origin.¹⁰⁰

Pato argues that one integral part of fascism is to make it impossible to name what is real; but this is not a problem of language per se. Language disconnects from reality because fascism has the power to impose this disconnection. Fascism is interested in turning the world into a chimera, in making it impossible to name and grasp reality and therefore, making it impossible to change it. In the Galician case this implies that deception – and through it, oppression – dominate the use of language as well as our perception of reality even after the end of the dictatorship because people have not changed language. Pato does not want to replicate the violence enacted by fascism. She would do this if she provided – or imposed – a new, “true” mode of signification. Instead, she invites her listeners to address language with her; to not longer speak an imposed language, but to produce language.

Pato introduces this distinction in “¿é vostede unha persoa...?” It is operative in an analysis of “a miña lingua nativa”, but she herself rewrites it in the manifesto poem “porque non é só o idioma”. In this poem Pato questions the agency assigned to the process of “producing language” because the consumer society of high capitalism has “subversively” reconfigured the dynamics of produced language and imposed language that Pato exposed in “a miña lingua nativa”.¹⁰¹

According to Pato, fascism imposes a language on the speakers and listeners. To resist, the speakers have to produce a language of their own, one that allows them to name

¹⁰⁰ A miña lingua native é o fascismo
a imposibilidad do fascismo para dicir os nomes do real.
Perturbación

Orixe.

¹⁰¹ The poem was originally used in an action of the group Redes Escarlata, of which Pato is a member. Redes Escarlata, which takes its name from a resistance group from the novel Bretaña, Esmeraldina (1987) by Méndez Ferrín, organize actions on the political left. The group as such is not affiliated with any party, though many of its members, among them Méndez Ferrín and Pato, are organized in the left-wing party Frente Popular Galega. Its political orientation is leftist-nationalist. The actions organized by Redes Escarlata are characterized by their creative approach. They create awareness about mechanisms of power. The poem I discuss here was used in a solidarity action for a strike of transport workers; a booklet was distributed among stranded travellers, asking them for their solidarity with the workers. Among information about the reasons for the strike, the booklet contained the poem. It was later published in Pato’s collection m-Talá (2000).
reality. Capitalism, just like fascism, provides a ready-made language. However, language made by capitalism is imposed in a different way: capitalism privatizes language and then turns those that should produce language, i.e. its speakers, into consumers. The connection of the two actions is vital to understand the dynamic that differentiates capitalism from fascism in their relation to language as Pato interprets it. Fascism does not give listeners a choice as to which language to speak; neither does it pretend to do so. Capitalism does pretend to give listeners a choice. However, because capitalism has privatized language, this choice is an illusion if the consumer wants to continue speaking at all: the choice is not between one language and another (or others), but between one privatized, prefabricated language and muteness.102

Pato’s auto-poetic texts are therefore calls to action, no matter whether one encounters them on the page, on the stage, or in the street, and no matter how they are read or enunciated. Reading them requires the intense and difficult involvement that Pato describes in “¿é vostede unha persoa…?” This poem ends with the following lines:

– but how exactly does such an endeavour triumph?
– like the knight of Nemours found himself before his love, that is, like the most violent, lead natural, and best-founded endeavor in the world103

Thus, the engagement with language is not an act of love, but the confrontation and the honesty towards oneself that it requires is what makes love possible. The intense appeal to the listener to join the poet in her adventure, expressed explicitly in Pato’s auto-poetic texts and performed and enacted through the manifesto-style of the poems and the demand to engage with different discourses and voices, situate Pato’s poetry firmly within a political and social context and from within it, and enact an engagement with language and with politics that makes her poem a performance, even if she “only” reads it out loud without employing any other audible or visible layers of signification.

102 In my article “Political Performance Poetry and the Market” (2006a) I analyse the concept of the consumer in more detail through a reading of the poem “El Ché” by La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís. I discuss the same poem in chapter 8, though under a different viewpoint. In 2006a I point out that “El Ché” demonstrates that a citizen, when interpellated as a consumer, will react as a consumer. Thus, all contentions that consumption might be a practice that can create different models of agency (in that particular article I referred to García Canclini 2001) is mistaken. Pato makes almost the same point.
103 – ¿pero exactamente, como triunfa este agrado?
– como o señor de Nemours prevaleceu ante o seu amor, é decir, como o empeño más violento, menos natural e mellor fundado do mundo
Conclusion
Through my analysis of theoretical approaches to the performance of poetry and of two poetry performances I have demonstrated that this poetic medium unsettles conventional forms of meaning making on several levels. My two-fold approach through theoretical texts and poems shows that the poetry performance mobilizes ways of making meaning that are not traditionally considered part of poetic stylistics. Olson theorizes some of these innovative elements of poetry through his emphasis on the breath, on the kinetics of the poem, on its speed, and on its projective power. Bernstein follows Olson’s line of argument and focuses on prosody, bringing out clearly how the performance of poetry destabilizes the traditional methodology of literary criticism. Their text-oriented approaches are complemented by Beasley’s and Dawes’ context-oriented theorizations of the poetry performance. These two writers point out that the performance of poetry relies heavily on poetic features proper to marginalized communities. Both emphasize the importance of the cultural, social and spatial context in which the poem is written and performed. However, Beasley focuses on the multicultural context of performance poetry as decisive for the locus of enunciation, whereas Dawes privileges class. My own argument is that the two factors interact with each other in their definition of the locus of enunciation.

In my analysis of Scott Heron’s poem “Whitey on the Moon” and Sissay’s alternative national anthem I emphasize the problematic political dimension of performance poetry. Scott Heron’s poem is an example of early, politically committed performance poetry. His locus of enunciation is within the community of African-Americans. He attempts to mobilize the audience to claim political agency. To do so, he introduces interactive elements into the poem. Interactivity manifests itself as open and close interaction. Contradicting Reis’ approach to ideology in literary texts, I argued that open interaction does not lead to a diminished ideological efficacy of the text. On the contrary, if the aim of the poet is to empower his audience, then open interaction is much more successful than close interaction because it does not only seek to convey a set of ideologically informed ideas, but it seeks to mobilize the audience members so that they take control of their own lives.

Lemn Sissay’s text from the early 2000s problematizes the notion of belonging that is so important to Scott Heron’s poem. His double-staged performance of his alternative national anthem for Britain emphasizes diversity, disruption in the processes of cultural belonging, and unsuccessful communication. An analysis of his performance through the concept of performativity leads me to the conclusion that language has more difficulty
having a liberating effect than an oppressive one. As a consequence, Sissay – like Scott Heron – argues that political agency finally lies with the audience members and not with the poet in his function as poet, but as citizen.

The example of Chus Pato and the use of auto-poetic texts in her work shows that poetics can be effectively mobilized as one element of the poetry performance in very particular circumstances: the audience needs to know of the political and cultural work of the poet, and it needs to make the connection between it and the performed poetry. In this case the articulation of poetics can be considered a layer of signification that makes for a poetry performance different than any of the others I analyse in this study.

However, for such a performance to become possible it is necessary for the political and the cultural fields to penetrate each other, as is the case in the Galician “Generation of the 90s”. In my analysis of “Whitey on the Moon” I brought out a different consequence of a similar situation, namely the possibility of open interaction from politically clearly defined positions. However, Scott Heron never published a reflection on his poetics; like many Anglo-Saxon performers, he seems to have subordinated his poetics to the effect of the open interaction.

Sissay’s performance of his alternative national anthem fails because the audience members – and in the final consequence the poet himself – refuse to collapse the boundaries between the political and cultural fields. Under such circumstances an articulation of his poetics would become a dispensable supplement to the poem, one that seeks to replace what the poem and the poet refuse to or cannot perform.

The conclusions I have come to demonstrate that the attempt to contribute to the intellectual emancipation, the self-respect and the empowerment of a particular community sometimes forms part of social movements, for example of the Black Arts Movement, and that in these cases culture and politics overlap. However, cultural and creative agency can never replace civic agency; they are complementary and the success of a movement depends on the interaction between the two. In terms of the theoretical approaches to agency and art that I have outlined in chapter 1 on “Commitment and Analysis” the conclusions I have reached in this chapter contradict Adorno’s notion of autonomous art: Lemn Sissay’s performance shows that the possibility for the creation of an autonomous work of art does not always exist, in this case due to the race of the performer. On an epistemological level one can extend Bernstein’s argument in this direction: a type of poetry that requires a mode of making meaning so different that it clashes with the existing
modes of making meaning, will not be granted the space of an autonomous work of art, even if it aspires to it.

Another important distinction between Heron’s and Sissay’s poetry and Adorno’s vision of committed art is that the two poets do not seek to effect any concrete institutional or structural changes by their work, but seek to provide a basis on which their audience can claim political agency and effect such changes. This makes their project profoundly different to the ideological projects that Reis discusses in his study on semiotics and ideology. The difference is particularly pertinent in the case of Scott Heron, who is committed to a particular social movement. The attempt to provide a basis on which their audiences can claim political agency is an important indication of the poets’ commitment to the democratic impulse of social transformation, leaving the control over the actual changes in the hands of differently and democratically organized movements and groups. The Jamaican poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite expressed this attitude when, in an essay on the importance and on the empowering effect of Nation Language, he emphasized that “it is not English that is the agent. It is not language, but people, who make revolutions”.

The political impulse of many poetry performers cannot be contested nor should it be diminished. Yet, due to the conditions of performativity involved, the line between the performance of poetry and political action is not as straight as often suggested. Therefore, I propose to make a distinction between a “political intervention” and a “political action”. Scott Heron and Sissay clearly have a political impulse, yet their poetry does not seek to change the political or social situation by itself. They have no interest in claiming political power in a performative manner for themselves, but their aim is the empowerment of their community (in the case of Scott Heron), the contestation of the hegemony of certain ways of thinking (in the case of Sissay), and the development of basic conditions for a profound political change (in the case of Pato). Doubtlessly, this is a political intervention, and I will continue to discuss performed poems in these terms. The term “political action” I will reserve for the discussion of concrete measures that seek to have an impact on institutional and structural levels.
Chapter 5: Address

Introduction
In the previous chapters I argued that performance poetry seeks to establish a direct relationship between poet and audience. In chapter 2 and chapter 4 I introduced two elements that facilitate the establishment of such a relationship. These devices are the public and the textual persona of the poet, and the performance with all its implications like the presence of the poet on the site of the performance. Neither of these devices are part of the actual wording of the poem. In this chapter I will shift the focus of my analysis on the verbal element of performed poetry by analysing the use of direct address in poems by Lemn Sissay, Saul Williams, and Jean Binta Breeze. My analysis will bring out how the effect and use of direct address is influenced by the situation of the performance. I will argue that the situation of the performance always by default implies a direct address because it is spoken in front of and addressed to an audience; consequently, performed poetry is always a public event. This reshuffles the effect of address as it is used in written poetry.

Direct address can search for many types of listeners or interlocutors. The poet can address one person or a group of people, a person he is intimate with or a stranger. Accordingly, it can work in many different ways. In the beginning of his study *Poetry’s Touch* William Waters lists several of these:

To whom does a poem speak? Do poems really communicate with those they address? Is reading a poem like overhearing? Like intimate conversation? Like performing a script? (1)

Reformulated for an analysis of the poetry performance, this passage could read as follows: does a poem speak to each audience member, or does it address all of them at once? Who is the audience of a recorded poem? Do performed poems really communicate with those they address? Are we overhearing or secretly listening to a performed poem when it does not include direct address? Is listening to a performed poem like intimate conversation? Is the poet performing a script? Most of these questions touch on one of the most central concerns of performance poetry: the contact between poet and audience. This concern is so central that almost all performance poems revolve around it.
The case of written poetry is more complicated. I refer to it briefly because it leads me to come to conclusions about performance poetry. Waters argues that the use of direct address in written poetry creates an unstable situation:

[. . . .] the address itself always becomes an axis of the poem’s concern. The poem persistently revolves around, or thinks about, the contact that it is (or is not) making with the person to whom it is speaking. (1)

Hence, the poems that form his case studies are characterized by insecurity about both the textual I’s wish to address someone, and about the success of the address. Consequently, the poems enact

[. . . .] not so much a stable communicative situation as a chronic hesitation, a faltering, between monologue and dialogue, between “talking about” and “talking to,” third and second person, indifference to interlocutors and the yearning to have one. (8)

This observation is relevant for my purpose because Waters connects this instability with the situation of enunciation and the shift from orality to writing:

Part of the reason for this instability lies in the complex historical and cognitive shift between oral delivery and writing as modes of poetic transmission. This shift (or tension: its still active forces can be felt in the difficulty of discussing poetry without metaphors of voice or speech) is lastingly implicated in what we readers experience as poetry’s désancrager, or “uprootedness,” from any specified communicative situation. Who is speaking (or writing), to whom, in what context? It is difficult to answer these very basic pragmatic questions with respect to a poem. The resulting kinds of ambiguity have become integral to modern written poetry, so that to read a poem is, again, to enter an underspecified communicative act. (8)

According to Waters, modern written poetry is characterized by an effect of address that the performance of poetry wants to do away with, namely ambiguity. The performance of poetry seems to clarify the unstable speech situation brought about by writing. In a poem like Gil Scott Heron’s “Whitey on the Moon” there are few possible misunderstandings
about who is speaking; even if the textual persona is obviously not identical with the poet, the poet still accepts responsibility for what the textual persona says by voicing it. It also seems to be quite clear to whom the poet is speaking; the addressees are the audience members, even though he might address them through a staged dialogue. The clarification of the speech situation reassures the reader of her importance in the process of communication and of her position towards the poet, the poem, and the context in which it is spoken. This argument sounds compelling and has an attractive political dimension: it validates the reader of poetry as crucial to the poem’s production of meaning, and it implies that performance poetry is a useful tool for political intervention because it straightforwardly transmits meaning. However, upon taking a closer look it becomes clear that such a reading does not work.

For, even a poem that seems to be as straightforward as “Whitey” raises questions about the communicative situation between poet and audience. The poem is after all a staged dialogue and not a direct address to the audience. The audience members are implicitly asked to overhear a dialogue and choose a part, but they are not structurally involved in the dialogue. Also, Heron plays with the role of the speaker. Even though he assumes responsibility for what his textual personas say, he is not identical with them. Moreover, he lends his voice to two textual personas. If the situation of the performance by default creates an address, we as audience members have to ask the question of who is actually addressing us and is soliciting our response: is it Gil Scott Heron? The teacher-activist? Nell’s brother?

The second poem I discussed in the previous chapter, Sissay’s alternative national anthem, creates an even more complex communicative situation. The text of the anthem does not include an address in its grammatical structure. However, the set up of the performance invites the audience to read the poem as an address – indeed, it asks two audiences to read the poem as address: the audience in the trance club and the audience watching the TV program. We know for certain that the audience in the trance club refuses the invitation to read the poem as an address; they decide to overhear it. Consequently, the performance stages an unsuccessful address and a failed attempt at communication. How does that affect the second addressed audience, the one watching the program on TV?

Chus Pato uses direct and indirect address in many ways. In “é vostede unha persoa…” she stages a failed dialogue and an evaded address in an interview situation. Then, she addresses her interlocutors in an invitation to join her in an address of language. The form of the manifesto poem includes an address of the public, and her use of different
characters and discourses in her poem turns most of her poems into a performance of multiplied forms of address. Do we as her audience respond to her invitation to address language? How do we react to the deconstruction of the power of the speaker by her inclusion of many other voices into the poem?

It seems, then, that instead of clarifying the communicative situation of address the performance of poetry complicates it. At the same time, the contact with the audience and hence, the rhetoric strategy of address and its different manifestations are crucial to the poetics of performance poetry. In the cases that I analyse in this chapter I will bring out through the example of several poems how the performance of poetry works with the rhetoric strategy of address. I will argue that the use of direct address in performance poetry frequently brings to the fore the tension between the intimate and the public. The intimate stands for the traditional arena of poetry. Because of the format of the performance, the poetry performance adds a public dimension to the private address of poetry, problematizing it.

**The Impossibility of Contact: Lemn Sissay’s Performance of Failed Address**

The struggle with and against the failure of communication is one of the defining elements of Lemn Sissay’s poetry. One of the main reasons for this failure is located in a discrepancy between the needs of the individual and the society he lives in. However, in contradistinction to the Romantics and many Modernists, Sissay does not react to the discrepancy between individual needs and society by withdrawing into the intimacy of the personal sphere. His poetry enacts the impossibility of resolving personal needs in the personal sphere only, because society determines the conditions under which the personal sphere is developed.

At first sight the two poems I have chosen to analyse seem to perform different, even opposed modes of address. “Fair”, published in Sissay’s collection *Morning Breaks in the Elevator* (1999) and released in his CD *Advice for the Living* (2000), makes an insistent and aggressive use of direct address. The speaker of the poem verbally performs a racist attack on his listener by verbally enacting the acts of violence he will perpetrate against her. In the second poem “Architecture” Sissay approaches his audience through a friendly, satirical form of direct address. Through the use of metaphors presented in a third-person perspective he suggests that the structure of society is hierarchical and that this structure limits and confines human experience. He then switches to a second-person direct address and in doing so, invites the audience members in a friendly and tongue-in-cheek tone to try
to break down or think outside of these limiting structures, thus performing an act of self-liberation. “Architecture” has not been published in writing. The performed live version that I will discuss here was released on Sissay’s CD *Different Drums* (2000).

I will argue that in spite of all their differences, both poems perform the desire for and the impossibility of direct contact between the poet and his interlocutors. Social structures and conventions are the main reasons for the impossibility of open contact. His attempt to expose them and the way they function opens up the possibility to change them. However, this change is possible only as a joint effort of poet and audience. The refusal of the audience members to open up and cooperate in this effort is a constant source of frustration for the poet and finally demonstrates everybody’s state of isolation.

In “Fair” the speaker talks his listener through the history of racism. However, he does not do that by adopting the seemingly neutral or objective position of a narrator who relates the facts in the third person perspective, nor does he reflect on or performs his own experience as a black person. Instead, he addresses the listener as victim, thus putting himself in the role of the perpetrator. The first five lines of the poem establish the power relations between speaker and listener:

I’ll reign you in then chain you in.  
I’ll slit whip and rip into you  
Till all the cold as nitric acid resentment  
Pours out of my black chest  
Onto your purpled curdled and blistered back.

In these lines the speaker sets the roles of himself and his interlocutor: “I” is the perpetrator and “you” is the victim. “I” has all the power and “you” has none. The speaker alone has the social power to define the listener’s identity. The speaker “reigns in” the possibilities for social existence of the listener. He then “chains in” the listener so that he cannot make any changes to his social position on his own accord.

The savagery of the attack is brought out by the slow and clearly articulated mode of reading, by the resonances of words with each other in the repetition of “in” in the first line and of the /i/-sounds in “slit”, “whip”, and “rip” in the second line, and by the use of sharp sounds and the plosives /t/ and /p/. The metaphor “nitric acid resentment” repeats and emphasizes the hard and cold sounds of /i/ and of the plosives /t/, /d/ and /c/. Apart from its sonic resonance with beatings, the latter term obliges the listener to linger on it. The
metaphor is so complex, and the chemical imagery comes so unexpected in a poem, that the
listener will need a moment to absorb what the speaker is actually saying. Linger on
such a terrifying, slowly and emphatically pronounced metaphor freezes the listener in a
moment of terror, the moment in which she realizes what she is up against. For, the last two
lines of the stanza contain the reason for the rage and violence of the speaker: the speaker is
black, the listener is white.

The realization that racism is the driving force behind the speaker’s attack on the
listener reverses currently existing power relations between black and white. This reversal
manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, black people are not usually assigned the social agency
to perpetrate such premeditated acts of violence against white people. Secondly, they are
not expected to perpetrate violence against white people for racist reasons. For, white skin
colour is still considered the norm and consequently, racism from black against white
people is not a frequent phenomenon.

The first stanza positions the listener in socially unknown territory. It clarifies the
context and the power relations under which the address takes place. The speaker
interpellates the listener as a humiliated, beaten and blistered creature that is barely
recognizable as a human being, that will lose what is left of its humanity during the course
of the poem, and that cannot speak. Having clarified the point of departure, the speaker
proceeds to perpetrate verbal violence and abuse against the listener.

In the previous passage I deployed Althusser’s notion of interpellation to
conceptualize the action taking place through the address of the listener in the first stanza of
“Fair”. Waters argues that interpellation is not applicable to poetry because of the particular
situation of enunciation of the poem. His most important argument against the applicability
of interpellation to poetry is the following:

[. . . .] Althusser asserts of his primal scene of subjectification that “nine times out
of ten” it will be the correct suspect who turns around in response to the call “Hey
you!”; but the character of poetry – even of those relatively few poems that do
abruptly hail their you – makes of the reader instead that tenth person, startled but
uncertain, who sometimes looks around but then is and is not the one meant, who
now locates and now loses the source of the voice calling “you.” (67)

Waters’ argument is convincing for written poetry in which the poet is not physically
present. However, the performance reconfigures the premises of the situation of enunciation.
The immediacy of the contact between poet and listener makes it clear that “I”, the one listening to the poem, am the one who is being addressed. The terrifying point about “Fair” is precisely that there are no ten potential addressees; in the moment of the performance the only people present are the speaker and the listener.104

Hence, a performed poem like “Fair” demonstrates that interpellation is indeed applicable to performed poetry. This is important because it is the condition for my next argument. In the beginning of the first stanza the speaker refers to the issue of naming:

I’ll wrench each finger from each joint
Till you get my point. Get it. Get my point!
I’ll drag you by the roots of your hair –
Make you wish you were no-one from nowhere.

I will read the last line of this stanza against the background of one of the arguments Butler makes in *Excitable Speech*. She argues that injurious speech and hate speech place the addressee in a subordinate position by calling her a name, but that the very act of calling someone a name contains the possibility for resistance:

One is not simply fixed by the name that one is called. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. But the name holds out another possibility as well: by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call. (Butler 2)

I contend that the speaker in “Fair” deprives his listener even of this possibility for contestation. The key line is the last one in the stanza: “[I’ll] Make you wish you were no-one from nowhere”. Those who are no-one and are therefore not given even an injurious name are not granted “a certain possibility for social existence”. Sissay demonstrates that hate speech can go beyond injurious names. Making some-one wish that she was no-one from nowhere destroys her own desire for social existence and any type of agency. Hence, it makes social agency impossible for the addressee. Thus, I conclude that Sissay points out

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104 This effect is intensified by the sound performance. In chapter 6 on “Sound” I will argue that hearing is an intimate experience because it relies on a ractile reaction. Sound waves enter our body and move the hairs on our tympani. Thus, speaking and hearing “Fair” physically performs the violent invasion of the listener’s body that the poem also performs verbally.
a register of verbal violence that exceeds Butler’s analysis of hate speech. The speaker of “Fair” is not only attempting to inflict injury. His primary goal is the annihilation of the listener’s identity and hence, her desire for the possibility of social existence.

If I am right in the argument I just made, then the social and the personal are inseparably intertwined with each other in terms of identity construction. The impact of the social violence that the listener is subjected to is so destructive that she will not be able to construct an identity in a protected intimate sphere. The speaker makes it clear that such a space does not exist for her anyway:

And what’s more
The moment you run on fire,
Through this poem, for the door
Gasp for air and some sense of pride
The same damned experience
Will be waiting for you outside.

In the last two stanzas of the poem the speaker demonstrates that the violence and the ideology that underpins it become “sworn in and government-approved”, thus leading to the complete mental destruction of the listener: “When you’re on the verge of enlightenment or madness/ Immersed in the quiet violence of the day-today-laws”. Thus, there is no way out for the speaker and no safe place where she could reconstruct herself as a human being.

As convincing as the speech situation is, it is an illusion. This is revealed in the final lines, when the speaker of the poem breaks through the illusion he has skilfully established all along:

When all this is said and done and said and done
You may accuse me of being a racist
And then we can continue “this discussion”
On a more equal basis.

The speaker implicitly accuses the listener of being a racist. If the speaker was not one, then the basis of discussion would not be equal. Through this gesture he reveals that the whole poem was a performance in the sense of “an act of untruth”: the black speaker does not
have the social authority that would make his locutionary speech acts work or, as Austin writes, felicitous. For a white reader there are two possible reactions. The reader can take a deep breath of relief and return to a normality that after experiencing “Fair” appears nothing short of insane, but that maintains the privileges of the white person. Or the reader can start to think about racism, its history, its manifestations, and about what it means to be white.

The performance of “Fair” demonstrates that the performance of poetry creates a situation of enunciation in which interpellation is an applicable concept of analysis and indeed a crucial one, because it allows to conceptualize the breakdown between the social and intimate spheres that Sissay addresses in his poetry. In the case of “Fair”, this breakdown is violent. The listener has no protected space to which she could withdraw. Hence, the poem can also be read as an investigation of how a racist attack can break down this separation.

The breakdown between the social and the intimate sphere characterize Sissay’s performance of “Architecture” as well. I start my analysis of Sissay’s use of address in this poem with a return to Waters’ comment on interpellation. Waters writes that “the character of poetry [. . . .] makes of the reader instead that tenth person, startled but uncertain, who sometimes looks around but then is and is not the one meant, who now locates and now loses the source of the voice calling ‘you’” (13). “Fair” can be read as an attempt to get hold of the listener and assure her that precisely she is addressed, and that a response is solicited precisely from her. “Architecture” does not make such demands. The poem reflects on – rather than tries to change – a situation of address in which each audience members tries to be the tenth person, pretending that she is not the one who is addressed.

“Architecture” is spoken in a friendly, satirical and accommodating tone. It uses direct address in a less direct form and only in the chorus. The stanzas of the poem are spoken from the point of view of a distant observer:

Each cloud wants to be a storm
My tap water wants to be a river
The match wants to be an explosive
Each reflection wants to be real
Each joker wants to be a comedian
Each breeze wants to be a hurricane
Each drizzled rain wants to be torrential
Each laugh from the throat wants to burst from the belly
Each yawn wants to hold the sky
Each piss wants to be a water spunter
Each kiss wants to penetrate
Each handshake wants to be a warm embrace

Don’t you see
How close we are to
Torrents and explosions
Currents and confusions
Mayhem and madness
Cacophonies of chaos
Crushes and confusion
Torrents and turmoil
And all things out of control.

Sissay’s mode of delivering the poem performs the address that is absent from its grammatical structure. Sometimes he whispers as if he was passing on a big secret to his audience (“Each drizzled rain wants to be torrential”). Sometimes he performs what he says, such as when he yawns when he talks about the yawn’s desire to hold the sky. He audibly smiles frequently while he reads. The audience noticeably relaxes and gets drawn into the poem as it continues; they laugh about the piss that wants to be a water spunter, whereas they respond with consternated silence to the claim that each kiss wants to penetrate.

The grammatical structure of the poem differs from “Fair” in that the speaker is not obviously present as an agent, but as a removed observer. Furthermore, his observations seem to be about objects, hence the audience feels comfortable because they do not feel scrutinized or questioned. That the poem is in fact talking about them and the society they belong to becomes clear in lines that are so metaphorically charged that their significance is hard to ignore, for example when the speaker claims that each kiss wants to penetrate and that each handshake wants to be a warm embrace. The audience reacts accordingly with slight embarrassment and the recording conveys a sense of discomfort.

Only in the chorus are the audience members directly addressed. Through the address and the use of the pronoun “we” they become implicated together with the speaker.
in a situation in which things are almost out of control. When Sissay speaks the chorus for the first time he understates its importance. Almost without pause he moves on to the next stanza and its inconspicuous first line (“Each ice cube wants to be a glazier”), thus shifting the emphasis from direct address and the threat of disorder on satire, description and observation. The audience members relax immediately and let themselves get drawn into the poem again:

Each ice cube wants to be a glazier
Each wave wants to be the smooth
Each cry wants to be a scream
Each carefully pressed suit wants to be creased
Each midnight frost wants to be a snowdrift
Each night-time wants to strangle the day
Each wave wants to be tidal
Each subtext wants to be a title
Each winter wants to be the big freeze
Each summer the big drought
Each polite disagreement a vicious denial
Each diplomatic smile a one-fingered tribute to tact

In this stanza Sissay increasingly deploys metaphors with a social charge. The cry that wants to be a scream indicates contained suffering, the carefully pressed suit that wants to be creased denotes a desire for the escape from suffocating conventions, the night time that wants to strangle the day evokes violence. The metaphor of the subtext that wants to be a title invites a reflection on the poem he is currently reciting. The line reflects on the poem’s contained and failed desire for breaking through conventions. These metaphors are not immediately noticeable, especially not in the fast paced performance of the poem. However, the social significance of the last two lines is plainly obvious. The audience chuckles at the last line, but Sissay’s increasingly impatient and angry tone when he speaks the chorus shows his frustration at the impossibility to make contact with the audience that goes beyond chuckling:

Don’t you see
How close we are to
Torrents and explosions
Crushes and confusion
Mayhem and madness
Cacophonies of chaos
Crushes and confusion
Torrents and turmoil
And all things out of control.

This time the refrain ends differently. Sissay whispers to the audience:

Keep telling yourself:
You’ve got it covered.

The whisper of the last line could be an expression of anger at and frustration with his audience who cannot step out of the conventions that make true contact between speaker and listener impossible. It could also be an expression of complicity, indicating that Sissay knows that the audience members are kidding themselves into a false security, but that he kindly leaves them their illusions. Whichever reading one prefers, Sissay drops this distance and suddenly addresses on a very personal, even intimate level. This sudden change of mode of address startles the listener who finds herself faced with questions like: why is he suddenly addressing me? How did he get from the rhetorical “don’t you see” to my personal issues? Was this not about waves and subtexts? Why does he think I’m kidding myself into having something covered? What have I got covered? And: what am I going to opt for tomorrow, the diplomatic smile or the one-fingered tribute to tact?

In both poems Sissay’s mode of address stages the impossibility of separating the intimate and the public sphere (see Waters 50). His mode of address performs the connection between the two. But whereas part of the violent experience of “Fair” is related to the breakdown of the separation between the social and the intimate sphere, leaving the listener no safe space to withdraw to, “Architecture” struggles with an exaggerated separation of the two. In both poems the social sphere gives no welcome to the individual. In the case of “Fair”, social norms are violently aggressive. In the case of “Architecture”, social norms smother the individual. In both cases, the address of the poet fails; communication does not work because of the negative impact that social conventions have
on the individual. As a response, Sissay practices a mode of address that constantly seeks for the possibility for intimacy – and fails.

“To all the people within the sound of my voice”: Saul Williams’ Sonic Forum

The poetry of Sissay has much in common with the work of U.S. African-American performance poet Saul Williams. Both are prolific performers who know how to mobilize the devices of the poetry performance like few other poets do. Both reflect on the performance as an act of “showing doing” and not of pretence. In Williams’ case this has led to an understated style of performance. Neither in his clothing nor in his behaviour or his demeanour does he endorse any particular subculture nor, for that matter, does he construct a stage persona that invokes the fantasy of poetic control. The discreteness of his stage appearance redirects the entire attention of the audience to his poetry. This strategy is an expression of his political priorities. Williams has been an articulate critic of U.S. policies for years. After September 11th 2001, he became known as one of the most vocal opponents of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, particularly as a prominent member of the group “Not in Our Name”.

In this section I will analyse the poem “Act III Scene 2 (Shakespeare)”, released on his latest CD Saul Williams (2004). The poem is both a poetic rewrite of and a reply to Act III Scene 2 of Shakespeare’s play Julius Caesar. In my analysis I focus on two central concerns of Williams’ poem and on one conceptual element of it. The first concern is Williams’ attempt to reclaim political language as a tool for communication, as opposed to it being a tool for persuasion and manipulation. The second concern is his address of the audience members as political agents. The conceptual element I will bring out is the pledge. It is conceptually related to the promise, the importance of which came to the fore in chapter 3. I argue that Williams reconfigures the promise as a pledge. In doing so, he shifts the emphasis from the personal to the political and from the seduction of the interlocutor to his or her political mobilization.

A brief summary of Act III Scene 2 in the Shakespearean play may be helpful at this moment. The scene is set on the Roman forum after the assassination of Caesar. Its central elements are two speeches, one by Brutus and one by Marc Antony. In his speech Brutus justifies the assassination of Caesar. He confesses that he is tormented by his conscience and his personal affection for Caesar. Still he had to murder the tyrant for the sake of the liberty of the Roman citizens. In the end of his speech, the assembled citizens endorse his deed and want to see him in the position of Caesar. When Brutus leaves, Marc Antony
takes the floor. The purpose of his speech is to incite the Roman citizens to condemn and take revenge on Brutus and his fellow assassins. Marc Antony does not make this case straightforwardly. He manipulates his listeners through several rhetorical strategies.

One such strategy is that everything he says means its precise opposite. He obsessively repeats the phrase “Brutus is an honourable man”, but always contextualizes it in such a way that his listeners must come to the conclusion that Brutus is a traitor and a thug. A second instance is the assurance that he is not trying to incite a riot (though he obviously is), and a third one is the phrase “if you have tears prepare to shed them now”. I will analyse the use of the latter phrase in detail, below. In his speech, Marc Antony paints an affectionate picture of a generous, victorious and selfless Caesar. Thus, he gets his audience to approve of Caesar and condemn Brutus for the murder. The audience, turned into a mob, leaves the stage with the intent to burn down Brutus’ house and lynch Caesar’s assassins. In Shakespeare’s play the scene ends here. In “Act III Scene 2 (Shakespeare)” Williams continues the scene, though he transposes it into the contemporary context of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Williams assumes the role of a third speaker. He critically responds to both Brutus and Marc Antony and exposes the manipulative rhetoric they both use, a rhetoric that continues to infuse political speech to this day.

Williams speaks “Act III Scene 2” at the top of his voice without interruption. His breath is integrated both into the rhythm of the poem and into the underlying track and therefore does not interrupt it. The underlying track is monotonous and repetitive. The chorus line “Spit for the hated, the reviled, the unrefined, the no ones, the nobodies. The last in line” starts without being introduced by a short pause. Thus, it is structurally part and parcel of the rest of the poem. However, it is spoken by a different voice and therefore does provide an audible division of the poem into four sections. The first section is an invocation of the audience. The second section introduces a number of speakers on Williams’ sonic forum, the third is a response to them, and the fourth contains a pledge made by the poet. Since the poem is enunciated without pauses on top of a monotonous and repetitive track, its auditive structure is of one block of speech and sounds. Consequently, the poem is typed in a block structure in the booklet that accompanies the album.105

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105 I do not discuss the transcription of performed poetry in this study. It is noticeable that in many transcriptions line breaks and other graphic and visual arrangements of the poem are determined by sound patterns and speech rhythm. Sometimes this leads to the violation of grammatical rules and poetic conventions. Another example of this transcription technique is the poetry of Rodrigo Solís, some examples of which I discuss in chapter 8 on “Poetry in the City”.

In the particular case of Williams’ album Saul Williams all of the pieces are transcribed in differently formatted block structures. I contend that by his choice for this type of transcription Williams makes a point about what determines the visual arrangement of poetry (i.e. sound and rhythm, not poetic conventions). Also,
The first section is dominated by an apostrophe of the audience. The poem is not a live performance, but a recording, and therefore the audience is absent from the situation of enunciation. Neither Williams nor other audience members like us who listen to the poem know who else is listening and hence, who the audience is made up of. To fill this void Williams constitutes his audience in the first lines of the poem:

This is a call out to all the youth in the ghettos, suburbs, villages, townships. To all the kids who download this song for free. By any means. To all the kids short on loot but high on dreams. To all the kids watching T.V., like. Yo. I wish that was me. And all the kids pressing rewind on Let’s Get Free. I hear you. To all the people within the sound of my voice. Spit for the hated, the reviled, the unrefined, the no ones, the nobodies. The last in line.

Through this apostrophe Williams brings the members of his audience to life, personalizes them, gives them character, points out what unites them and hence, constitutes them as an audience: they are young, not rich or even poor, they profess their desire for freedom, but most importantly, they are within the reach of Williams’ voice. This is a good case to extend Culler’s definition of apostrophe in his essay of the same title. Culler writes:

[. . . .] to apostrophize is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire. In these terms the function of apostrophe would be to make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces: forces which can be asked to act or refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually behave. (61)

Perhaps paradoxically, this definition can tolerate the extension of the category of inanimate objects to include humans. I propose to read the apostrophe in the first section of “Act III Scene 2” as Williams’ attempt to constitute and also, to animate his audience. I contend that in this particular case the audience members can be understood to be inanimate
objects. This argumentative move can be made for two reasons. The first reason is that in the case of a CD they are absent from the actual address, which is particularly conspicuous and significant in a poetry performance because it is unusual. The second reason becomes clear as the poem continues. In the poem Williams attempts to politically mobilize his audience. The section following the apostrophe presents them as politically passive and immobile. I contend that their passivity can be read either as their refusal to make their presence felt, or as their acceptance of the passive role that is cut out for them by those in power. Williams’ apostrophe of them constitutes them as subjects and possible agents. However, once they are no longer inanimate objects they are not easily asked “to bend themselves to your desire”, as Culler puts it. This is where Williams’ political militancy clashes with the limits of traditional poetry.

In a different register the use of apostrophe brings me back to the role of the author-poet. The passage by Culler I just quoted suggests a powerful role for the poet, one that resonates with the fantasy of poetic control. Indeed, Culler argues that the use of apostrophe enacts and constitutes the “poetic presence” of the poet in the poem and towards his audience “through an image of voice” (63). The poetic presence of the poet manifests his power. Culler argues that apostrophe alludes to [. . . .] the condition of visionary poet who can engage in dialogue with the universe. If, as we tend to assume, post-enlightenment poetry seeks to overcome the alienation of subject from object, then apostrophe takes the crucial step of constituting the object as another subject with whom the poetic subject might hope to strike up a harmonious relationship. Apostrophe would figure this reconciliation of subject and object. But one must note that it figures this reconciliation as an act of will, as something to be accomplished poetically in the act of apostrophizing [. . . .]. (63-64)

I contend that Williams’ use of apostrophe introduces a different focus on the use of apostrophe and address, and by extension on the role of the “visionary poet”. “Act III Scene 2” makes it clear that apostrophe is not enough to make someone’s presence felt or relevant. If that were the case then Williams’ apostrophizing of his audience in the very beginning of the poem would be enough to constitute interlocutors. However, the whole point of the poem is that the existence of interlocutors is not enough. They have to make their presence felt.
Williams' address of the audience members as potential agents goes hand in hand with the second central concern of Williams' poem that I mentioned above, making political language available for communication. This becomes clear in the second section:

If you have tears prepare to shed them now. For you share the guilt of blood spilt in accordance with the Dow Jones. Dow drops fresh crop skull and bones. A machete in the heady: Hutu Tutsi, Leone. An Afghani in a shanty. Doodle dandy yank on! An Iraqi in Gap khaki! Coca Cola come on! Be ye bishop or pawn, in the streets or the lawn. You should know that these examples could go on and on and... what sense does it make to keep your ears to the street? As long as oils in the soil, truth is never concrete. So we dare to represent those with the barest of feet. ‘Cause the laws to which we’re loyal keep the soil deplete. It’s our job to not let history repeat. Spit for the hated, the reviled, the unrefined, the no-ones, the nobodies, the last in line.

“If you have tears prepare to shed them now. For you share the guilt of blood spilt in accordance with the Dow Jones” is a line central to my argument. Marc Antony uses the line as a powerful instrument of manipulation against the Roman citizens. Holding up Caesar's mantle, now pierced by the assassins’ daggers, he says:

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.
You all do know this mantle: I remember
The first time ever Caesar put it on;
’Twas on a summer’s evening, in his tent,
That day he overcame the Nervii.
Look! In this place ran Cassius’ dagger trough:
See what a rent the envious Casca made:
Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabb’d;
And, as he pluck’d his cursed steel away,
Mark how the blood of Caesar follow’d it,
As rushing out of doors, to be resolv’d
If Brutus so unkindly knock’d or no;
[. . . ] (Act III, Scene 2, lines 174-185)
Marc Antony turns the mantle into a synechdoche of Caesar’s so-called achievements for Rome, evoking notions of national grandeur. At the same time, he points out the perfidiousness of the assassins, calling Casca envious and Brutus – in so many words – a traitor. Conversely, he suggests to the members of his audience that they are without blame and that therefore, they have the authority to judge the assassins. The sentence is clear from the beginning because it is decided by Marc Antony before he starts his speech: the assassins will have to die. Through his cunning use of the powerful line and the symbolism of Caesar’s mantle, and his appeal to the wishful thought of innocence of the Roman citizens, Marc Antony manages to pass off his judgement as theirs. In doing so, he gets rid of the assassins – Octavius’ rivals for the position of Caesar – without having to take the blame for the murders.

Williams recovers the powerful line “If you have tears prepare to shed them now” from its sentimental and deceitful use by Marc Antony. Spoken by him, the line expresses grief and rage about the violence and exploitation committed by the U.S.. Williams’ appeals to his listeners’ sense of responsibility, whereas Marc Antony appeals to the indignation of the Roman citizens. In keeping with his appeal to their responsibility for the crimes committed by the U.S., Williams asks his listeners to not only shed tears about the crimes committed by others – as Marx Antony did – but also about their own complicity with them: “If you have tears prepare to shed them now for you share the guilt of blood spilt in accordance with the Dow Jones.”

This brings out one of the most important differences between Marc Antony’s conceptualization of citizens’ participation in the political system on the one hand, and Williams’ on the other. Marc Antony and Brutus both debate over whether Caesar did good or bad things for the Roman people, but both agree that he was the protagonist of history. The power struggle that takes place at the time of the debate is over who will be the next protagonist of history: Brutus, or Octavius and Marc Antony. The Roman citizens remain passive spectators in this struggle. Following Marc Antony’s logic, their passivity is the base for their innocence, which in turn enables them to judge the assassins. This line of argument leads to the conclusion that the citizens’ innocence is contingent on their powerlessness. When Williams declares his fellow citizens guilty and responsible for the crimes perpetrated by the empire, he implicitly recognizes that they do have agency and can claim power, if only they want to do so. He suggests that people are just as much protagonists and agents of history as those in power, even if the people refuse to participate.
Conversely, this means that they are also responsible for the crimes committed in their name, i.e. the crimes they did not prevent from happening.

The passage is one of the most telling examples of one of the most efficacious possibilities for political intervention that are open to performance poetry. Williams uses poetic devices to stage political language, to make the strategies that inform it transparent, and to propose a use of metaphor that does not look to deceive, but to communicate. This type of political language allows for an association between the speaker and his listeners. In the end of the stanza Williams switches from “you” to “we”, now including himself among his listeners and arguing that he and they share the responsibility to “not let history repeat”. Thus united with his audience members he outlines the work to be done in the final section:

So here’s the plan. The ides of March are always at hand. And when the power hungry strike, they strike the poorest of man. And if you dare put up a fight they’ll come and fight you for your land. And they’ll call it liberation or salvation. A call to the youth! Your freedom ain’t so free, it’s just loose, but the power of your voice could redirect every truth. Shift and shape the world you want and keep your fears in a noose. Let them dangle from a banner star spangled. I’m willing and able to lift my dreams up out of their cradle. Nurse and nurture my ideals ‘til they’re much more than a fable. I can be all I can be and do much more than I’m paid to. And I won’t be a slave to what authorities say do. My desire is to live within a nation on fire, where creative passions burn and raise the stakes ever higher. Where no person is addicted to some twisted supplier who promotes the sort of freedom sold to the highest buyer. We demand a truth naturally at one with the land, not a plant that photosynthesizes bombs on demand, or a search for any weapons we let fall from our hands. I got beats and a plan. I’m gonna do what I can.

In this section he elaborates on the collaboration between poetic language and political mobilization in his “call to the youth”, starting with “Your freedom ain’t so free [. . . .]”. The phrase “the power of your voice could redirect every truth” emphasizes both the power and the limitations of language and of speech. “The power of your voice” requires language, but it also requires the decision of the other potential speakers to take an active role in redirecting the truth that the speaker wants to redirect.

The section I quoted above also contains the pledge that is the conceptual focus of my analysis of “Act III Scene 2”: “I’m willing and able to lift my dreams up out of their
cradle. Nurse and nurture my ideals ‘til they’re much more than a fable. I can be all I can be and do much more than I’m paid to. And I won’t be a slave to what authorities say do.

[. . . .] I’ve got beats and a plan. I’m gonna do what I can”. In these lines the speaker pledges to be the first to stand up and fight for his dreams. I propose to conceptualize these lines as a pledge rather than a promise for two reasons. The first reason is related to the position of the speaker, the second reason refers to the wider implications of both terms. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the promise as “A declaration or assurance made to another person with respect to the future, stating that one will do, or refrain from, some specified act, or that one will give or bestow some specified thing”. The pledge is associated with acts of faith and with personally standing in for something: “To become surety for, make oneself responsible for (a person, thing, or statement).” Used as a noun, the word can also refer to “a person that becomes surety for another”. The pledge is the expression of an act of faith rather than a personal commitment or favour, thus situating the individual who makes or becomes the pledge closer to the religious, political and legal realm than to the personal realm. Therefore, the personal investment in a pledge has far more consequences. It connotes the willingness of the person to put himself at risk. One might get away with breaking a promise, but if one breaks a pledge the consequences will be severe for the person making the pledge, not only for his disappointed interlocutors. Also, to become surety for another or for an idea the person making the pledge has to take a step from the personal sphere into the public arena. The difference between pledge and promise brings out the difference in two modes of address: one that takes its motivation from personal interaction and the desire for intimacy, and one that takes its motivation from public responsibilities.

My second reason for reading “Act III Scene 2” in terms of a pledge rather than a promise is related to the wider implications of both terms. In chapter 3 I discussed the promise in detail and argued that the keeping of promises is crucial for the public function of poetry and for the credibility of the poet’s public persona. The trajectory of my argument departed from love poetry. In El cartero de Neruda and in my theorization of it through Shoshana Felman’s reading of the promise in Don Juan’s promises related to love became the touchstone for the speaker’s credibility. In a reading of Skármeta’s extension of the promise of love (or matchmaking) to the promise of standing in for one’s political convictions I followed his transposition of the concept of the promise from the personal into the political realm. Since Williams’ mode of address takes its motivation from public responsibilities, the concept of the promise as I developed it is unsuitable for an analysis of
Williams’ poetry. My reading of the importance of the pledge in Williams’ poetry is enforced by the context of Williams’ work. The pledge is a very important and recurring concept in his poetry since September 11, 2001. Williams is a prominent member of the group “Not in Our Name”, which was founded to protest the invasions of Afghanistan and later, Iraq. The constitutive document of the group is “The Pledge to Resist”, the text of which features in Williams’ poem “September 12th”.

After having pledged to his audience that he will stand up and stand in for the society he proposes, Williams goes back to addressing the audience directly in the second half of section 4. Now he outlines their role in the plan he proposes:

And what you do is question everything they say do, every goal ideal or value they keep pushing on you. If they ask you to believe it question whether it’s true. If they ask you to achieve is it for them or for you. You’re the one they’re asking to go carry a gun. Warfare ain’t humanitarian. You’re scaring me son. Why not fight to feed the homeless, jobless, fight inflation?! Why not fight for our own healthcare and our education?! And instead, invest in that erasable lead, ‘cause their twisted propaganda can’t erase all the dead. And the pile of corpses pyramid on top of our heads. Or nevermind. Said the shotgun to the head.

Williams can make these demands only on the basis that he has pledged to go as far and further himself. He proposes to his interlocutors that their most important task is to think critically, to face the words that are being directed at them, to interrogate those for the motivations that inform them and for the strategies that drive them. On the basis of this interrogation they can claim the agency of the voice and “redirect every truth”.

The last two sections perform a subtly shift from “I” to “us”. This shift creates a communal agency the construction of which lies at the heart of the use of apostrophe and more generally, of address, in Williams’ poetry. The notion of communal agency brings me back to Culler’s theorization of apostrophe and its implications for the position of the poet. Culler implies that the “visionary poet” can bestow the agency to speak on his interlocutor. Williams argues that he cannot, at least not in a situation in which agency is measured against the political and social context and not against the desires of the poet; a situation in which agency outside of the poem is more important than agency within the poem. In Williams’ poetry the poet needs to become one of many, because only then will his ideas and his analysis of the situation have an effect.
Sissay’s and Williams’ use of address demonstrate that the performance of poetry profoundly changes the function of address. Address in performed poetry leaves behind the figure of the lonely visionary poet. In enabling this change, the performance of poetry can be read as a response to Barbara Johnson’s criticism of Culler’s analysis of address. She writes:

Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness. (Johnson 185)

Neither Sissay nor Williams ask for “mute responsiveness” from their audiences. They are asking for their audiences to respond actively, maybe even in a confrontational manner. Hence, their use of address functions as a rethinking of the traditional practices of poetic address. The poetry performance is one of the strategies they use in order to obtain an answer from their audiences that makes them speak their own minds. Only if they receive such an answer will they be able to complete their poetic project.

**Overhearing Jean Binta Breeze’s “Ordinary Mawning”**

In the essay from which I just quoted, Johnson discusses the function of apostrophe and direct address in the work of women poets through an analysis of poems about abortion. Her analysis of the poem “Mothers” by Gwendolyn Brooks brings out how women poets write from a very different point of departure than men do. Johnson argues that Brooks struggles with the self-confident posture taken by canonical male poets:

While Baudelaire and Shelley addressed the anthromorphized other in order to repossess their lost selves, Brooks is representing the self as internally addressed and possessed by the lost, anthromorphized other. (189)

Brooks switches around the position of the apostrophizing speaker and the apostrophized listener. Whereas male poets claim the right and the capacity to animate dead objects, women poets cannot rely on being granted the possibility to do so. Johnson writes:
Gwendolyn Brooks [...] is here rewriting the male lyric tradition, textually placing aborted children in the spot formerly occupied by all the dead, inanimate, or absent entities previously addressed by the lyric. (189)

The woman poet does not have the power to bring the dead children to life but is herself apostrophized by those for whose death she has to accept at least partial responsibility. Such a mode of address remains enclosed within its own dynamics; the textual I cannot step out of the circle of address that she started and that always returns her address to her. Thus, the poet remains alone with the ghosts that attack her. The only way to break the circle would be if she was to externalize her experiences, either by sharing them with sympathetic listeners in an intimate environment, or by turning them into a social issue and claiming the attention of a wider audience. However, as things stand she lacks an audience, and due to her own involvement in the situation Brooks cannot apostrophize and bring to life such an audience from her own enclosed position.

Here, I continue where this aspect of Johnson’s analysis ends, and look at how the performance of poetry and the use of address in the performance of poetry is used by poets to create a public for their concerns. The poem “Ordinary Mawning” by Jamaican-British poet Jean Binta Breeze addresses the concerns of a single mother. The text never directly addresses the audience at any moment. However, that the text is being performed indicates the search for a public.

“Ordinary Mawning” is an example of what Breeze describes as “domestic dub poetry”. Breeze started writing domestic dub poetry in the mid-1980s. At that time she was already famous for her explicitly political poems, the best known among them being her critique of World Bank policies in “Aid comes with Bombs” (1982). Breeze’s turn to domestic dub was received with heavy criticism. Most of her critics accused her of abandoning her overtly political stance. My analysis of “Ordinary Mawning” suggests that this charge is unjustified. Domestic dub brings out the effects of economic and social policies on the most marginalized members of society, for example single mothers. By bringing their story into focus Breeze not only protests against the policies that victimize them. She also takes to task social movements and activists who pretend to stand up for everybody’s right but refuse or forget to admit that the social and political situation of human beings is defined by gender and sexuality, in some cases more so than in others. The loneliness and abandonment of the textual I in “Ordinary Mawning” is one result of such an attitude. The situation of the textual I is determined by social policies. However, she does
not have a public that is sympathetic to her concerns. In this situation Breeze reinvents the function of the poet-author. The poet-author is the only one who replies to the timid address of the textual I, who takes up her cause and presents it to a wider audience. In doing so, Breeze creates a platform from which the textual I can voice her concerns, and where it can be heard.\(^{106}\)

The title of the poem clarifies its subject matter. The poem recounts the events of one of the textual I’s ordinary mornings. Breeze speaks the poem without interruptions and there are no recognizable sections. Therefore I will quote the poem in full:

It wasn’t dat de day did start out bad
Or dat no early mawning dream
Did swing mi foot
Aff de wrong side of de bed
It wasn’t dat de cold floor
Mek mi sneeze
An mi nose start run wid misery
Wasn’t a hangover headache
Mawning
Or a worry rising mawning
De sun did a shine same way
An a cool breeze
Jus a brush een aff de sea
An de mawning news
Was jus se same as ever
Two shot dead
Truck lick one
Israel still a bruk up
Palestine
An Botha still have de whole world han

\(^{106}\) For more information on domestic dub and Breeze’s work with characters or textual I’s that are different to herself see Sharpe 2003. In this interview both Sharpe and Breeze conceptualize Breeze’s mobilization of characters in terms of a theatric monologue; hence, in terms of the methodology of theatre studies. My analysis of Breeze’s performance introduces a different angle from a different, interdisciplinary methodology. For an analysis of the Jamaican context of Breeze’s poetry see Cooper 1993. In this study Cooper frames her case studies – some of Breeze’s work being one of them – within the context of orality in Jamaican popular country, and analyses them through a gender-sensitive approach.
Twist back a dem
No
It wasn’t de day dat start out bad
Wasn’t even pre m t
Or post m t
Was jus’ anadda ordinary get up
Get de children ready fi school
Mawning
Anadda what to cook fah dinna dis evening
Mawning
Anadda wish me never did breed but Lawd
Mi love dem mawning
Jus anadda wanda if ah should a
Tek up back wid dis man, it would a
Ease de situation mawning
No
It wasn’t no dumpy frighten mi
Mek mi jump outa mi sleep
Eena bad mood
Nor no neighbour bring first quarrel
To mi door
Wasn’t de price rise pon bus fare
An milk an sugar
Was just anadda
Same way mawning
Anadda clean up de mess
After dem lef mawning
A perfectly ordinary
Mawning of a perfectly
Ordinary day
Trying to find a way
Out
So it did hard fi understand
Why de ordinary sight of
Mi own frock
Heng up pon line
Wid some clothespin
Should a stop mi from do nutten
But jus’
Bawl

The speaker vacillates between descriptions of what would make the morning a bad morning and what is so ordinary that the textual I can endure it without it affecting her negatively. The cold floor, the pressure of having to take care of her children by herself, the desire for the company of a partner, the rising costs for basic necessities, the bad news about world politics, and her having to clean up after her children form part of an ordinary morning. She can endure them without any further consequences. Other, more dramatic events like a hangover or complaining neighbours are necessary to push her limits.

From its very beginning the poem builds up tension because it suggests that something extraordinary happened on that ordinary morning. The extraordinary event is the breakdown of the textual I before of the sight of her own dress, hung up to dry with some clothespins. It is the small gesture of having done something for herself together with the despair about having to do it herself and not having anything done for her, of receiving not even the smallest gesture of care for her by another person, that leads to her breakdown. The dress washed and hung up by herself stands for the accumulated neglect and abandonment that form part of her ordinary mornings and her ordinary days. Precisely its ordinariness makes this situation unbearable. The sense of abandonment indicates the lack of a possible addressee. To whom would the textual I complain? Who is the abuser in this abusive situation? Her children? Those who are responsible for her poverty? Whose help would she ask for? Who is willing to stand up for her and lend her a hand? The poem performs this paralyzing lack of an addressee by pointing out the demoralizing power of habit, of poverty, and of everyday misery.

Only the poet-author reaches out to the textual I. To be able to do so, Breeze maintains a strict separation between herself and the textual I. Her presence in the poem is defined not so much by the story of the poem – which is clearly not hers – but by her performance. She speaks the poem in a quiet voice. Her tone is gentle, the pace slow and melodious, her articulation is clear, the timbre of her voice is warm and soft. The spoken word is accompanied by a blues track the motives of which are being repeated throughout
and after the spoken text. The style of enunciation creates a sense of intimacy, as if the speaker was speaking to a close friend. The listener is drawn into this intimate situation as if she was a third, silent party overhearing the conversation between Breeze and the textual I. By drawing the listener into the intimacy between herself and the textual I, Breeze creates a small public in which the situation of the single mother finds a compassionate audience.107

Breeze herself assumes the responsibility for turning the dramatic monologue of the textual I into an address, and in responding to it. By creating a small public that is willing to listen and respond to the textual I, she breaks through the circle of redirected address that characterizes the loneliness of the speakers in the poems discussed by Johnson, and makes address towards others possible. However, “Ordinary Mawning” honestly admits its own limitation. After all, the poem conveys a sense of impotence rather than a sense of contestation. The social and political constraints that determine the life of the single mother remain intact. All the poem can do is to rescue the situation from its ordinarness and therefore, from its acceptance as normal and unchangeable. Furthermore, it can contribute to the construction of a community that supports the single mother in her daily life and that helps her to formulate claims that can change her living conditions. However, it cannot change these conditions. Hence, the poem encourages a look at the different social, political and personal factors that keep the single mother in her situation and that produce the sense of despair and impotence that informs the poem. Furthermore, it invites a response to the single mother that is not only sympathetic, but that looks for ways to change her situation.

Conclusion
Since the establishment of contact with the audience is one of the most important elements of performance poetry, direct address is necessarily one of its central rhetoric and poetic

107 Importantly, the audience created by Breeze can be considered part of a larger public. In his article “Publics and Counterpublics” Michael Warner argues that for a group to be a public it needs to fulfill the following characteristics: a public is self-organized, it is a relation among strangers, the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal, a public is constituted through mere attention, a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse, publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation, and a public is poetic world-making. Through these definitions he develops the public as a group of people who are united by shared characteristics or interests, which is constituted independently of the state or administration, which seeks to grow and involve strangers, which reflects on its own discourse in such a way that it can develop a particular identity through characteristics of its discourse, which acts “punctually”, and which develops its own social imaginary. Discourse and address play a vital role in the constitution of a public. Address constitutes a public: “A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed” (50). Breeze’s performance of address in “Ordinary Mawning” successfully establishes such a public, thus turning her group of listeners from an isolated audience into part of a larger group of people, in which political and social issues can be discussed and resolved.
strategies. It is indeed so important that the poetry performance integrates address among its premises; as long as there is an audience present, the poem will always address somebody. However, this important device often fails. The poems “Fair” and “Architecture” address these failures. In the case of “Fair” the address fails because racism and prejudice make truthful contact impossible, in the case of “Architecture” address fails because the audience try to avoid it and its implications. Sissay’s recourse to intimate address is an expression of his search for strategies that allow him to break through their audience’s resistance to public address.

Saul Williams poem “Act III Scence 2 (Shakespeare)” performs a politicized address that appeals to shared beliefs rather than personal interest. His address leaves the intimate or personal sphere behind and locates itself in the public sphere. However, like Sissay he insists that truthfulness and personal commitment lie at the heart of his political language. Making political language available for communication, rather than using it to manipulate and instrumentalize his audience, is one of the most important elements of his poem. The address in the poem includes the invitation to the audience to speak such a truthful language and in doing so, change the terms of politics.

With “Ordinary Mawning” by Jean Binta Breeze I introduced a third mode of address. Women cannot be public speakers from the same self-confident position as men. Therefore, Breeze uses address to construct a sympathetic public for her textual speaker. In her poem the use of address is doubled: she creates the possibility of address for her textual I, so that her textual I can break through her loneliness and abandonment. She also puts herself into the position of the addressed, giving a sympathetic response to her textual I.

Breeze’s poem brings to the fore that address and the speaking and listening that is the response to it needs to transcend the intimate towards the political if the poet wants to instigate social change. While the intimacy between Breeze’s speaking voice and her textual I is crucially important for the beginning of the process of speaking and listening, it cannot lead to the actions that could change the dismal situation of the textual I. To make the demands that can lead to these actions the textual I, or the audience members who are willing to adopt her cause, have to address the public in the political sphere. Hence, both Breeze and Sissay are concerned with making the transition from the intimate to the public, albeit in very different ways.

Like the written poems that Waters analyses in *Poetry’s Touch*, performance poems revolve around the issue of address. Performed poems stage and perform address, often both at the same time. However, the particular situation of performed poetry, and especially
of politically militant performed poetry, reconfigures the terms of both the staging and the performance, thus making an original contribution to the poetic genre as a whole.
Chapter 6: Sound

Introduction
In the previous chapters I have discussed the importance of the live performance and of direct address for performance poetry. Both concepts perform and suggest an immediate connection between poet and audience on the site and in the moment of the performance. However, my use of recorded performances has already indicated that the phonographic recording, i.e. the CD, is starting to become an important medium for performed poetry. In his article “Vive la difference!” on which I have drawn in chapter 1, Paul Beasley indicates the growing importance of sound-recording technology:

Performance poetry, concerned as it is with audio-transmission, has endeavoured to make itself more available through other formats; primarily the event and secondarily through sound-recording technology – the album, cassette and CD. [. . .] I’d just like to observe that although the media have been slow to pick up on the potentials of performance, especially for a mass audience [. . .], it is happening and the signs are seriously exciting. (Beasley 1996: 35-36)

In terms of sound-recording technology, Beasley has turned out to be right. He himself started a label specialized in performance poetry, and it is now common for performance poets to release CDs, either in their own production facilities or with established labels. Here, I am not interested in the potential that these media hold for performance poetry; instead, I am interested in understanding the impact of sound-recording technology on the sonic devices used in the performance of poetry, especially in understanding the way in which the sound recording changes the dynamics between poet and audience.

My analysis must be understood against the backdrop of the previous chapter. There I have argued that much of the specific characteristics of performance poetry have been developed through the possibility of open interaction and through the presence of the poet on the site of the performance, which makes him immediately addressable. It might seem that the poet is as absent in a sound recording as he is in writing. However, I will argue that this is not the case, especially in sound recordings that are not simple recordings of performances, but that explore and develop means of signification that are specific to the sound recording. Such sound recordings open up new registers of signification by focusing on the interaction between music, sounds and language. Therefore, I argue that the sound
recording mobilizes registers of signification that are not mobilized by the performance, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{108}

The sound recording as a device for the sonic performance of poetry has received very little critical attention. Therefore, I will focus in this chapter on the development of analytical tools for the analysis of the sound recording in a close engagement of the album \textit{Clandestino} by Manu Chao. The concepts I will introduce are the “sonic I”, and what I call the incomplete split between body and voice. Furthermore, I will borrow the concepts pheno-song, geno-song and grain of the voice from Roland Barthes. In an engagement with Chao’s performance I will develop these concepts to become tools of analysis for sound performances. In this chapter I focus on concepts associated with the performer’s voice. In chapter 9 entitled “Borderlands” I will return to the album performances of Chao and develop their existence on the borderlands between music, sounds and voice.\textsuperscript{109}

\textbf{The Split between Body and Voice}

Most importantly, the sound recording suggests a split between the body and the voice of the poet in the perception of the audience. In his study \textit{Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts} Douglas Kahn discusses the impact of the phonograph on sound and its perception and brings up the notion of this split. He argues that before – or separate from – the phonograph, speaking was tied up with the speaker’s body:

\begin{quote}
While other people hear a person’s voice carried through vibrations in the air, the person speaking also hears her or his own voice as it is conducted from the throat and mouth through bone to the inner regions of the ear. Thus, the voice in its production in various regions of the body is propelled through the body, its resonance is sensed intracranially. [. . .] Yet at the same time that the speaker hears the voice full with the immediacy of the body, others will hear the speaker’s voice infused with a lesser distribution of body because it will be a voice heard without bone conduction: A deboned voice. (Kahn 1999: 7)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{108} In this study I do not discuss videos of performed poetry because they are a very recent development. I do not mean videotaped performances, but videos that engage with performed poetry on again a different register of signification. Saul Williams has probably pioneered this trend with the videos that are accessible on his website. As I finish writing this study, Beasley’s label 57 Productions are starting to produce a series of videos of performed poetry. Some of these videos are already available on the website of 57 Productions.\textsuperscript{109} One of the few academic studies in which the sonic dimension of poetry is explored is the essay collection \textit{Sound States}, edited by Adalaide Morris. In this collection the authors explore the sonic dimension of “innovative poetry”. Among the cases discussed are dub poetry and poetry recitals.
Hearing oneself, “the most wide-spread private act performed in public and the most common public act experienced within the comfortable confines of one’s own body” (Kahn 1999: 7), makes the speaker more conscious of herself, of the connection between her thought and her physical being. However, this moment of becoming conscious is private to the speaker. It is also ephemeral, because it is tied up with the temporally limited moment of speaking. Only fractures of a second after the moment of enunciation, the listener already experiences a different, “deboned” voice.

As a consequence, Kahn argues,

[. . . .] the presence produced by the voice will always entail a degree of delusion because of a difference in the texture of the sound: the speaker hears one voice, others hear it deboned. (7)

This difference between the voice the speaker hears and the voice the listener hears is even greater in the case of a recorded voice than it is in personal interaction because the recorded voice of the speaker is also temporally separated from the moment of enunciation:

No longer was the ability to hear oneself speak restricted to a fleeting moment. It became locked in a materiality that could both stand still and mute and also time travel by taking one’s voice far afield from one’s own presence. (8)

Kahn addresses a separation that in my analysis will emerge as crucial for the sound recording: a split between voice and body. Yet, my analysis will qualify the split that Kahn understands to be a complete split. Kahn argues that:

The voice no longer occupied its own space and time. It was removed from the body where, following Derrida, it entered the realm of writing and the realm of the social, where one loses control of the voice because it no longer disappeared. (8)

In some respects I concur with Kahn’s conclusion. The technologized voice in many ways resembles the technologized word because of its disconnection with the body of the author and the physical experience of speaking (Ong 1982).

Yet, I will make the point that in the oral and auditory experience the split between voice and body is not necessarily complete. The singing voice of the singer, or the speaking
voice of the speaker, who in the case of my objects of analysis is always identical with the author, insists on the singer’s individuality and on his physical existence because, as I have argued in connection with Kahn’s argument, the voice is always connected to one particular body. This incomplete split between voice and body can become a conundrum for the sonic artist. In the example I will discuss in this chapter, the artist reflects on and signifies on top of his own and his voice’s role in the sonic text. He does this by first developing a “sonic I”, a text-internally produced figure that is not necessarily identical with the author, and then by deconstructing his “sonic I”. This “sonic I” becomes compromised by several issues concerning agency. In a discussion of the implications of the split between body and voice for the concept of “voice” I will argue that the artist finally leaves this split intentionally incomplete.

The sound recording is the ideal medium to reflect on the split between voice and body because other than the written word, which appeals to visibility, recorded sound appeals to the audio-apparatus. This does make a difference, not only in terms of the visible presence of the poet on the site of the performance, but also because the audio-apparatus encourages a different type of reception. In his seminal book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) Walter Ong discussed the difference between sight and sound in great detail. He argued that:

> [s]ight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer. Vision dissects, as Merleau-Ponty has observed (1961). Vision comes to a human being from one direction at a time: to look at a room or a landscape, I must move my eyes around from one part to another. When I hear, however, I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelops me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence. (1982: 72)

Ong’s focus, other than Kahn’s, is on the listener, her positioning and her temporality. Hearing, Ong argues, is a much less controlled sensation than seeing is, as the listener “gather[s] sound simultaneously from every direction at once”. Furthermore, sounds do something to the listener: they “envelop me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence.” In the grammatical construction of this sentence sounds are the agent. I would like to add one observation to this point. Hearing, like speaking, is a tactile experience. We hear because sound waves enter our ears and move the tiny hairs on the
Moreover, the sound wave enters the body of the listener. It affects the listener literally and physically from within and not from the outside.

This physiological process implies that hearing a sound physically changes something inside us, if only for a brief moment. The art of a spoken-word artist thus consists of conscious and skilful intrusion into the body of its listener, in violation of the physical “frontier between myself and everything else” that is the body (Ong 1983: 73). This does not necessarily mean that the listener in comparison to the reader has less agency in her relationship with the author. After all, the sound becomes integrated into the listener’s temporality. However, the terms on which the interaction between speaker and listener takes place do emphasize that sonic texts cannot be understood like literary texts, while their temporality emphatically insists on their difference from live performances. Hence, sonic texts cannot be subsumed under either the category of the live performance or of writing.110

To do justice to the difference between live performance and sound recording my analysis will focus on the work of Manu Chao, whose studio albums are radically different in style than his live performances and therefore demonstrate that he understands and works with the different registers of signification that are available to the live performance and the sound recording respectively. As I have to specify immediately, Chao is known as a musician rather than a spoken word artist or performance poet. However, his work lends itself to the analysis I will undertake because in his solo albums he skilfully balances the importance of music, sounds and words, so that they emerge as equally important elements of the sonic text. This balance was one of the reasons why Clandestino, released in 1998, first caught my attention.

When I first heard the album I liked it, but felt like a stranger to its rhythms and never quite caught on to it. Much later I came across the CD again. This time I was captivated by the lyrics and the general style of the album, much more than by the tunes and rhythms. I strongly related to the language, the mixture of languages, the integration of sounds – for example recordings of speeches – into the songs, and to the issues that the album addressed. Only through these did I start to relate to the music. Thus, I accessed this music album not through its music – as one would expect for a music album – but through other components of it, such as sound and words. Hence, I argue, Clandestino cannot be classified as an example of either music or poetry. Rather, it documents the artist’s exploration of the relationship between language and music.

110 On the temporal aspect of sound and performance see Filmer (2004).
The second striking feature of the album is the performance of the voice. Its nasal
tonality, its variety of timbres and its tone, which is often more related to a recital than to
singing, make its performance very idiosyncratic and in itself already unusual. The lyrics of
the songs and the different languages they are written in create an additional moment of
alienation, as the voice changes easily from one language to the other and tells stories in the
first person which can impossibly be the stories of the singer. Yet, the singer’s physical
voice is vital and draws a disproportionate amount of attention because it functions as the
red thread that holds the different stories in the album together. In accordance with this
contention, the political imaginaries that inform the lyrics and the style of the album
suggest that the singer is taking on the function of a “spokesman” for those whose voices
are not normally heard; but the same political imaginaries are based on a rejection of
protestanism, a rejection that is being addressed frequently through the songs on the album.

_Clandestino_ works with and reflects on this double tension (the intensity of the
individual voice of the singer versus his representation of those that are not heard; the
function of a spokesman versus the rejection of protagonism) and seems to recreate the
tension again and again. This observation resonates with the theory of performative
authorship that I developed in chapters 2 and 3. It seems that in the case of _Clandestino_ we
also encounter at least an author and a “textual” persona, and also a highly problematized
public function of the singer and his persona. However, as I indicated before, the emphasis
on sound reshuffles the elements that make out the construction of the persona. The poet-
author is not physically present and addressable and an analysis of a sonic recording has to
take the incomplete split between body and voice into account. Therefore, I need to develop
a new framework for the analysis of authorship in performed poetry out of the sonic
dimension.

**Manu Chao’s “sonic I”**

I will now start to construct this analytical framework through a constrastive analysis of the
voice performance in the songs “King of the Bongo” from the 1991 album _King of the
Bongo_ by Mano Negra and “Bongo Bong” from _Clandestino_. “Bongo Bong” is based on
the musical motive and the lyrics of the song “King of the Bongo”.111 The 1991 track “King
of the Bongo” is a punk song and is clearly made for dancing. The music declares loyalty to

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111 Mano Negra is the band with which Manu Chao became famous as their singer and guitarist. Mano Negra
played an important part in the development of the “pachanka” or “patchanka” sound. They broke up in 1994
after a by now notorious tour through Latin America. For further information and a discussion of the political
and social themes in the work of Mano Negra see Rivas Gamboa (2003). For an account of the Latin America
tour of Mano Negra see Chao (1994).
punk and pogo in a time when disco and house were becoming increasingly popular, and the lyrics reinforce this message and make it more explicit. Still, the lyrics are subordinated to the music. This subordination is made clear by the relation between the music and the lyrics as well as between the music and the voice.

The lyrics, first of all, are hard to understand because the music almost drowns out the voice. The voice itself does not change much during the song; intensity, timbre and intonation remain the same. The voice sounds far away. The singer is singing in English, with his own accent. He does not seem to feel particularly comfortable with the English language; the accent marks awkwardness rather than an appropriation of English. Because the music is more important, it dominates the language: the rhythm of the music – to which the singer is really reacting – is directing the rhythm and the intonation of his singing and thus, of his performance of the language. In “The Grain of the Voice” Roland Barthes uses the term “pheno-song” to describe such a performance. He describes the pheno-song as

all the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung, the rules of the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composer’s idiolect, the style of the interpretation: in short, everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which it is customary to talk about, which forms the tissue of cultural values [. . . .], which takes its bearing directly on the ideological alibis of a period [. . . .]. (Barthes 1977: 182)

In terms of the pheno-song, that is in terms of the genre punk or in terms of the genre pachanka, “King of the Bongo” is a good song. The singer performs a musical example of the genre. But because the song itself and the performance emphasize the importance of the genre, there is no space left for the personal engagement of the singer.

Personal engagement is related to exploration, and a friendly engagement requires the reduction of, or a peaceful engagement with, the differences and resistances one wants to explore. At this moment I want to focus on the engagement of resistances. In his article “Resistance” the cellist Richard Sennett argues that the performance of music is inseparably related to the exploration of resistance:

For musicians, the sense of touch defines our physical experience of art: lips applied to reed, fingers pushing down keys or strings. It might seem that the more easily we touch, the better we play, but facility is only half the story. A pianist or a violinist
must constantly explore resistance, either in the instrument or in the musician’s own body. (Sennett 481)

In Chao’s singing performance of “King of the Bongo”, the voice is not engaging with the resistance of the music or the language, with the resistance of the singer to the English language (or of the English language to the accent of the singer), or with the resistance of the singer’s body, which seems to be under considerable strain during the whole performance. The performance shows the singer’s rebellion against the resistance that his own body affords, not his engagement with this part of his own performing self. Thus, the singer’s physical presence remains unaddressed; it is negated rather than engaged with and as a consequence, cannot get a voice. The voice remains ephemeral and does not receive a sense of materiality; but in the absence of materiality, touch becomes impossible.  

“Bongo Bong” from Clandestino performs a different engagement with resistance. While the song is based on “King of The Bongo” and the lyrics are almost identical, the stanzas that place the song in the context of specific musical styles are left out and as a consequence, the overall meaning of the lyrics changes. The song is now telling the story of a street musician who comes from the jungle to the big city. There he is insulted and pushed around, and nobody wants to listen to him. The language is that of a storyteller, very rhythmical and plastic:

Mama was queen of the mambo
Papa was king of the Congo
Deep down in the jungle
I started bangin’ my first bongo

Every monkey’d like to be
In my place instead of me
Cause I’m the king of bongo, baby
I’m the king of bongo bongo

I went to the big town
Where there is a lot of sound

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112 Saying this, I need to point out that I am not going into the issue of dance because this is outside of the scope of my study. However, punk and pogo do solicit a different type of engagement through dance, and “King of the Bongo”, being very danceable, certainly solicits engagement through dance.
From the jungle to the city
Looking for a bigger crown

So I play my boogie
For the people of big city
But they don’t go crazy
When I’m bangin’ in my boogie

They say that I’m a clown
Making too much dirty sound
They say there is no place for little monkey in this town
Nobody’d like to be in my place instead of me
Cause nobody go crazy when I’m bangin’ on my boogie

The inhabitants of the big city turn the street musician into a monkey, a term that has now lost the affectionate connotations it had when the street musician used it in the beginning of the song. The monkey is now merely a silly and bothersome animal.

The street musician, while being addressed in terms of a silly and bothersome animal rather than a human being or an artist enamoured with his art, stays true to his music:

Bangin’ on my bongo
All that swing belongs to me
I’m so happy there’s nobody
In my place instead of me

I’m a king without a crown
Hanging loose in a big town
I’m the king of Bongo
Baby, I’m the king of Bongo Bong
This story is told in the English language; but not in British or American English. If anything, the English the lyrics are performed in would be related to Patois and Caribbean dialects.

However, the language of the song is not patois. Rather, it is its own, heavily accented creation. The rhythm of this language is defined by the strong accent of the singer. The accent, like the language, is very difficult to place and does not associate the singer with any specific nationality or country. I will take up the issue of the accent as a marker of identity in chapter 7 on “Accents and Translations”, and of the accent as a means to confuse set ideas of identity in chapter 9 “Borderlands”. The musical style of the piece is just as difficult to place; the style of the music is a mixture of rap and reggae. The melody of the tune is monotonous, repetitive and calm. Changes in tempo and tone are almost all performed by the voice, as they would be in a conversation or by someone telling a story. The voice is louder than the music, which places additional emphasis on the story; furthermore, the soft tone suggests a certain intimacy, as if the singer was sitting next to the listener.

The rhythm of the tune and the rhythm of the language are engaging with each other; when one has heard the song once and afterwards reads only the lyrics or hears only the music, one will always hear the other part as well. Due to their interactive inseparability, the rhythm of the language and the rhythm of the tune make up the rhythm of the story together. Thus, “the story” is made up of sound and rhythm as well as it is made up of the meaning of the words. The voice is the central force that holds the different components of the song together, engaging with their resistance and the resistance of its own body or, as Sennett calls it, “courting danger” (484):

Romanticism provided a misleading vocabulary for this divide; musical notations like “innerlich” or “geistlich” (“inwardly” or “with soulful feeling”) suggest the musician’s soul will at a particularly expressive moment withdraw to higher realms than the physical. The musician’s fingers remain, unfortunately, on strings. [. . . ] I don’t know if there’s a German word like outerlichkeit – “outwardness” but there should be. (2004: 484)

In the terms in which Sennett describes it, “courting danger” is a highly physical act. Sennett describes a moment in which the resistance of the material – in his case, what the song should sound like and the possibilities of the instrument – becomes part of the song. In
the example of Chao, the voice would be the instrument. When it engages with the resistance of the material, sound is at its most tangible.

The engagement with resistance, the particular way of each musician to “court danger” and the terms he does it in, make for an intense performance of the voice which shows the singer in an engagement with the material that makes up his song, including the resistance that comes from within his own body. It is, therefore, a moment of contact between the interior of the singer and everything that surrounds him. Barthes, borrowing from Kristeva, describes such a performance as the “geno-song”:

the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate “from within language and in its very materiality”; it forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expressions; it is that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language – not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters – where melody expresses how the language works and identifies with that work. (182)

In the geno-song the singer’s voice, the tune and the lyrics of the song are forged together in the construction of an entity that corresponds to the “lyrical I”: a text-internal entity constructed by all devices at the disposal of the artist, but not identical with the artist. Because in this case this entity is created by the sound of the words as well as their content and other lyrical stylistic devices, I introduce the term “sonic I”. As I indicated earlier, the category of the sonic I makes it possible to conceptualize and analyse the split between body and voice.

Musicians and Jongleurs: The Politics of Sonic Production

Having introduced the term “sonic I”, I immediately need to problematize it in the case of Chao. I have said in my introduction to this passage that the central position of the singing voice and the imaginary that refuses protagonism seem to clash with each other. Chao seeks to resolve this clash through his refusal to appear on the CD personally. Instead, through his blatant refusal he seeks to direct the attention of the listener past the singer, to “those that are behind”, those whose voices cannot be heard and who materialize in the voice of the singer. In doing so, he makes an important proposition. He proposes that the intensity of his performance and the clandestineness of being one out of many are not a contradiction, but
instead, that the intensity of the performance is contingent on being one out of many. At this point Chao’s sonic perspective meets up with the poetic perspective of Éluard and the poetry of circumstance. Both Chao and Éluard posit the poet or musician as a brother to humanity, as one who articulates the precariousness of human existence as well as the aspirations of human beings (Éluard 993). The power of the work is at least partially due to this status of the poet.

However, at this moment I need to stay within the analytical realm of the sonic. Therefore, I return to Sennett’s analysis of the intense moment of “outwardness” in the performance of music. His analysis helps me to rephrase my argument about the singer’s voice as contextualized within the voices of “those that are behind” in relation to Barthes’ argument about the performance of the geno-song by the grain of the voice. I would say that our understanding of the geno-song is too focused on the person who is performing it. We tend to see the subjectivity of the performer as complete in itself and thus, understand the grain of the voice as representing only his subjectivity, but we do not conceive of the subjectivity of the performer’s voice as constituted through a process of negotiation with those who surround him.

Even the modern scriptor Barthes introduces in “Death of the Author” finally receives uncontestable authority because he is in the end always alone:

[. . . . ] the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time that that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now. (145)

This position of alone-ness (the “internal exile of the poet” as Beasley calls it more polemically) makes it difficult to contest the authority Barthes sought to undermine, and that in spite of the death of the author continues to reside in the text, as I argued in chapter 2.

In her discussion of the female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema The Acoustic Mirror, Kaja Silverman addresses the authority invested in the spoken and heard voice of cinema:

The notion that cinema is able to deliver “real” sounds is an extension of that powerful Western episteme [. . . . ] which identifies the voice with proximity and the
here and now – of a metaphysical tradition which defines speech as the very essence of presence. (43)

Silverman’s evocation of the “here and now” resonates with Barthes’ and Beasley’s evocations of the same expression; Beasley’s I have discussed in detail in a previous chapter. Silverman goes on to connect the essence of presence with notions of authority:

When the voice is identified in this way with presence, it is given the imaginary power to place not only sounds but meaning in the here and now. In other words, it is understood as closing the gap between signifier and signified. Even more important [. . . .] Western metaphysics has fostered the illusion that speech is able to express the speaker’s inner essence, that it is “part” of him or her. (43)

Silverman’s emphasis on the individual speaker who places meaning in the here and now is the most productive aspect for my argument of the passage quoted above. The “gap between signifier and signified” is closed by the highly personalized voice of one person only, a product of the speaker’s “inner essence” functioning as the indispensable bridge between signifier and signified. Both Barthes and Silverman in different ways emphasize that generally, the speaker is conceived of as an individual, and that speech is conceived of as inseparably bound up with his – and only his – “inner essence”. Chao, however, practices a different idea of the voice.

I contend that for Chao, the subjectivity of the singer is inseparably bound up with the “outwardness” Sennett describes. Instead of turning inwards and looking for the singer’s/speaker’s “inner essence”, Chao’s voice turns “outwards” towards the people, the places and the practices that surround the singer. Consequently, his practice of voice is a constant negotiation of his subjectivity and his surroundings, a constant practice of absorption and consequently, of change. When he turns “outwards” and conducts, or reflects on, his engagement with those who are around him in the moment of “outwardness” through the grain of the voice, his geno-song can become the access to – and not the replacement of – those who are around him. In terms of our own context or culture they might not be visible and audible to us, but they become so by way of the sonic I, brought to life by the geno-song. Such a position of the singer as one knot in a network formed from many has far-reaching consequences for the authority of the voice, consequences that I will discuss later in this chapter as well as in Chapter 9
“Borderlands”. For now, I would like to emphasize again the importance of the geno-song that allows the intensity of the performance to unfold its full force in interaction with the singer’s refusal of personal protagonism.

Here I am interested in one particular result of this interaction. In the following I will demonstrate that the lack of personal protagonism paired with the geno-song performance, strengthens the sense of urgency concerning the political and social issues that are being addressed. The street musician in “Bongo Bong” is a prime example of this strategy. At first glance his story seems innocent and naïve. However, it loses its innocence when placed in a larger context of urbanization politics. In recent years street musicians were among the first to be kicked off the streets by city councils who want to “clean up” their cities, for example in Paris, Barcelona and Amsterdam. One of the worst repercussions they can suffer is the confiscation of their instruments by the police. To redeem them, the musicians have to pay a fine; a difficult undertaking for someone who makes his living off the instrument that has been taken from him. For those musicians who are in Europe illegally, getting into trouble with the police for playing on the street also means that they will be deported. Hence, Chao’s act of making a street musician one of the central speakers of his album should not only be understood in terms of “giving voice”. His play with the identity of the “I” and of the “sonic I” has another dimension which emerges more clearly upon reading “Bongo Bong” against Jacques Attali’s study Noise: The Political Economy of Music.

In this study Attali discusses the figure of the musician as street musician or as living in the street in terms of the appropriation of music by power. He argues that in the Middle Ages, musicians moved from place to place and were referred to with the same term that was used for other street artists:

The term jongleur, derived from the Latin joculare (“to entertain”), designated both musicians (instrumentalists and vocalists) and other entertainers (mimes, acrobats, buffoons, etc.). At the time, these functions were inseparable. The jongleur had no fixed employment; he moved from place to place, offering his services in private residences. He was music and the spectacle of the body. He alone created it, carried it with him, and completely organized its circulation within society. (1997:14)

The jongleur was then an autonomous figure. His relationship to music was immediate: there was no separation between himself and his music; music did not exist independently
of its maker. This changed in the 14th century. At this time the upper class started to monopolize music and its production:

[. . . .] the techniques of written and polyphonic music spread from court to court and distanced the courts from the people: nobles would buy musicians trained in church choirs and order them to play solemn songs to celebrate their victories, light songs for entertainment, orchestrated dances, etc. Musicians became professionals bound to a single master, domestics, producers of spectacles exclusively reserved for a minority. (15)

The institutionalisation of music goes hand in hand with a process of settling down for musicians, processes of organizing themselves and, while making a better living, relinquishing their autonomy on the production of music to the service of those that paid their salaries:

Within three centuries, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth, the courts had banished the jongleurs, the voice of the people, and no longer listened to anything but scored music performed by salaried musicians. Power had taken hold, becoming hierarchical and distant. (15)

Musicians organized in gilds started “shutting out the jongleurs, who were independent and often nonprofessional musicians”. The street musician as an uncontrollable performer in whom physicality and music are inseparable, and as a performer who is always on the move and on the road and therefore cannot be incorporated into a capitalist system, is the contemporary version of the jongleur. Chao’s sonic I uncomfortably foregrounds the tension between musician and jongleur, between established musician and street musician, between being graspable by the system and constantly dodging it.¹¹³

The issue that becomes pertinent in Chao’s construction of his sonic I as a street musician and his evocation of the jongleur is that of “giving voice”. I will raise a provocative question here: does Chao “give voice” to the street musician, or does the street musician “give a voice” to Chao? Chao, owner of the singing voice, can give voice to the

¹¹³ Some Performance Poets prefer the term “street poetry” for Performance Poetry (see Dawes 1996) because they see their function as related to the one performed by the jongleur according to Attali’s analysis. A similar claim was made in an older version of the website of the French Slam Productions, www.slameur.com, which was accessible in 2002. In this context Dawes’ term “street poetry” gains renewed currency, though it would have to be rewritten in the context of the street movements of the early 21st century.
jongleur from a comfortable position within the system of established musicians. This act of “giving voice” could be interpreted as putting his power to good use. However, I would suggest that something else is happening here.

The performance of the sonic I shows that issues of musical identity are wrapped up with issues of power. This entanglement is much more complex than simply the question of having access to the international music market, which equals having access to music production companies, which equals becoming heard in many places of the world, and earning money and fame. Rather than addressing such questions of success within the system, Clandestino claims the freedom to function and to speak from outside of it. Chao, rather than “giving voice” from his own position of success to those who are not heard, instead claims access to the streets and other public spaces for himself and others, spaces in which the vital interaction between the people and the jongleur can take place. What he suggests, then, is that his voice depends on the voice of the street musician. In the following section I will delve deeper into these issues of “voice”, exploring the concept and its possibilities for sonic texts.

The Concept of Voice in Sonic Texts

I have argued that in the case of Clandestino, the construction of Chao’s sonic I is characterised by the singer’s refusal to appear personally, an aim he pursues throughout the album by way of his evasiveness. None of the songs reveals the identity of the singer; neither is it ever clear in which songs the sonic I is identical with the singer-author and in which songs it is not; it is only clear that in some songs it cannot be identical with him. As a result, the listener knows who the singer is and can even hear his physical voice, but the metaphorical voice is never identical with the physical one. This split in the concept of voice emerges very strongly in recorded sonic texts because the listener can hear the singer, but cannot see him. My argument is that Chao reflects on and explores the split between singer and voice on several levels.

He addresses it explicitly in the second song of the album, called “Desaparecido”, “The Disappeared”. This song features a sonic I which continuously evades those who seek to apprehend him:

114 For further information on the situation of street musicians in Barcelona in particular, and of Manu Chao’s involvement with their cause, see http://www.radiochango.com/francais/artistes/manu_chao_itw1.php3 and www.lacolifata.org.
Me llaman el desaparecido
They call me the disappeared
Que cuando llega ya se ha ido
Who when he arrives has already left
Volando vengo, volando voy
I come flying, I go flying
Deprisa deprisa a rumbo perdido
quickly quickly in a lost direction

Cuando me buscan núnca estoy
When they are looking for me I’m never there
Cuando me encuentran yo no soy
When they find me I’m not
él que está enfrente porque ya
the one that appears in the front because
Me fui corriendo más allá
I already went running further along

The song points out the impossibility of getting hold of a person who is in constant movement. But even if the ones who search for him do find him, they do not encounter the person they were looking for: “Cuando me encuentran yo no soy/ él que está enfrente porque ya/ me fui corriendo más allá”. These lines indicate that disappearance does not imply that the disappeared person is not there anymore; disappeared people are always there, one just does not know where they are. The issue is not that of visibility. An invisible person is still located somewhere and remains palpable. A disappeared person is dislocated, remains possibly visible as “él que está enfrente”. but cannot be sought out easily. Especially, the disappeared cannot be held or held back.

The sense of touch, so important for the performance of music, does not work in the relationship between performer and listener when the listener encounters someone who is disappeared. These lines describe the experience of failure of the listener who tries to pin down the sonic I by identifying it with Chao, the owner of the singing voice, or the other way around. Each song refutes any conclusion one might have come to while listening to the previous song. In the first song “Clandestino” the sonic I stages an illegal immigrant, the second song “Desaparecido” proclaims the sonic I’s evasiveness, the third song “Bongo Bong” develops the sonic I of a street musician and turns into the song “Je ne t’aime plus, mon amour”, a song of love and loss, and so on.

In consequence, I contend that the particularity of sonic texts is based not only on the split between body and voice, but emphatically on the fact that this split is incomplete. More strongly, my interpretation suggests that Chao addresses precisely the incompletion of this split. The incompletion of the split between body and physical voice becomes very clear when we include the narratological concept of “voice” into this analysis. As I have
indicated, one of the consequences of the incomplete split between body and voice is that the term “voice” takes on two meanings in reference to a sonic text. One meaning refers to the physical voice of the singer, known as the singing voice. This meaning suggests a connection to the singer as a person, to the person who physically exists and utters the sounds of the singing. The second meaning of the term “voice” has been developed in literary theory.

In her article “Critique of Voice” Mieke Bal traces the development of the concept of “voice” from the 1920s and 1930s, when it is implicitly invoked in early narrative texts by Foster and James, to the 1970s, when the term was finally introduced. She connects its emergence with theory’s struggle to conceptualise “agency beyond the author” (Bal 2004: 42). While theorists tried to avoid a return to intentionalist readings of literature, they also needed to “account for the fact that a story doesn’t come out of the blue, and that someone is responsible for it” (Bal 2004: 42). This meaning of “voice” resonates with the sonic I, which is also a text-internally produced entity that is not necessarily identical with the author. Sonic texts, however, work differently than texts that are written down in that the physical voice is always audible; thus, the materiality of the singer is always in some way present.

Let me return to the 1920s and 1930s, the moment when, according to Bal, “the word ‘voice’ became replenished with sense and relevance in a culture that saw itself as modern” (Bal 2004: 36). Bal recalls that the transition from silent to sound film produced a moment in which the voice of the actor is being added on to the already shot scenes. The flip-side of the materiality of voice that could now be captured together with the images is “a new cognitive understanding” of the body:

It [that understanding] concerned the fundamental deficit of the body, so that it was seen as in constant need of supplementation by means of prostheses. One of which was the voice. The concept of voice, disembodied, thus makes its appearance as a tool for analysis, made technical, as if to overcompensate the anxiety triggers by a generalized sense of the body’s defective state. A body-part sung loose of its body. (Bal 2004: 39)

Bal’s analysis is in line with Ong’s argument that the technologizing of the word has robbed it of its immediate and communal function and that it has been used to write the author out of his text. Her analysis is also connected to Kahn’s argument cited above that
the phonograph removed the voice “from the body where, following Derrida, it entered the realm of writing and the realm of the social, where one loses control of the voice because it no longer disappears” (1999:8). Kahn’s noun “social” in this context does not refer to the immediate situation of enunciation that I have discussed in my previous chapter, but to a more anonymous social sphere to which I will turn below. However, the geno-song performance adds another level to Bal’s, Ong’s and Kahn’s combined arguments.

The geno-song performance is crucial because as I have argued, it preserves the materiality and the physicality that the technologizing of the word according to the three theorists destroys. Chao’s geno-song performance combined with his insistence on his own evasiveness makes the double meaning of the term “voice” – the discrepancy between the metaphor or concept and the physical voice – so disturbingly obvious. Listening to his albums is like reading a handwritten literary text. Neither of them allows for complete abstraction, both of them emphasize the incomplete split between voice and singer or writer.

Why does Chao insist so emphatically on this split and its incompleteness that it becomes one of the major themes of both of the two albums I discuss in this chapter? My speculative answer is that the importance of this issue is related to the function of the sonic texts in the realm that Kahn terms “social”, and that it is especially related to the power relations that are at work in the social space, which have an impact on the sonic text from outside. Chao does not only use the sonic I to capture different voices in a neutral manner or to “give voice”. Clandestino is clearly situated within a political situation. This is made amply clear by the red star on the cover, the dedication of the album to the EZLN, the use of EZLN sound material in the album, the address of issues like illegal immigration, the exploitation of the South, hunger, and other burning issues in the songs. Last but not least, Chao frames Clandestino in the political realm by the subtitle of the album “…esperando la última ola”, “waiting for the last wave”, which in the course of the album emerges as one of the major themes.

To situate himself and his album in this context, Chao features other voices in Clandestino through heterosonic recordings. In the song “Mentira” (“Lie”), Chao picks up and elaborates on a term that is frequently used by the EZLN. They have used it as a term of protest against the betrayals of indigenous communities and of the EZLN by those in power. The Subcomandante Marcos has also used the term mentira to point out the

115 In his analysis Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, Walter Ong interestingly jumps from oral literature to the standardizing and technologizing of writing. He does not pay any attention to handwriting. For a study of handwriting and technology see Neef 2006.
appropriation of language by power and to analyse the way in which this appropriation is interfering with peoples’ possibilities to communicate with each other.\footnote{As one example see “Another Geography”, Revista Rebeldía No. 5, March 2003, \url{www.revistarebeldia.org.mx}. I quoted extensively from this text in chapter 1.}

In the song “Mentira” in Clandestino Chao explores the consequences of mentira’s power:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentira lo que dice</td>
<td>What is said is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira lo que da</td>
<td>What is given is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira lo que va</td>
<td>What goes is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira la mentira</td>
<td>a lie is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira la verdad</td>
<td>the truth is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira lo que cuece</td>
<td>What cooks below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bajo la oscuridad</td>
<td>the darkness is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira el amor</td>
<td>love is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira el sabor</td>
<td>flavour is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira la que manda</td>
<td>mentira rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira comanda</td>
<td>mentira commands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira la tristeza</td>
<td>the sadness is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuando empieza</td>
<td>when the lie begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentira no se va</td>
<td>it doesn’t leave</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As this lyric demonstrates, “mentira” is an attitude, not a single act. Once it arrives it never leaves, but infiltrates itself into every single part of life and initiates a vicious circle until even “the truth is a lie/ the lie is a lie”. The sonic I is lonely and isolated in a world in which truthful communication is becoming increasingly impossible:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todo es mentira en este mundo</td>
<td>Everything in this world is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo es mentira la verdad</td>
<td>Everything is a lie, that’s true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo es mentira yo me digo</td>
<td>Everything is a lie, I tell myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo es mentira</td>
<td>Everything is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Por qué será?</td>
<td>Why would that be?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The song ends with a recording from a radio news broadcast about the refusal of the U.S. to sign the Kyoto protocol, inviting the listener to elaborate on the connection between the term, its consequences and the concrete example.

In a later song “Luna y sol” (“Moon and Sun”), Chao picks up the term mentira again. The text of the song versions a theme of the song “Mentira”, but this time Chao adds a different note:117

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todo es mentira en este mundo</td>
<td>Everything in this world is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo es mentira la verdad</td>
<td>Everything is a lie, that’s true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo es mentira yo me digo</td>
<td>Everything is a lie, I tell myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo es mentira</td>
<td>Everything is a lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Por qué sera?</td>
<td>Why would that be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperando la última ola</td>
<td>Waiting for the last wave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperando la última ola</td>
<td>Waiting for the last wave</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Esperando la última ola”, “Waiting for the last wave”, adds a hopeful, yet ambiguous, touch to the song, one that had not been there before. It indicates that something has started moving, that there is hope for a change. Consequently, the song ends on a different note:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buscando un ideal</td>
<td>Looking for an ideal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuando será?</td>
<td>When will it be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Por dónde saldrá el sol?</td>
<td>Where will the sun come through?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and with a recording of the 4th manifesto of the Zapatistas, read by the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos. The quoted text contains the promise to remain true to their principles, demands basic rights and necessities for everyone, and makes the request to promulgate the manifesto.118 The song suggests that the struggle is not lost, but that it is only just beginning, and it brings in the EZLN as an important reason for hope.

Chao’s exploration of his own voice and of other voices in sonic texts is an example of the successful mobilization of the incomplete split between singer and voice. Chao’s

117 For an analysis of the practice of versioning see Peeren forthcoming.
118 The text of the manifesto is available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese at http://www.ezln.org/documentos/index.html.
voice can credibly put forward the voices of others because his voice is not necessarily an expression of his own subjectivity. At the same time, the incompleteness of the split does not allow for complete abstraction of the voice from the singer. This means that the singer assumes the responsibility for the causes he articulates. The inclusion of other voices among the song posits that the voice of the singer is always in dialogue with other voices. Such a technique performs a concept of subjectivity that recalls the one Éluard develops in “Poésie de circonstance”. The poet-author employs his voice to explore loci of enunciation from within the community of those human beings with whom he shares commitments or, in the words of Éluard, aspirations as well as pains. Hence, his voice is constantly struggling against isolation and performs a constant dialogue with other voices.

**Sound and Thought**

Both songs, “Mentira” and “Luna y sol”, show the singer and his voice in a powerful position. The singer organizes the sound material. He writes the song, he picks the recordings, he arranges them; thus, he suggests the connections that are to be made. His voice unites music and its components melody and rhythm with language and the sound recordings, giving them direction and organizing them. The songs also bring to the attention of the listener that the choices Chao makes for recording material are not accidental, but that they are informed by a particular way of understanding the world and understanding power relations; in the widest sense, by theoretical ideas.

In his study *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought*, Ernst van Alphen analyzes visual art as thought. One approach he takes to this issue leads through an analysis of the work of Hubert Damisch:

> All of his writings [Damisch’s] are directed by the conviction that paintings and other cultural products perform, in one way or another, an intellectual or philosophical project. He never deals with paintings as mere passive manifestations of a culture or historical period or as the product of the artist’s intention. Rather, the painter thinks, and she does that in her paintings. A painting is therefore for Damisch a reflection – not in the sense of the passive definition of the word, as a mirror image, but in the sense of the active definition, as an act of thought. (2005: 2)

Van Alphen argues that consequently, paintings invite the viewer to “think ‘with’ the work of art”(5), rather than approaching it solely as products of a particular context or as
creations of one particular artist. The viewer does not “decode”, she is in dialogue with the work of art. In this dialogue, new thought is being elaborated through the engagement with the work of art. If an artist produces her work as thought and as an invitation for engagement, she positions herself differently than an artist who invites the listener/viewer to decode the work of art. Her position is subject to contestation and discussion. Yet, the artist employs her agency to express her thought as an invitation to other people to engage with her; this exercise of her agency claims authority on the issues she addresses. Under these circumstances, downplaying the importance of the singer/author in the process of enunciation and engagement would be an act of insincerity and a denial of his responsibility, as well as of the responsibility of the listener who does it. For these reasons the device of the sonic I that Chao uses, and the concept of the sonic I that I have developed in the previous analysis, need further scrutiny.

Orality and sound are frequently portrayed as alternatives to the technologized word, for example by Beasley and Ong. This view does not account for the equally technologized status of the recording. This is why I do not wish to portray the work with sound and the spoken word as a return to the long-lost roots of spoken language and to an equally long-lost communal space of enunciation. Instead, I see recording as a technique that emerged out of centuries of the experience of the technologized word. One consequence of the technologization of the word has been an acute sensibility to the difference between “sounds” and “words”, and the institutionalization of music that, as Attali describes it, has led to an equally acute sense of the difference between “sounds” and “music”. Chao, rather than collapsing these boundaries, performs the borderlands between sound, music and words as a place of encounter and of interaction. One example is the song “La despedida” (“The Goodbye”), one of the last songs of Clandestino.

“La despedida” tells the story of the end of a love story, of the singer’s failed attempt to come to a closure with it. In the beginning of the song the voice is dominant and clear, almost lacking timbre. The words are clearly articulated:

Ya estoy curado, anestesiado
ya me he olvidado de ti
Hoy me despido
de tu ausencia
ya estoy en paz...
Ya no te espero

At last I’m cured, anaesthesized
At last I have forgotten you
Today I say goodbye
To your absence
At last I’m at peace…
I don’t wait for you any longer
ya no te llamo
I don’t call you any more
ya no me engaño
I don’t deceive myself any longer
Hoy te he borrado
Today I deleted you
de mi paciencia
from my patience
Hoy fui capaz...
Today I was able to do it
Desde aquel día
Since that day
en que te fuiste
when you left
yo no sabía
I didn’t know
que hacer de ti
what to make of you
Ya están tomados
At last I have swallowed
mis sentimientos
my feelings
mejor así...
It’s better that way
Hoy me he burlado
Today I made fun
de la tristeza
of sadness
Hoy me he librado
Today I freed myself
de tu recuerdo
from the memory of you
Ya no te extraño
At last I don’t miss you anymore
ya me he arrancado
At last I have torn myself away
ya estoy en paz...
At last I’m at peace

The lack of timbre performs the lack of emotion that was obviously so difficult to achieve for the sonic I. The story is a painful one and is therefore not easily told. The final performance of the goodbye by acknowledging it in the song does not come easily.

The forced lack of timbre also bears witness to the effort the singer has to make to come to a closure. When he can finally say “At last I’m at peace”, a chorus starts softly singing “se acabó, se acabó” (“it’s over, it’s over”). The singer responds to the chorus by repeating what he said before:

Ya estoy curado, anestesiado
At last I’m cured, anaesthesized
ya me he olvidado
At last I have forgotten
Ya estoy curado, anestesiado
At last I’m cured, anaesthesized
ya me he olvidado
At last I have forgotten
But the soft voices of the chorus break down his resistance, and in a softer voice, which, as one can hear only on good audio equipment, is recorded in stereo quality, he sings:

Te espero siempre, mi amor
I will always wait for you, my love
cada hora, cada día
every hour, every day
Te espero siempre, mi amor
I will always wait for you, my love
cada minuto que yo viva
every minute I will live
Te espero siempre, mi amor
I will always wait for you, my love
no te olvido y te quiero
I won’t forget you and I love you
Te espero siempre, mi amor
I will always wait for you, my love
Sé que un día llegará
I know one day you will come
Te espero siempre mi amor
I will always wait for you, my love
cada hora, cada día
every hour, every day
Te espero siempre, mi amor
I will always wait for you, my love
cada minuto que yo viva
every minute I will live
Te espero siempre, mi amor
I will always wait for you, my love
no te olvido y te quiero
I won’t forget you and I love you
Te espero siempre, mi amor
I will always wait for you, my love
Sé que un día volverás
I know you will come back one day

During the last line one hears beeps in the backgrounds, and after several beeps, an answering machine is heard. One hears three messages from different people, calling just to say hello or to see if someone is home. The one message that the sonic I is waiting for is missing.

My point here is that “La despedida” is only understandable if one includes the recordings that are not part of traditional “song-material” like voice and music. This inclusion is necessary because the meaning of the song is produced by the tension between different elements: the lyrics themselves, the two different tones in the voice of the singer, the singer and the chorus and, most notably, the answering machine recordings. The lyrics, the music and the other sounds that are part of the song do not complement each other by reaffirming each other’s message or by adding a context. Rather, they break through each other’s space and through each other’s boundaries. In doing so, they demonstrate rather than explain a complex, multi-layered situation. I can say this differently: Chao “trilanguages” the media of enunciation that are at his disposal. In terms of the locus of
enunciation this leads to a splitting up of the socially delimited loci of enunciation of the musician, of the speaker/singer, and of “sounds” that have no definable source of origin. As a consequence, the social power and the authority that are assigned to those claiming either of these loci of enunciation – i.e. of the musician, of the speaker/singer or of the sound artist – are also shattered. This is the “thought” that Chao proposes by way of sounds.

“La despedida” is also an example of a technique that Chao uses and that is relevant for the performance of poetry. I will call this technique “sonic layering” in the development of an argument made by Ángela Rivas Gamboa in an article on Mano Negra, the band that Chao played with before he started his solo career. She argues that Mano Negra worked with what she calls “imaginones sonoras”, “sonic images”. Complementary to the sonic images the band also “quoted” sounds:

The effect of these quotations of sound is a non-linear argument that can place multiple histories in the same moment instead of telling a history with a linear sequence. The quoted fragments come from very different sources: old popular song, radio programs, proverbs, colloquial expressions, lyrics that are taken from informal language, musical sequences, urban sounds, rhythmic and onomatopoeic expressions. Each of these sonic quotes is important in its own right, but the key to the sonic images is their purposeful juxtaposition and their simultaneity (99).

In “La despedida” Chao quotes and juxtaposes sounds in order to produce meaning and to “tell a story” about simultaneous and contradictory feelings. However, since my analysis focuses on the sonic dimension of Chao’s work, I prefer the term “sonic layering” over Rivas Gamboa’s “sonic images”. Sonic layering uses the possibility for simultaneity that is opened up by the sound recording. In my analysis of the poetry of Willie Perdomo in chapter 8, and of Chao’s second album Próxima Estación...Esperanza I will analyse the techniques and effects of sonic layering in detail.

**Offbeat Heartbeats**

In my analysis of Chao’s work I have paid little attention to beat and rhythm. However, they are important elements in the performance of poetry, especially in contemporary spoken word poetry in the U.S., which draws heavily on Hip Hop. I will therefore address beat and rhythm through an analysis of the poem “Twice the First Time” by Saul Williams. By choosing this poem I focus on beats and technologized rhythm as opposed to the rhythm
performed by percussion instruments in the work of poets such as Scott Heron or La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís, whose work I will discuss in chapter 8. I choose this focus because of the frequency with which technologized rhythms are used in the performance of poetry and because it allows me to address the arguments of Carrie Noland and Amittai Aviram on the use of technological devices in poetry and on rhythm as an expression of the sublime, respectively.

In her study *Poetry at Stake* (1999), Carrie Noland develops the connection between the performance of poetry and modern technology, which made the work with sound recordings possible in the first place. Noland argues that the development of the technological devices of sound recording, television and radio as well as their wide-spread availability was made possible by a market economy interested in competition and technical innovation.

Noland takes Apollinaire’s essay “L’Esprit nouveau et les poètes” as her point of departure. She then “pursues the full implications of Apollinaire’s decision to ally lyricism with the technological means and promotional strategies of modern capitalism” (5). The latter include among other devices radio, phonographic recordings, album cover jackets, advertisement and the language of advertisement. She demonstrates the alliance between lyricism and modern capitalism through case studies and close readings that prominently feature Rimbaud, but also include Blaise Cendrars, Sonia Delaunay, René Char, Patti Smith and Laurie Anderson.

Noland’s assessment of the impact of the alliance between the strategies of modern capitalism and lyricism is overwhelmingly positive. The arguments that lead her to this conclusion are closely related to her conceptualization of high art and popular culture. She argues that in the late-19th and early-20th century the two were strictly separated, and that this separation was conceptualized by literary scholars through the assumption “that the poetic is by definition the very contrary of the mechanization and commodification of the human voice” (5). Through close analyses of several cases – Rimbaud, Cendrars, Char – she argues that the forces of the modern market economy, which critics hold responsible for the “mechanization and commodification of the human voice”, made the “technological means and promotional strategies of modern capitalism” available to society at large, and therefore also to poets. Her argument is informed by the underlying assumption that popular culture is the culture of the mechanized and the commodified. While she does not address this assumption openly, it clearly informs her choice of case studies, for example Rimbaud’s
use of the féerie, Cédar’s use of advertising strategies and fashion design, and Char’s work with radio transmission.

Poetry that is related to Hip Hop, for example Williams’ poetry, relies on technology for the performance of its rhythms and beats. In order to analyse the particular function of technologized rhythm in performed poetry I will connect Noland’s arguments regarding the connection between technology and the performance and poetry with Aviram’s analysis of poetic rhythm in general. In *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry*, Aviram argues that the meaning produced by poetic rhythm and metre relies heavily on an opposition between language and the unrepresentability of rhythm. He argues that rhythm cannot be articulated through words and is accessible mainly though the feeling of pleasure. He makes the point that rhythm rather than the word is the central element of poetry:

Poems are allegories of the sublime power of their rhythm. Their images and themes represent the power of rhythm, while the very words that convey to us these images and themes physically manifest that rhythm. (223)

He comes to connect the word with the notions of specificity and historical engagement. In contradistinction to it, he connects rhythm with the sublime, which is beyond social constructions and social codes of value (223). By arguing that rhythm is both sublime and central to poetry, he defines the reception of poetry as a physical experience. At the same time he disconnects poetry from the specific historical moment of its performance and reception. At first sight it is an appealing model for the analysis of performed poetry in that it can be employed to place the performance of poetry within an academically accepted tradition of lyricism. However, it is inapplicable because it denies precisely the historical and social connectedness that is characteristic for the performed poetry I analyse in this study.

In “Twice the First Time” Williams performs an investigation of the meaning produced by rhythms and beats. The poem makes a sophisticated use of the interaction between spoken word, melody and beat. It performs a dualism between a strong beat and a dissonant melody reminiscent of a blues tonality gone wrong. The melody is performed by violins that at times slip into screeching in a musical articulation of the desperation expressed by the speaker. The speaker depends on the beats for the articulation of his identity. However, the beats perform a conflict between the strict beats of Hip Hop, the
equally strict rhythm of the chain gang song, and the speaker’s heartbeat, which gets drowned out by the two. The meanings of Hip Hop and of the chain gang song are socially and historically determined. However, the speaker’s heartbeat is allegedly not. Moreover, his heartbeat does not fit with either of the two options that socially and historically determine the construction of his identity. Consequently, he enters into a tormented search for an identity beyond the chain gang and the market-determined beats of Hip Hop – and fails.

“Twice the First Time” starts with a passage sung to the beating sounds of a chain gang and to the dissonant melody of the violins:

i will not rhyme on tracks
niggas on a chain gang used to do that (Huh!) way back

i will not rhyme over tracks
niggas on a chain gang used to do that (Huh!) way back

don’t drop the beat on me
don’t drop the beat no

In this passage the speaker verbalizes his desire to escape from the oppressive and confining beats of the chain gang. Yet, the last two lines indicate that he cannot escape it. Furthermore, the beats over which the track is performed demonstrate and stage the impossibility to escape the beat because it is an important, formative aspect of his identity.

The beat in the performance of Williams is anything but sublime. It is so historically specific and socially connected that it becomes oppressive. In “Twice the First Time” words, and not rhythm, offer a way out of the speaker’s predicament. He can free himself momentarily in a spoken word passage in which he rebels against the beat, searching for an identity that goes back further than the mind-numbing beat of the chain gang:

i am not the son of sha klak klak
i am before that
i am before
i am before before before death is eternity after death is eternity
there is no death there’s only eternity
and i’ll be riding on the wings of eternity like
However, his search for an identity in eternity is stopped by the “sha klak klak” of the chain gang catching up with him yet again. In the last line a Hip Hop track kicks into his rant. Since it coincides with the line “Get me the fuck of this track” it is not clear whether “this track” refers to the chain gang track or the Hip Hop track or to both.

At this moment it is possible to read the Hip Hop beat as a beat of liberation, as a genuinely African-American beat that proposes a viable alternative to the beat of the chain gang. However, in the following passage Williams contests such a reading. He starts to problematize the Hip Hop beat:

as if the heart beat wasn’t enough
they got us using drum machines now
the hums of the machines
tryin to make our drums humdrums
tryin to fuck our magic
instruments be political prisoners up inside computers
as if the heart were not enough
as if the heart were not enough

The passage raises doubts as to whose identity the Hip Hop beat really expresses. “They got us using drum machines now” suggests that the production of the beat is once again being taken away from those who developed it. Worse, the beat is being returned to them in a form that once again culturally colonizes them through the drum machine, a device that is seemingly theirs but has been estranged from them and now works according to the rules of others. Hence, the beat perpetrates more violence, creates more disorder, and finally leads to self-denial, as the next passage of the poem demonstrates: “our drums become humdrums”. The one beat that is genuinely the speaker’s, his heart beat, is “not enough”, does not gain acceptance among the beats that are socially acceptable for him.

Williams’ approach to modern technology in this passage provides a stark contrast to the celebratory approach taken by Noland. Noland’s argument applied to Hip Hop would conclude that Hip Hop is a genuine expression of African American culture. Modern technology would provide access to the market and thus, make the art form of the
underprivileged noticeable and important to the popular culture of contemporary society. Williams, on the other hand, argues that the question is not about which technological innovations are available to whom, but about the conditions of availability. The crucial point is not whether the underprivileged have access to modern technology, but who gives it to them, under what conditions, and for what purposes.

The difference between Noland and Williams is crystallized in their different readings of the provider of modern technology, the market. Whereas Noland suggests that the market works according to the laws of competition, is devoid of an ideology that goes beyond it, and is benevolent towards the underprivileged as long as their art is appealing and has high quality, Williams indicates that the market is an instrument in the hands of those who revivify the projects of colonization and oppression, only by different means. It provides modern technology for a reason. Noland's line of argument is informed by her reading of essentialist arguments that point out that the human essence is corrupted by the impact of modern technology. Williams sidetracks this argument. He argues that modern technology as it is used now is partial and ideologically informed; hence, it will not interact with the human being that has it at its disposal, but will reduce the possibilities for identity construction.

Williams argues that the incapacity of modern technology to engage with the heartbeat of the human being and hence, the loss of the heartbeat, leads to social violence:

and as heart beats bring percussions
fallen trees bring repercussions
citys play upon our souls like broken drums
redrum the essence of creation from city slums
but city slums mute our drums and our drums become humdrums
cuz city slums have never been where our drums are from
just the place where our daughters and sons become
offbeat heartbeats
slaves to city streets
and hearts get broken and heartbeats stop
broken heartbeats become breakbeats for niggas to rhyme on top, but

i won’t rhyme on top no tracks
niggas on a chain gang used to do that (Huh) way back
i won’t rhyme over tracks
niggas on a chain gang used to do that (Huh) way back

In this passage Williams brings out one particular strategy for the oppression of African-Americans. Those in power sell them the illusion of what is properly theirs (“broken heartbeats become break beats for niggas to rhyme on top”). Because the illusion seems real, those in power cover up the traces of their oppression and make it look like liberation. Thus, African-Americans are manipulated into a position that recognizes them as victims, and make sure that they will always stay victims. Even the speaker, who analytically understands what is happening, cannot escape the vicious circle from which he so desperately wants to escape. In the performance of the sonic text he cannot be without the beat that confines and victimizes him:

  don’t drop the beat no
  don’t drop the beat noooo

Each stanza of poetry, of self-articulation and analysis of his situation, is followed by the refusal to rhyme on tracks and the desperate cry not to drop the beat, thus establishing a circle that consists of the desire to break out and of the inability to do so.

  The poem ends ambivalently:

  and you must stop that damn track from going
  please don’t drop the beat
  don’t drop the beat nooo

  and

  i will not rhyme on tracks
  niggas on a chain gang used to that (huh) way back
  (repeat)

  don’t drop the beat noooo
don’t drop the beat

One might be tempted to read the ongoing heartbeat as a sign of victory or hope, but my analysis of the poem suggests, rather, that the heartbeat is a constant torture to the speaker. It allows him no peace. It cannot connect with the cultural agency he performs in the poem. The agency that is socially bestowed on him always leads him back to the violence of city slums, the denial of his own heartbeat, and to the realization that those who have agency attempt to make break-beats out of broken heart beats instead of trying to keep hearts from breaking, because break-beats sell much better and give people a moment’s rest without making any fundamental changes. The poem invites the depressing question of how one can stop hearts from breaking if one has no other choice but to construct the enunciation of one’s identity at least partially on a beat that turns one into a victim.

Williams’ use of rhythm is opposed to Aviram’s theory of poetic rhythm. In “Twice the First Time” technologized rhythm transmits the burden of socially constructed roles and identities. The words of the poem are by no means an allegory of the rhythm; rather, they struggle with it, try to contest it, fail miserably, try to develop ideas that could lead to a way out, and fail again. Rhythm – innocent of the imposition of social norms, according to Aviram – turns out to be the most socially determined and limiting force that there is in the poem, precisely because it is supposedly innocent.

To an extent, though, Williams reaffirms Aviram’s contention that rhythms are unrepresentable, that they draw the listener “toward a state of being not-oneself, free of social codes of value, without language” (224). Breakbeats are a source of wordless pleasure. However, the pleasure they cause becomes complicitous with the social norms and constructions that impose limits on the speaker of the poem precisely because the breakbeats are not critically addressed as carriers of social codes of value.
In “Twice the First Time” Williams explores rhythm’s way of signifying in a similar way that Marcos explores the meaning of terms of struggle. Both Williams and Marcos investigate what impacts on and manipulates processes of meaning making from the outside. The beats used to be “terms of struggle” in their own right. However, they have been appropriated by those in power in a similar way that the concept of equality has been appropriated by them. By establishing the connection between sound and thought Williams points out that the interrogation of the processes that determine the meaning of beats – and not just the uncritical mobilization of beats – is an important task of politically militant performance poetry.

Conclusion
In this chapter I have argued and demonstrated that the analysis of sonic texts in which words, music and sound interact with each other requires its own categories of analysis. After the analysis of Manu Chao’s album *Clandestino* I have a number of analytical tools at my disposal: the pheno-song, the geno-song, the sonic I, the incomplete split between body and voice, and Chao’s “trilanguaging” of his media of enunciation. In the analysis of these categories I have problematized and developed some of the concepts I introduced earlier to make them applicable to the analysis of sonic texts. Most importantly I have complemented the textual I with the sonic I in order to account for the specific poetic devices available to sonic texts. I have also demonstrated how Chao mobilizes sonic devices to undercut and question the authority of his own sonic I in an analogy to the devices of dialogue and open interaction analysed in chapters 3 and 4. Furthermore, in the case of Chao, Neozapatism has once again turned out to be an underlying current of contemporary theory that informs the work of the artist whose work I discuss in this study, especially his questioning and undermining of authority and power.

Finally, we have seen that in the performance of poetry rhythms signify as much as words do. Rhythms and words might even contest each other. Through the example of “Twice the first time” it has become clear that one cannot analyse sound without critically investigating the accessibility to the technical devices that make the work with sound in performed poetry possible at all. Also, rhythms need to be considered not an expression of the sublime or the beyond, but are a poetic element that serves to perform and emphasize the connection of a poem with the moment of its enunciation.

There are, of course, more dimensions to the use of rhythm in the performance of poetry than the ones I have brought out in the analysis of Williams’ poem. In an analysis of
the poem “Bass Culture” by Linton Kwesi Johnson, Kevin McGuirk argues that rhythm – in this case, the bass line of the reggae rhythm – can emphasize culturally specific speech patterns, in the case of Johnson, the speech pattern and intonation of Jamaican patois. In the following chapter I follow up on McGuirk’s suggestion, but place it in the context of accents and translations. Through a comparative reading of the practice of accents and translations in the poetry of Johnson, Urs M. Fiechtner and Sergio Vesely, I explore different modes of identity construction and identity deconstruction in the performance of poetry.
Chapter 7: Accents and Translations

Introduction

In Chao’s work, accents play an important role. The language of the sonic I of “Bongo Bong”, for one, is heavily accented and as I pointed out, the difficulty to place his accent emphasizes the sense of dislocation that Chao seeks to convey. Williams’ poem “Twice the First Time” could be understood as “accented” in a different way. In his case, the intense beats and the rhythms “accent” the language of the poem in a violent, confining act that nevertheless is an important, formative element of his identity. This makes a point that, in this chapter, I will introduce, namely that the accent as a category for the analysis of performed poetry.

The accent is an important category of analysis because, as Beasley correctly points out, performed poetry has often emerged from and therefore has to be theorized through a multicultural context. The performance of poetry lends itself to accented languages because accents are predominantly recognizable in speaking. Hence, the performance of poetry has often been mobilized in diasporic contexts, particularly since the 1970s. This is partially so because of its receptiveness for accented language, and partially because of the traditional link that certain immigrant cultures have with orally performed poetry. One of the most famous examples for this kind of poetry is U.K. Dub Poetry and one of dub poetry’s most important representatives is Linton Kwesi Johnson  whose poetry will be my first case in this chapter.

I will then extend my analysis of the accent to the concept of “translation” and of “accented translation”. Dub poets are situated within and speak from and for a diasporic community, hence, they have quite clear-cut notions of cultural identity. My second case in this chapter is the work of the poets Urs M. Fiechtner and Sergio Vesely who try to destabilize clear-cut notions of German identity by engaging it with dissident German perspectives, through their own perspective of people who have spent a lot of time in Latin America. Their poetry enacts a back-and-forth translation between German and Spanish, and between music and the spoken word.

Accents and translations in performed poetry also point towards the tight connection between performed poetry and its cultural context. Some critics, for example Kevin McGuirk in an analysis of Johnson’s work, go so far as to argue that poetry in their cases has to be read as a cultural practice:
It is important to emphasize the plural nature of Johnson’s work – the insufficiency of his poetry to his total cultural work – and the plural ways in which resistance, the deliberate articulation of the self and community with a historical process, takes place. It is naïve to think that art alone can be politically efficacious. This assumption limits much discussion of politics and poetry taken up by disputes between form-as-political and content-as-political when what also needs to be considered is the rhetorical and cultural role of poems among other cultural practices in their specificity of form, statement, and occasion. (64-65)

The intricate connection between personal expression, community, culture and politics that McGuirk points out applies in different ways to the work of all three poets. Due to their different cultural and historical location the work of Johnson calls for a reframing of my reading of Éluard’s and Neruda’s elaboration of the poet as a brother of humanity – or as a member of his community – that I analysed in chapter 2. Éluard’s and Neruda’s model of humanity and consequently, of the poet, universalizes the notion of humanity and does not account for the culturally specific. Performance poetry as a more recent development of public poetry introduces poetic element that facilitate the focus on the cultural specificities of the poets and their communities. We will see that accents and translations are touchstones for the performance of identity and – in the cases I discuss here, inseparably linked – for the articulation of political demands in performed poetry.

**Accents**

Performed poetry foregrounds the performer’s accent, and performing with music adds another dimension of “accenting”. Music can accent spoken word poetry by pointing out speech rhythms and speech melody. It can also foreground cultural values. In this sense accents can be “one of the most intimate and powerful markers of group identity and solidarity, as well as of individual difference and personality”, as Hamid Naficy points out in his study *An Accented Cinema* (23). From his very different point of departure, Beasley interprets the accent in a similar way:

> And it is often the case that accent or dialect is offered up not only as a “natural fact” but as a political issue – in explicit defiance of pressure to conform to standard expectations or obviate it in more abstract or formalistic concerns.
Instead it is all the more foregrounded – celebrated as a key component in the poet’s individual and group identity. (29)

Naficy goes so far as to use the term “accent” to designate a new cinematic genre. This genre, which includes diasporic, ethnic and exilic films, is characterized by a specific “accented” style. In his analysis of the “accented style”, Naficy broadens the term “accent” to refer not only to speech but also to “the film’s deep structure: its narrative visual style, characters, subject matter, theme, and plot” (23). Thus, the term “accent” describes not only an audible characteristic of speech but can also be applied to describe many characteristics of artistic products that originate in a particular community.

“Accented films” reflect the dislocation of their authors through migration or exile. According to Naficy the filmmakers operate “in the interstices of cultures and film practices” (4). Thus, Naficy argues, “accented films are interstitial because they are created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices” (4). Naficy’s use of the term interstice refers back to Homi Bhabha, who argues that cultural change originates in the interstices between different cultures. Interstices are the result of “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (2). In the interstice “social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition” (3). Thus, the development of alternative styles and models of cultures, and the questioning of the cultures that dominate the space outside the interstice is encouraged. The questions that are being raised, and the alternative forms of cultures that are being developed in the interstices reflect back on “the political conditions of the present” (3) and “open[s] up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4).

Both critics interpret the foregrounding of accents in cultural products – films and poetry – as a reaffirmation of cultures and identities that are under pressure to conform to another culture. In this chapter I will problematize this view. While the performance of accents can fulfil the positive functions of community affirmation, community building and community defence, Beasley’s and Naficy’s analyses are problematic in one respect. They both base their argument on the existence of an “official” (non-) accent. Their accented poets and filmmakers deviate from this standard and in doing so perform a different identity and an act of resistance against the pressure to conform. Neither Beasley nor Naficy address questions like the following: Who decides what is the “official”, standard speech? Once there is one, can it be changed? If an accent indicates a deviation in whatever sense, even a
positive one, then those who decide what is the “official” speech and what is not decide on what is normal and consequently, on what is strange. For what reasons are such decisions made, and by whom? Who conferred the authority on the decision-makers?

These questions gain urgency when one takes into account that the people who are recognizable as strangers by their accent have come to a place to stay. If the “original” culture keeps conceiving of them and their cultural practices as “accented”, this is an attempt at exclusion. How does the notion of accent, then, affect power relations in a society?

The second element of Naficy’s and Beasley’s approach that I find problematic concerns the concept of space. Naficy describes accented filmmakers as situated in what he calls interstices. The metaphor indicates that these filmmakers do not live in the same space as the people who inhabited this region previously. Are the accented artists squeezed into the interstice, or suspended in the act of straddling the interstices, because they are not welcome in this other place that has no name, or do they embrace the position they are in? The choice of withdrawal into the interstice or a move into the unnamed, previously inhabited “spaces” turns out to be a crucial question in representing and analysing “accented cultures”. At stake is the question of how different cultures that coexist in the same region negotiate their contacts with each other, and how “accented” cultures negotiate their contacts with their surroundings.

The nature of this negotiation is addressed by Naficy in a contrastive analysis of “accented cinema” and Third Cinema:

As a cinema of displacement, however, the accented cinema is much more situated than the Third Cinema, for it is necessarily made by (and often for) specific displaced subjects and diasporized communities. Less polemical than the Third Cinema, it is nevertheless a political cinema that stands opposed to authoritarianism and oppression. If Third Cinema films generally advocated class struggle and armed struggle, accented films favour discursive and semiotic struggles. Although not necessarily Marxist or even socialist like the Third Cinema, the accented cinema is an *engagé* cinema. (30-31)

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119 “Third Cinema” is a current of cinema that opposes neocolonialism, capitalism, and Hollywood cinema, the latter being considered as a strategy to make money and numb the capacity for critical thinking of the viewer. The term was coined after the manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema” by the Latin American filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. For more detailed information see Solanas and Getino 1976 and Wayne 2001.
In this passage Naficy explicitly constructs an opposition. He first establishes that accented cinema is “much more situated” because its production and its address are specific subjects and communities, not the general public. He then characterizes the address of Third Cinema to the general public as polemical. In defining the Third Cinema as polemical, “socialist or even Marxist” and as advocating political struggle, and in opposing Third Cinema to the “much more situated”, more specific, political, engagé and discursively and semiotically struggling “accented cinema” Naficy suggests that one is either group-specific or one advocates concrete political demands, that one either advocates concrete strategies of political struggle or engages in discursive and semiotic struggles. Naficy seems to suggest that an art form is more successful when it is not polemical and does not put forward any concrete political strategies, but instead engages in discursive and semiotic struggles and is directed mainly towards its own community. It is nevertheless morally equally astute because it takes a general stand against authoritarianism and oppression. Comparing the two cinemas in terms of such a contradiction allows Naficy to separate style from content and to subordinate content to style because style in terms of Naficy’s analysis becomes a performance of basic political demands and attitudes.

Such an approach is problematic in two respects. The first problem concerns the relation between goals and targets. Taking a general stand against authoritarianism and oppression might be enough if the “accented culture” does not seek to move into the space of the “host” society and is not under attack from it. However, the moment a group comes under attack it will have to develop some kind of strategy to concretely defend its rights and in doing so, engage in a – possibly unfriendly or even openly antagonistic – contact with its surroundings. Such a strategy will necessarily have to include some form of address and precise formulation of demands that is directed towards the outside and as a consequence, has two aspects. One aspect would be the reaffirmation of the identity of the “accented culture”.

The second problematic aspect of this first problem would be the development of political strategies in interaction with the reaffirmation of that identity. In his comparative analysis of Third Cinema and “accented cinema” Naficy stops short of the second aspect. The reason he implicitly gives is that he associates the only concrete strategies he mentions, class struggle and armed struggle, with polemics. On these grounds he dismisses them. But instead of analysing whether the discursive and semiotic struggles of “accented cinema” lead to alternative strategies of engagement, he seems to consider the development of such strategies obsolete because the reaffirmation of a cultural identity according to Naficy is
already a political statement. However, a statement does not necessarily solicit a response and is thus something entirely different than a demand. By not making this difference Naficy’s argument leads to a seeming politicisation of the discursive and semiotic struggles of “accented cinema”, but it does so at the expense of and sacrificing concrete political demands.  

The second problem I see with Naficy’s approach has to do with style. An “accented style” can be an expression of cultural identity. But, as Peter Hitchcock points out in his article “Decolonizing (the) English”, it can be easily appropriated by the culture it seeks to affirm itself against. Hitchcock points out that:

the nature of racism, which also finds its way into multiculturalism, includes the fetish of the other, the desire of the other, which must disavow the other’s desire yet simultaneously make the other “palatable” as Fanon puts it. It is not just a psychic process, which is often how both Fanon and Marx are misread on the question of the fetish: it is a concrete invitation to otherness to sustain the subject that otherwise denies the other. (763)

“Accented” cultural products might therefore be perfectly acceptable for an “unaccented” culture because they provide an example against which the “unaccented” culture can define itself. As Hitchcock puts it, much “is indeed palatable in that it places cultural difference in proximity yet simultaneously sustains an idea of nation that remains exclusionary” (764).

Hitchcock raises the question of “whether what reviles and desires is overly upset by a stylish intervention” (764) if such stylish interventions are not “concerned with a cultural politics that would, in appropriating ‘being British,’ disrupt the race and class hierarchies that have secured colonial and colonizing epistemes” (764). Such cultural products question and redefine what it means to “be British” and as a consequence call for serious changes in society’s perception of its cultural identity because they establish “the right to lead in cultural matters, the right to export a collective identity in such a way that borders are not effaced, but enhanced” (Brennan 2001b: 687).

120 Naficy’s argument builds upon and is liable to the same criticism as Bhabha’s development of the third space of theory (see chapter 1).

121 At this moment I choose to read the conflict I just outlined through the vocabulary of Naficy and Hitchcock. It is also possible to read it through a critique of the separations of the paradigms of recognition and of redistribution, most prominently discussed by Nancy Fraser (Fraser 1999, 2000). In my paper “Political Performance Poetry and the Market” I read Johnson’s poetry in terms of Fraser’s critique.
The poetry of Johnson is a case in point for Hitchcock’s and Brennan’s arguments. Johnson was born in 1951 in Kingston, Jamaica, where he spent the first 11 years of his life. He initially lived with his parents in Kingston and then, when his mother went to England to look for a better job, in the Jamaican countryside with his grandmother. At the age of 11, Johnson followed his mother to England and lived with her in Brixton. While he was still at school he joined the Black Panthers. There he developed his first literary aspirations, discovering Black literature and meeting up with other young people interested in writing, to discuss their texts. He eventually got together with a reggae group called Rasta Love and in close co-operation with them developed some of the poems that were later released on his first CD *Dread Beat an Blood* (1978). These poems are some of the first examples of the U.K. version of dub poetry.

“Dub poetry”, some of whose major representatives besides Johnson include Jean Binta Breeze, Benjamin Zephaniah, Michael Smith, Mutabaraku and others, refers to poetry that is performed with a reggae track. The words are spoken over the reggae track. When the track is removed the reggae rhythm remains in the poetry. Johnson himself coined the term “dub poetry” during his studies of sociology at Goldsmith’s College. At that time he worked on a sociological analysis of reggae and used the term “dub lyricism” to refer to reggae DJs as poets because he viewed them as “people doing (…) spontaneous oral poetry, documenting what was happening in a society at a particular time” (Harris and White 60). Johnson sees his task as a poet along similar lines. He points out that he started writing in order to give voice to the concerns of his community:

> My initial impetus to write had nothing to do with a feel for poetry or a grounding in poetry, rather it was an urgency to express the anger and the frustrations and the hopes and the aspirations of my generation growing up in this country under the shadow of racism. (Caesar 62)

Consequently Johnson has always combined his work as a poet with his work as a political activist, first for the Black Panthers and then for the Race Today Collective.

In his poetic and cultural work he practices and defends accents as a performance of an independent cultural identity that has led him to take a political position. His use of the

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122 Hitchcock explains the genealogy of the terms “dub poetry” and “dub lyricism” in slightly different terms than Harris and White do. In Hitchcock 1993 he points out the difference between the two: “The main difference, however, is that dub poetry privileges the word over the music, or else incorporates the rhythm of the instruments into its enunciation. For LKJ in particular, the poetry should outlast its musical accompaniment or affiliation” (no page numbers).
accent in the context of political militancy distinguishes his approach from that of the accentuated filmmakers whose work is analysed by Naficy. Whereas Naficy can separate the advocation of class struggle and armed struggle from that of discursive and semiotic struggles, Johnson’s work mobilizes both types of struggle. As we will see, this connection between political struggle and accented speech – or, phrased differently, between content and style – makes Johnson’s work unavailable for those who invite “otherness to sustain the subject that is otherwise other”, to return to the formulation by Hitchcock that I quoted earlier. In such a use of accented speech the analytical scope of the concept of accent comes to exceed the description of a way of speaking. Rather, it captures the effect of spilling over from the entity of the poem into the cultural sphere.

The Inseparability of Style and Content
The poetry of Johnson exemplifies a product of an “accented” culture that sees itself under attack from the “unaccented” culture of the country they both live in. To voice his community’s concerns Johnson uses its traditional speech patterns and rhythms. “Dub poetry” with its base in reggae expresses certain cultural values and class alignments: reggae has played a crucial role in developing a Caribbean cultural identity because it is tied up not only with a particular rhythm but also with a dialect, and it first became commercially successful through the sound systems that operated in Kingston’s ghettos. In his study of reggae, Bass Culture, Lloyd Bradley places Johnson within this mixture of rhythm, music, dialect and politics:

Linton’s poetry was an intrinsically Jamaican medium, dating back to long before roots deejays took it upon themselves to sound genuinely Jamaican. Dialect poetry and plays had been performed by black Jamaicans since the days of slavery as a way to establish some form of cultural identity and send up the planters and their flunkeys back in the slave quarters. Dramatist, actress, orator and dialect poet Louise “Miss Lou” Bennett is probably roots poetry’s most famous exponent, moving seamlessly from folk tales to sly (and not so sly) sideswipes at authority. [. . . .] African anthem meets sugar plantation work song meets revivalist meeting meets dubwise. Which is the point at which Linton took it up and added riddim and a large helping of black British political awareness. (Bradley 436-37)
Embedded in this tradition, Johnson shifted the emphasis between language and music. He got together with musician Dennis Bovell and the two started recording, putting Johnson’s poems to music instead of speaking poetry over an already existing track:

This was like toasting, but approached from completely the opposite direction inasmuch as the music was written to fit the words [. . .] In this way, stories could be told and points made with far more clarity and precision than if the main concern was riding the rhythm. (Bradley 437)\(^{123}\)

The texts themselves are performed in a mixture of Caribbean and British English, or as Bradley puts it, in “an easily understood textbook patois” (Bradley 437). The content of Johnson’s poetry is thus accessible to English and Caribbean listeners alike.\(^{124}\)

I will now give a brief analysis of two of Johnson’s poems that demonstrate that the inseparability of form and content in his work reflects the inseparability of the paradigms of redistribution and of recognition. In the first poem “It Dread Inna Inglan” the speaker assumes the position of a spokesman. Thus, it forms parts of a series of poems that I propose to call Johnson’s “spokesman poems”. In these poems he takes on the function of spokesman for campaigns, in this case for the campaign to free George Lindo, a black man from Bradford who was framed by the police for a robbery. In the poem he emphasizes the ability of his community to take care of its concerns with the campaign:

```
dem frame-up George Lindo
up in Bradford Toun
but di Bradford Blacks
dem a rally roun

mi se dem frame-up George Lindo
up in Bradford Toun
but di Bradford Blacks
```

\(^{123}\) Toasting is a poetic or musical form that builds up on African oral traditions. In Africa, a toaster recounts the legends and myths of his community. The Jamaican form of toasting was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A DJ would play the latest hits on his sound system and speak his own “lyrics”, or “toast” on top of the track. Hence, whereas toasting adds the words to the track, dub poetry adds the track to the words.

\(^{124}\) For reasons of space and the scope of this study I give only this short overview of dub poetry. For further information please see Cooper 1993 and Habekost 1993, among others. For an analysis of dub poetry and its performance of cultural identity through dread see Hitchcock 1993.
dem a rally roun…

Maggi Thatcha on di go
Wid a racist show
But a she haffi go
Kaw,
Rite now,
African
Asian
West Indian
An’ Black British
Stan firm inna Inglan
Inna disya time yah

Far no mattah wat dey say,
Come wat may,
We are here to stay
Inna Inglan,
Inna disya time yah…

The seemingly easy structure and the repetition in the beginning make the poem a powerful and effective articulation of a particular political demand – freedom for George Lindo – but it also places this demand within the context of the representation of the concerns of the Black community in England.\footnote{One of the causes that Johnson supports in some of his most famous poems is the Notting Hill Carnival. I do not address any of these poems in this study. Peeren discusses Johnson’s work in her analysis of the Notting Hill Carnival through a Bakhtinian approach.}

The poem states and performs, and hence demonstrates in logic as well as style, that black people are perfectly able to defend their rights and that they do so from a position of moral strength because they are “here to stay”. This statement is a crucial aspect of Johnson’s political attitude:

From an early age [ . . . ] I realized that black people were in this country to stay and we had to accept that we weren’t going anywhere, [ . . . ] and we had to accept that we’re a part of Britain and that we had to build our own independent institutions
Thus, the poem is not exclusively addressed to the Black community. White people will have to learn to read poetry like Johnson’s and they will have to accept it on its own terms. These terms include white peoples’ willingness to learn to read and understand Johnson’s mixture of Jamaican patois and English, and to conceive of poetry as rhythmic and as publicly spoken and performed. Furthermore, white readers have to engage with a rhythm in language that they are not accustomed to and that denotes certain cultural and social affiliations. This does not mean that they need to meddle with interior concerns of the Black community.

Both McGuirk and Hitchcock point out that in poems like “New Craas Massakah”, which commemorates the death of 13 young Blacks at a dance club allegedly destroyed by an arson attack, the addressee is the Black community and not the public at large. The reason is that the focus of “New Craas Massakah” lies on remembering the massacre itself. The white British public cannot perform such an act of remembering because the victims were unknown to them. The white British public can only remember its own attitude towards the event and the miscarriage of justice that was the result of it. If the white British public were integrated into the same act of remembering as the Black community, it would bracket the memory of its own guilt and responsibility.

Consequently, Johnson rejects benevolent attempts of white groups to take over the demands of the Black community, a rejection he articulates in “Independent Intavenshan”:

Make dem gwaan
Now it calm
But a whi who haff really ride di staam
(repeated)

Wat a cheek
Dem t’ink we meek
An’wi can’t speak up fi wi self
(repeated)
Di SWP can’t set wi free
Di IMG can’t dhu it fi wi
Di Communist Pasty, cho, dem too awty-fawty
An’di labahrites dem naw goh fite fi rites

In terms of language and the issue of “accent”, the importance of style becomes clear in this example. If the white groups Johnson mentions took over the concerns of the Black movement, they would formulate them in their own language, and put them forward in their own political style. The concerns would be separated from the ways of life and the concrete experience of the community that is concerned, but not heard publicly as addressing the issue. In presenting the concerns of the black community as their own concerns such predominantly white political movements would not help, but sabotage the concerns of the black movement. And in the political realm the black movement would seem obsolete because the better-known movements would assimilate and champion their causes.

Finally the “adoption” of black issues by groups that represent the system of “white” society can be an easy way around acknowledging that racism is not the problem of black communities (whose problem is the consequences of racism), but the problem of white communities. Therefore, predominantly white social movements need to address racism and the problems related to it from a different perspective than the black movement. They need to address it not only by making themselves the “champions” of black issues, but also by addressing the origins and the reasons for the pervasiveness of racism within their own social and political communities. The policies put forward in “Independent Intavenshan” attempt to avoid the conflation of the approaches the black movement takes in dealing with the consequences of racism with the approaches that white societal groups would have to take in dealing with the causes and the consequences of racism.

Here language and in particular Dub Poetry as a fusion of language with a musical style that has certain cultural and spiritual values attached to it becomes a very practical way to question power relations. Johnson does not ask only for political rights to be written down and put into practice, he also insists on the right of his community to put their demands forward in their own way, practising a Britishness that is different to what many conceive of as English. The English will have to learn to understand this language, to read this style, and they have to accept that Johnson’s people as a part of British society have the right to speak about their own issues in their own manner.
Johnson’s poetry thus activates what Peter Hitchcock calls the “Caliban Clause” in the English language:

The decolonizing “I” is one that does not write out English as the standard against which its acculturation must be measured; rather, it questions that which would exclude the forms in which it finds linguistic expression. [. . . .] This is the Caliban clause in English, the weak spot in cultural hegemony where language is appropriated for ends not altogether English as a posited norm. (761)

In connecting style and content, in performing his community’s rights through language and sound, in practising the equality of his English-English/Caribbean-English mixture with British-English and in tying the performance of language to concrete political demands and examples of political struggle, Johnson is questioning social structures as well as their linguistic expression. Viewed in terms of accents and “accented cultures”, Johnson’s poetics raise the following question: if English “as the standard against which acculturation must be measured” is being questioned so thoroughly, then how can one determine what is an accent and what is not?

It is important to note that this question is not being raised from a location such as Bhabha’s “beyond” nor from a “third space”. Let me take a look at Bhabha’s reading of Derek Walcott’s poem “Names” to explain my point. Bhabha writes that nowhere did he find “the concept of the right to signify more proudly evoked than in Derek Walcott’s poem on the colonization of the Caribbean as the possession of space through the power of naming” (231). He then goes on to say that:

Walcott’s purpose is not to oppose the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native voice. He proposes to go beyond such binaries of power in order to reorganize our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics. (Bhabha 233)

At this point Bhabha’s reading of Walcott makes a similar argumentative jump as Naficy’s analysis of Third Cinema and “accented cinema”. Bhabha posits an implicit contradiction. He equalizes the opposition of “the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native ways” with a binary of power and points out in a positive manner that Walcott goes “beyond such binaries of power in order to reorganize our sense
of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics”. As Naficy disregards the development of concrete political strategies because armed struggle and class struggle can be polemical, Bhabha fails to discuss the opposition of “the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native voice” because there is a better option, namely the reorganization of our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics.

Johnson’s strategy, however, is a different one. He acknowledges the “opposition of the pedagogy of the imperialist noun to the inflectional appropriation of the native voice”, addresses the pedagogy of the imperialist noun by emphasizing the native voice much in the tradition of Kamau Brathwaite’s essay “History of the Voice” and in doing so, attempts “the reorganisation of our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics”. None of these different aspects of his poetics can work without the other because it is precisely the insight into how power relations have affected language and the contestation of this mechanism that allows the reorganization of our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics. In turn, the reorganizing of our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics is one – but not the only – powerful instrument to contest what Bhabha calls “the pedagogy of the imperialist noun”. Johnson points out again and again that this pedagogy is as lively as ever, though it might have shifted the location of its main activity from Jamaica to the British Islands.

To address and fight this powerful presence is one of the reasons for Johnson’s double strategy of engagement with the other culture in his mode of address and in his language, and of the reaffirmation of his community’s cultural identity. In this logic there is certainly a binary opposition and there is an inside and an outside, notions that Bhabha contests in his The Location of Culture. However, these binary oppositions are not created by Johnson. They are created by racism and colonialism and are being enforced by underpayment, police brutality and racial discrimination. To contest these very present forces and their consequences Johnson cannot ask his questions about the validity of accents from the beyond. In the poetry of Johnson there is no beyond, neither spatially nor temporally. There is the here and now, and his objective is to develop a form of engagement that allows different cultures to share it.126

126 Brathwaite and Walcott stand for opposing models of politics, poetics and language policies. Their differences were most poignantly expressed in the so-called Walcott-Brathwaite debate (see Ismond 1971 and Collier 1985). Brathwaite is considered to be far more radical in his rejection of British cultural models and in his emphasis on Nation Language. Arguing that Walcott provides a blueprint for Caribbean resistance against the colonial power implies taking his side against the politically far more radical Brathwaite.
In Johnson’s work the accent performs the speaker’s cultural identity, which is defining for both the style and the content of his poetry. Hence, Johnson’s use of the accent in his poetry demonstrates that in the struggle for social justice and racial equality semiotic and activist or militant strategies are equally important and indeed, inseparable from each other.

**Translation in Performance**

I now turn to the work of Fiechtner and Vesely, two poets who also address the issue of cultural identity, albeit from different perspectives and in a different country. Both poets are almost the same age as Johnson (Vesely was born in 1952 and in Fiechtner in 1955) and also started performing in the mid-1970s. Fiechtner was born in Germany, grew up in Latin America, and returned to Germany as a teenager. Vesely was born in Chile, jailed after the coup of General Pinochet and, after spending two years in concentration camps and prisons, was sent into exile in Germany, where he still lives.

The two artists met coincidentally at a festival where Fiechtner was to perform a poetry recital and Vesely was to perform as a songwriter. Since the organizers were short of a room, the two were asked to shorten their respective performances and follow upon each other’s performances in the same room. Rather than doing that, they decided to spontaneously perform together. However, they hardly knew each other’s work (Fiechtner knew only very few of Vesely’s poems) and Vesely did not even understand German. Hence, the tunes he used to accompany Fiechtner’s reading interacted solely with the sonic elements of Fiechtner’s language and speaking. As a result, to this day the two artists characterize their own performances as a “conversation between music and words, and sometimes they get into a discussion with each other, and sometimes they even fight” (Fiechtner and Vesely in personal conversation, March 2003). This improvised performance was the first of many concert readings, the performance form that has become characteristic for Fiechtner and Vesely.

This situation makes it appealing to analyze the concert reading as a series of translations. They are songs written and performed by Vesely, alternating with poems written and read by Fiechtner, but also with poems written by Fiechtner that Vesely has put to music, and with poems written in Spanish by Vesely that Fiechtner has translated into German. Thus, the artists continuously probe the possibilities and impossibilities of translating spoken word into music, music into spoken word, German into Spanish, and
Spanish into German. In the performances the translated version and the original version exist on equal footing next to each other.

One example is the piece “Progress”. It exists in three versions: as a poem by Fiechtner, a song text by Vesely, and finally as the song itself, in which Vesely combines the German and the Spanish text. This is the text of Fiechtner’s poem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fortschritt</td>
<td>Progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niemand mehr da</td>
<td>Nobody left here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>der anzuflehen ware</td>
<td>to plead with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mit Gebet und Räucherwerk</td>
<td>with incense and prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niemand mehr da</td>
<td>Nobody left here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dessen Bild herumzutragen wäre</td>
<td>whose picture we could carry around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mit Parole und Transparent</td>
<td>on slogans and banners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niemand mehr da</td>
<td>Nobody left here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dem zu folgen sich lohnte.</td>
<td>who would be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>worth following.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es muss nun endlich</td>
<td>Finally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alles aus uns selber kommen.</td>
<td>everything has to come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from ourselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Das hat alles ein bisschen</td>
<td>That has made everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gefährlicher gemacht.</td>
<td>a little more dangerous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auch uns.</td>
<td>Including ourselves.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fiechtner’s language has a peculiar rhythm for German. It is very musical, emphasizing the rhythm of the words and lines. Because people do not usually expect this from contemporary German poetry, they are often startled by Fiechtner’s poems. When they hear him read this effect is increased. Many people at first have the impression that Fiechtner has a foreign accent that they cannot place. As they keep listening they come to the conclusion that they are wrong and that he must be German, but a sense of strangeness or peculiarity remains. I contend that this is partly due to the fact that Fiechtner speaks
unusually clearly, but also to the way he works with sound and rhythm. Both in writing and in speech his language has a soft and musical timbre that comes from Spanish. Thus, his experience of living in a different language for many years has inflected his “native” language through Spanish.

Vesely’s version of “Progress” is a type of translation of Fiechtner’s piece that is really a response:

**Fortschritt**

Sergio Vesely

Aquí no hay quien valga tanto  There is no-one left here to take the place
Como aquel santo que se venera  of some saint we could worship,
Ni como quien llega a emblema  or of one of those that come with meaning,
O quien evocaran los cantos  or of one of those that is evoked by songs

No queda nada mas que ponerle  There is nothing left to do
El hombro a la vida  but to take on life with both hands
Y tirar para adelante  and pull forward

El tiempo esta muy cambiante  Times are changing
Y más cambiante esta la gente.  and people are changing even more

Both texts address the same issue. They state that there are no set ideologies or religions left to follow. The leaders are gone. People have to take life in their own hands and make their own history. The two texts share certain key words, lines and ideas. One of them is the title, which in the Spanish version that was given to me by Vesely was not translated, but left in German. Another shared element is the claim that there are no leaders left, and the identification of certain areas from which the former figures of identification came, such as the Church and political movements. But in spite of their similarities the texts have a slightly different take on the issues they raise. Fiechtner’s poem has an ironic tone to it and points out that the absence of ideologies makes everything more dangerous and unpredictable. This is viewed as neither good nor bad; it is presented as an observation. The last line “auch uns” includes the speaker. Hence, what has become more dangerous refers also to people, not only to ideas.
The song text focuses more on the theme of change. As a direct result from the lack of leadership, times and people are “cambiante”. “Cambiante” refers to being willing to change, or being able to change, but not yet “changing”. It is therefore left unclear whether there will be a change or not. The aspect of danger is implied as one aspect of the insecurity and unpredictability of the situation described, but it is not explicitly mentioned. The speaker is placed in a more distanced relationship to the people than in the poem because he is not implicitly included as in the poem’s use of “us”. He seems to be watching the situation, waiting for what will happen. Whereas the poem is describing a situation that happens to everyone including the speaker, and in which the disappearance of authorities inevitably will lead to a change, the song text represents the same situation from a distance, agreeing with the basic assessment of the situation, but not as certain about its consequences.

The song version integrates the German and the Spanish text. Vesely first sings the Spanish version, then the German version with the interjection “no existe nadie” after the third stanza, then the Spanish version, then the German version with the last two lines repeated three times. This repetition gives the listener the possibility to absorb both versions, and the words to unfold their full effect and to interact with the music. The translation between the languages and the musicalization of the text has now become a dialogue between two genres, two cultures, two languages, and two people. This dialogue can do without an original; whether the poem or the song was there first does not matter, what matters is the dialogue that the original strikes up.

Within such a constellation the term “accent” becomes irrelevant. In Fiechtner’s and Vesely’s work everybody has an accent, one person or poem might even have several. There is no norm and no original except for those that are being created by the dialogue between two people who have moved between different cultures. Furthermore, the performance practice of Fiechtner and Vesely disputes the notion of an “authentic” text that is being transferred into a different language or medium. I therefore suggest to discard the term “accent” for an analysis of Fiechtner’s and Vesely’s intercultural performances, though not for the work of all performance poets.

The term “trace” might offer a different, more useful approach. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “trace” as “a mark or line left by something that has passed; a sign or evidence of some past thing”. This definition implies that while a trace is a remnant of something past, it also bears witness to the impact that things past have had on the present. In her article “Translating Translation” Bal proposes to treat accents as untranslatable
traces, as remainders of the language that is not being spoken and as the experiences of the past that impact on the present. Translations that are marked by these traces become “accented translations” (2006). In the case of Fiechtner and Vesely accents certainly are the “traces” of their past experiences, of the experience of changing continents and of the impact that their countries’ histories have had on their and our presence. The translations do not seek to mute these traces or integrate them into a different cultural or mediatic context. Rather, they emphasize their peculiarity as they travel from one culture and from one medium to the other and back.

**History with an Accent, History with A Trace**

Whereas the concept of the trace usefully replaces that of the accent in an analysis of the poetry of Fiechtner and Vesely, the accent in the enlarged conceptualization I suggested in my analysis of some of Johnson’s poems remains useful for the analysis of poetry that places a stronger emphasis on the cultural origin of the speaker’s identity, as Johnson’s poetry does in contradistinction to Fiechtner’s and Vesely’s. In this section I clarify my differentiation between the accent and the trace through an analysis of the rewriting of history by the three poets.

In the beginning of this chapter I quoted Naficy’s argument that the accent can be “one of the most intimate and powerful markers of group identity and solidarity, as well as of individual difference and personality” (Naficy 23). I want to return to the tension between the individual and the communal that is indicated by this quote. A similar tension emerged in my analysis of the poetry of circumstance in chapter 2. However, in chapter 2 I took recourse to the writings of white middle-class writers like Éluard and Neruda. I will now reconsider the relationship between the poet and his community through the perspective of the writing of “accented” history. Central to my analysis is the enquiry into political agency in the process of making accented history.

The position of the subject and the community in history is one of the most important recurring motives in the work of Johnson, Fiechtner and Vesely. “Progress”, for one, introduces this topic. In this piece Fiechtner and Vesely argue that human beings will have to make their own history according to their own standards. The two poets reject any master narratives or dominant ideologies that give the correct directions. However, they do not displace political agency into creativity along the lines of the argument that I criticized with Brennan in chapter 1. Rather, they advocate a rethinking of political agency in terms of the dissident currents in German culture.
In his poem “Mekin Histri” Johnson also proposes a rewriting of history, though from an entirely different perspective. Black people started to arrive in Britain in large numbers after 1945. While they brought their heritages with them, they also had to literally “make history” in a country where they had not been before. Moreover, they had to make history from a subaltern, “accented” position. One of the great achievements of Johnson is his poetic rewriting of historical events, for example of the Brixton riots in “The Great Insurrection” and of the struggle against the suspension law in “Sonny’s Lettah”. He develops an entirely new vocabulary that allows him to present these events through the perspective of the Black community.

In “Mekin Histri” Johnson presents “making history” as a series of acts of resistance against the racist and oppressive forces that do not want to grant a space to the cultures of colored people. The poem starts with a direct address of the forces of oppression, mocking their expectation that Black people would continue to put up with oppression:

Now tell mi someting
Mistah govaament man
Tell mi something

How lang yu really feel
Yu coulda keep wi andah heel
Wen di trute done reveal
Bout how yu grab an steal
Bout how yu mek zu crooked deal
Mek yu crooked deal?

127 The Gramscian concept of the subaltern has been developed in the context of representation most famously by Spivak and Beverley (1999). In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak, or at least not in a way that could be understood by the hegemonic cultures, because representation takes place within the framework of the hegemonic culture. Beverley agrees with Spivak on this basic analysis but responds with a different methodology, that of subaltern studies. Thus, whereas Spivak responds with a deconstructionist approach, Beverley proposes the strategy of “writing in reverse” of academic studies. Hitchcock indicates that dub poetry questions both approaches because “[. . .] if the subaltern does not speak, as such, it is only within the restrictive logics and codes of the dominant discourse. This raises the paradox of dub once more, for there the subaltern is not represented but is heard. On the one hand, the social conditions dub critiques engage a particular community and context; on the other, the alienating English of dub distances the normative and normalizing tones of the linguistic orthodoxy [. . .]” (Hitchcock 1993, no page numbers).

128 I am grateful to Ben Bollig for pointing this out to me.
Johnson outlines the mechanisms of oppression – lies and exploitation – and then goes on to describe incidents of rebellion against oppression:

Well doun in Soutall
Where Peach did get fall
Di Asians dem faam-up a human wall
Genes di fashist an dem police sheil
An dem show dat di Asians gat plental zeal
Gat plenty zeal
Gat plenty zeal

This structure is repeated throughout the poem. Johnson addresses first the gouvernment, then the police force, then the right-wing movement. After one stanza of accusation follows a stanza of an example of resistance, always ending with the refrain

It is no mistri
Wi mekin histri
It is noh mistri
Wi winnin vietri

In his accusation of the mechanisms of oppression Johnson addresses a violence that operates on all levels of society: economic and intellectual violence as committed by the government, physical and system-inherent violence committed by the police force; and the brutalities committed by right-wing movements that are not being prevented by the police. The narration of the incidences of oppression alternates with examples of resistance by Black people and with the refrain, thus performing an alternation between attack and defense, emphasizing the readiness of the Black movement to counter any attacks their people are subjected to. Violence committed by black people is presented as the only possible response to the violent onslaught that they are confronted with from the side of their oppressors. In other words, the forces of oppression had guns; the black movement did not, but due to their unity and courage they won anyway:

Well doun in Bristal
Dey had noh pistal
But dem chace di babylan away
Man yu shooda si yu babylan
How dem really run away
Yu shoo da si yu babylan dem dig-up dat day
Dig-up dat day
Dig-up dat day

At the base of Johnson’s rewriting of history is his own inclusion into the movement. He never speaks of “I” but always of “wi”, thus connecting his retelling of history with the action undertaken by the movement. The movement resists violence. The poet is a participant in the resistance. Additionally, he is responsible for putting the disparate events together into one coherent accented narrative of oppression and resistance. I call this narrative “accented” because it is marked by the creole language, the Jamaican accent, the speech rhythm, the reggae track and, more importantly, by a point of view that carries and performs the traces of past experiences and of a particular cultural identity. The narrative is also accented because its rhythms, its structure, the repetitions and the refrain make it an oral text rather than a written one. History is being made and told right in this moment, rather than written down in and studied from a book.

I will now turn to a different mode of making and rewriting of history, practised in a sequence from a concert reading by Fiechtner and Vesely. This reading, which took place in March 2003 in Amsterdam, was atypical in that it did not treat one particular theme, as the concert readings usually do, but was designed to give a general introduction to the work of Fiechtner of Vesely. One of the sequences consisted of Vesely’s musicalization of the poem “The German Refugees” (“Die deutschen Flüchtlinge”) by Ludwig Pfau and Fiechtner’s reading of his poem “Die Ruinen unsrer Häuser”. Pfau’s poem was written in 1847, during the period know as “Deutscher Vormärz”. This period in German history was characterized by the growing opposition against the regimes of the German states and its increasingly violent repression. Many of those who supported oppositional forces spent many years in prison or had to go into exile, Pfau among them. In his poem “Die deutschen Flüchtlinge” he addresses the situation of German refugees.

The poem’s text is addressed to people outside Germany, explaining to them the situation of the German refugees who are arriving in their countries. The first stanza gives a picture of the refugees: they are poor – beggars –, they look worn and their faces are marked by the troubles they have suffered. Deeply rooted in their hearts they carry the
anguish of their people; thus they are inseparable from their people but cannot stay with them in their country. The one thing they have not lost is their pride. The second stanza addresses the situation of exile. It speaks about uprootedness, homesickness, depression and, as a result, the refugee’s incapacity to do anything with themselves in a strange country. In the last stanza the speaker explains that if the refugees had compromised, if they had forsaken their desire for liberty and their pride and had become the servants of the regime, they could have chosen a comfortable life. But faced with this choice they called out for freedom and justice, spoke up for the oppressed and continued with their struggle. As a result, going home would mean to go to prison. Pfau ends each stanza with a plea for kindness towards the German beggars.

The song begins with Vesely whistling the first phrases of a tune that is familiar to any German, the German national anthem. But by the technique he uses – whistling – he estranges the tune from his listeners. The German national anthem is known to most Germans only in a rhythmically strict version that is presented by official choirs or at international football games. Individuals do not usually whistle it, and especially not in the strange rhythm that Vesely applies to it as he shortens some notes and lengthens others. Vesely’s version is his individual interpretation of the German national anthem; it is quiet, pensive, and has a note of sadness to it. In presenting it in this way, Vesely reclaims it from its pompous and abstract life as a national anthem. He reminds his audience that it was originally the song of a protest movement, and that it was sung and whistled by its supporters on many occasions.

The tune of the national anthem fades into the song itself, which Vesely sings with a strong Chilean accent. The tune takes recourse to German songwriting traditions and at the same time calls to mind the music of South American songwriters like Victor Jara, Daniel Viglietti and others. This style of music is easily recognized by most Germans, and the audience will thus be able to understand the connection Vesely himself made immediately when he first read the poetry of the Vormärz, and that he now suggests by putting Pfau’s 150-year-old text to music: that the persecution Pfau speaks about is still happening, and that the struggle of the German refugees is still being fought, albeit in different places.

Vesely’s performance reminds his listeners that the Federal Republic of Germany has constructed its identity supposedly on a tradition of resistance against oppression and of a struggle for freedom. By adopting this particular song as a national anthem the Federal Republic of Germany explicitly aligns itself with this tradition and reclaims the “Song of the Germans” from the abuse of its first stanza by the Nazis (who had used it as national
anthem). In combining the national anthem with a song on persecution and exile, Vesely reminds his listeners that precisely because of these ideals those who were considered the ideological forefathers of the current German republic were exiled, and had to live a poor life as refugees. The historical connection he suggests with today’s struggles for freedom and democracy, and today’s refugees, encourages his listeners to reflect on in how contemporary Germany does justice to its political heritage in its treatment of those who walk today in the paths of Germany’s ideological forefathers.

The second claim Vesely makes by means of the whistling and the strange rhythm regards the construction of a national identity. He demonstrates that the song that is one of the most important performances of nation’s patriotism, can be sung in many different rhythms; and the suggestion that is implied is that “being German” can be performed and understood in many different ways, from which each individual has to make a choice. The suggestion that Vesely makes, then, is that there is no unified “nationality”, which would have to be constructed officially and from above. Rather, he suggests that a “nationality” exists in many equal forms, and that each citizen has the right to understand it and live it in their own way.

The question after the contemporary situation of Germany’s supposed political origins can take a chilling form when “The German Refugees” is performed with “The Ruins of our Houses”. This poem addresses one of Germany’s favorite myths of the present day, one that assigns 1945 as a new beginning for the country. At that moment, many houses were literally in ruins. According to popular mythology the material reconstruction of the country led to a new mental construction of the people.

The first lines of the poem already raise doubts about this version of history:

Es ist das alte Leben nicht das aus den Ruinen blüht. It is no new life that prospers from these ruins.
Es ist das alte Leben doch den Fehlern der Ahnen verfallen It is the old life still abandoned to the ancestors’ mistakes wie einem Fluch, es ist as to a curse, it is
dasselbe Leben, noch einmal dasselbe Leben, noch einmal the same life, once again
die alten Untaten erstrebend die alten Untaten erstrebend striving for the misdeeds of the past, es sind dieselben Steine doch es sind dieselben Steine doch these are the same stones still aus denen die neuen Mauern entstehen. from which new walls are being built.
The poem suggests that it is not a new way of life growing out of the ruins, as popular myth will have it, but that the old one coming is back with renewed force. “Life” stands here for a particular mode of thinking and acting, one that once led to the “old misdeeds” and is now pushing in that direction again. What precisely the “old misdeeds” are is purposefully left open. Germany has a very long list of “old misdeeds”. The poem encourages the listener to reflect on what they are and how they were all enabled by a particular attitude.

The first stanza has something very peculiar about it, and upon a closer reading one realizes that this might be because in an unusual formulation, the “life” is posited as the agent of the poem. It is pursuing the old misdeeds seemingly on its own accord. The people who live it appear to be controlled by the life, rather than shaping, living or controlling it.

The second stanza explains in greater detail what precisely the “life” is like:

Es ist die alte Schweigsamkeit

die in den neuen Häusern wohnt
dieselbe Teilnahmslosigkeit
gegen die Leiden der anderen
die alte Ahnungslosigkeit, die
nenenlose Überraschung, wenn wieder
die Zerstörung nicht nur die anderen
trifft, die Fernen, die Fremden

sondern, wie es immer war, zuletzt
auch durch die eigenen Türen dringt.

It is the old silence

that lives in the new houses,

the same indifference

towards the suffering of others

the old cluelessness, the

bewilderment, when once again

destruction not only hits

the others, the far-away, the

strangers

but finally, as it always has,

walks in through these doors.

Considering that in the first stanza the “life” is posited as the agent we now encounter a characterization of the agent that seems strange, for the agent is characterized by “actions” that consist of not doing anything: silence (“schweigen” means “not speaking”), indifference towards the suffering of others, and cluelessness. This tension between being an agent and doing nothing suggests that “doing nothing” is also an action. Indeed, “doing nothing” is to make the choice to leave the field to the powers of destruction.

The poem also slowly starts to dissolve the claim it made before, namely that the life is the agent. If the “life” is characterized by silence, indifference and cluelessness, then there must be someone there who feels these emotions. Life on its own accord cannot be
silent, indifferent or clueless. Thus, the poem encourages the reader to look for one entity that has so far been invisible in the poem. This entity suddenly emerges in the last stanza:

Würden wir doch lernen 
If we’d only learn

die Zerstörer zu ruinieren 
to ruin the destroyers

dann hätten unsere Häuser 
our houses might finally

dann hätten unsere Häuser 
our houses might finally

dann hätten unsere Häuser 
our houses might finally

endlich Ruh’.
find peace.

Suddenly there is a community of addressees that includes the speaker – “we” – and there is another agent in the poem – “the destroyers”. The “we” is startling because it includes the poet and his listeners into the complicity of the “life”. All of a sudden the listener is encouraged to wonder about her own position in the scenario the first two stanzas describe. The introduction of the “destroyers” appeals to her to define her own position in the face of their existence. And finally, the very strange formulation “to ruin the destroyers” opens up the question of what precisely that means, and consequently, how one ruins a destroyer. It seems that the poet is suggesting to not destroy the destroyers, that is, not to retaliate with their own weapons, but to “ruin” them, that is, to annihilate the mechanisms and structures that make their existence possible.

In the last stanza the poem confirms the suspicion that it had already raised in the second one, namely that things do not happen because of “life”, as people often like to claim in an attempt to deny their responsibility. The poem demonstrates that this claim is as absurd as the grammatical construction that Fiechtner introduces in the poem. He demonstrates that circumstances and events are never a product of “life”, but that life is always made by people.

The poem’s strange and seemingly contradictory grammatical constructions causes a sense of unsettlement. There is an agent who does not do anything and finally encourages the question of whether and how this agent can be an agent at all; there is the sudden appearance of subjects who had been hidden between the lines previously. These constructions function in a similar manner as Vesely’s musicalization. They make connections and contradictions visible, and in doing so, put them on the table for discussion and for questioning. Like Vesely’s song, the poem stops at this moment of tension; it needs to do so, because the poet does not want it to provide any answers. Both pieces encourage and open up the possibility for a dialogue, but they do not yet engage in it and thus, do not
monopolize it. The audience does not have to ask the emerging questions to the poets; those
do not seem to be any wiser than the audience. Listeners can discuss these questions later
on with themselves, among each other, or with someone who was not at the performance.
The performance is only the beginning.

The combination of “The Ruins of Our Houses” with “The German Refugees” in
the performance opens up a lot of possible points of discussion. It points out, for example,
that those who seem to be others, for example refugees or people being in prison in other
countries, are not all that different from the Germans, because many Germans were in the
exact same position not so long ago. The combination also intimates that there is an
alternative to the “old life” in “The Ruins”. Pfau’s refugees, the people who first sang and
whistled the German national anthem, became refugees because they spoke up precisely
against the tradition of silence and subordination; thus, they are evidence that there are
other possibilities.

The three poets’ renditions of historical ev-
dents are accented through their use of
dialect, real and metaphorical accents of language, and through their practice of accenting
through music. The difference between Johnson on the one hand, and Fiechtner and Vesely
on the other hand lies in their very different points of departure. In Johnson’s case the accent
functions as a marker of group identity and solidarity in the sense of Naficy. In
contradistinction to his use of accent, Fiechtner and Vesely use accents to dissolve the
notion of community. They do not attempt to construct group identity and solidarity on the
basis of cultural identity; instead, they question and destabilize notions of group identity.
Thus, the histories they propose to write or that they rewrite are better described as being
characterized by the traces of the poets’ past experiences. Importantly and in spite of their
different points of departure, Johnson, Fiechtner and Vesely share an approach to political
agency that focuses on reflection and responsibility. The poet-author as well as his textual
persona are involved in making history as well as in writing it. Through the clear separation
of the two activities the poets point out that writing alone will not make a difference.

The Accent as Mediator
In Vesely’s musicalization of “The German Refugees” and in “The Ruins” the poet-
speakers do not claim a role of agency for themselves that exceeds their existence as
members of the people as a collective. If they were to claim such a position of agency, they
would suggest that the poet was “one of those that come with meaning” or “who it is worth
following” – and such authoritarian structures of “making history” are precisely what the
poets want to do away with. Similarly, Johnson bases his agency of writing history on the collective process of making history. However, this does not efface the subjectivity of each poet.

In an article on the lyrical element in Linton Kwesi Johnson’s and Tony Harrison’s poetry McGuirk’s argues that twentieth-century poetics have been informed by “the binary poetry versus history – which means, in effect, the lyric self versus history” (58). He goes on to point out that:

Johnson invokes a different relation to history. The immersion of his lyric “I” in the rhythm of the poem enacts the subject’s immersion in history: in rhythm and in history, or in the conflation of the two described by the phrase “bass history.” So if, as Peter Hitchcock has observed, the question generating Johnson’s poetry is not the Romantic “who am I?”[. . . .] but “who are we?” this is because Johnson does not conceive his subjectivity outside historical communal struggle. That would be a privilege, not so much of the subjects of history (military leaders and politicians) rather than its objects (colonized and variously oppressed peoples), but of the middle classes who saw themselves (and still see themselves) as neither. (58)

McGuirk’s view finds confirmation in my analysis of the poetry of circumstance in chapter 2. In the analysis of Éluard’s speech on circumstantial poetry and on Neruda’s performance of his public persona I pointed out that Éluard posits the poet as a brother to humanity, hence suggesting an equal relationship between the poet and his audience. The performance of Johnson reframes this notion in a contemporary diasporic context. Éluard’s and Neruda’s universalizing notion of humanity is reinterpreted in terms of the Jamaican tradition and diasporic situation.

Hence, Johnson’s persona cannot be separated from his cultural environment. Neither can his poetic work be separated from his political work because such a separation would rupture the inseparability of style and content. As a result of his analysis, McGuirk argues that poetry like Johnson’s has to be read as a cultural practice and not as a self-contained poem. Such a reading clashes with narrow definitions of poetry.

In an essay responding to McGuirk’s essay – among others in Jeffrey’s collection – Marjorie Perloff argues that contemporary lyricism is problematic because the surroundings that provided the reservoir for metaphors of Romantic lyric language has changed dramatically since the Romantic era. Traditionally, lyric subjectivity is often expressed
through metaphors that come from nature. The problem that poets who look for a
contemporary language that expresses lyric subjectivity encounter is that nature does not
anymore lend itself to the expression of subjectivity, much less lyric subjectivity:

The problem [...] is that the basic human-natural correspondence no longer has
much meaning, that the pathetic fallacy cannot be maintained. We now know only
too well that meanings cannot be read into the landscape. That people die of AIDS
or cancer or in automobile accidents whatever configuration the birds outside the
window may make. [...] Indeed, “nature” in the greater part of the globe has been
so massively destroyed, so polluted by industrial waste, pesticides, and automobile
exhausts, that the “veil” is no longer the “gray silk” of rain but an air system much
more threatening. (253)

In this passage Perloff brings up two points that problematize the use of lyric language
based on metaphors taken from nature. The first point is that the horrors that characterize
contemporary society are so incisive that employing natural metaphors to express the
integrity of the lyric subject recreates the incongruity between experience and its expression
that Romantic lyricism sought to overcome. The second point is that nature has been
destroyed and polluted. Therefore, we can no longer read metaphoric language based on
nature as the Romantics used to read it. Perloff quotes the metaphors of the “veil” and
“gray silk” for rain. When we read about “veils” and “gray silk” in these days we think
about pollution. Hence, nature and landscape are no longer available as metaphors that
express the relationship between the subject and its surroundings. The social and the
political have intruded into, and have destroyed, the reservoir of metaphors most frequently
used in the Romantic period to express the poet’s subjectivity.

Hence, the problem at stake is the development of a new language for lyric
subjectivity. Johnson, Fiechtner and Vesely – and McGuirk with them – would argue that
the reservoir of lyric metaphors can be replenished by a metaphorical language that
expresses a stronger concern for the social and the political, hence, to return to McGuirk’s
formulation, a language that expresses a different relation of the lyric subject to history.
Fiechtner performs this same orientation in his poem “Die Poesie vielleicht” (“Poetry,
Maybe”):

Draw a magic circle
around a bird in full flight

Knowing that time is a stream, boundless
that dreams of resting

Dreaming that the stream is worth watching
worth stopping for a moment

Feeling that the moment is worthless
without the water that carries it

Compelled to see the times within time
and yet every drop in the water

Sensing that we are separate, endlessly lonely
yet linked with it all, never alone

Suspecting there is something behind things
companionship, unassailable, love maybe

Obliged to give names and voices to pains
to create a rock for truth in the stream

Knowing that in the hands of the dreamers
dreams become bloodless and cold

Draw a magic circle
around a bird in full flight

And protect it
from the nets of the hunters.\(^{129}\)

\(^{129}\) Einen Zauberkreis ziehen
um einen Vogel im Flug

Wissend, dass die Zeit ein Strom ist, uferlos
Fiechtner’s poem is characterized by the disturbance of metaphors that seem to be very traditional and evoke the Romantic language of subjectivity by other metaphors that do not belong to Romantic discourse. He evokes a continuous flow of time that cannot be stopped and that has to be understood and appreciated in order to appreciate the moment. The individual is firmly located within the moment it lives within the flow of the times. As a result, the individual is “unendlich einsam / und doch verflochten mit allem, uferlos, niemals allein”. The conflict between “einsam” and “niemals allein” points out the importance and the difficulty of making contact with other human beings, an importance and difficulty that can never be separated from the moment in which it takes place, and from the times that carry that very moment.

Johnson comes to a similar conclusion in poems like “If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet”. In this satirical reflection on notions of ethnicity and cultural identity that inform the creation of a contemporary canon, he compares his own writing to that of “tap-natch” poets like Chris Okigbo, Derek Walcot, T. S. Eliot, Kamau Brathwaite, Amiri Baraka and others. I’ll give only one excerpt of this very long poem:

if I woz a tap-natch poet

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der träumt, innehalten zu können

Träumend, dass der Strom es wert sei, betrachtet
angehalten zu werden für einen Augenblick

Fühlend, dass der Augenblick wertlos ist
ohne das Wasser, das ihn trägt

Gehalten, in der Zeit die Zeiten zu sehen
und zugleich jeden einzelnen Tropfen im Fluss

Spürend, dass wir Einzelne sind, unendlich einsam
und doch verflochten mit allem, uferlos, niemals allein

Ahnend, dass hinter den Dingen noch etwas anderes ist
eine Begleitung, unantastbar, die Liebe vielleicht

Verpflichtet, den Schmerzen namen zu geben und Stimme
der Wahrheit einen Felsen zu schaffen im Fluss

Wissend, dass in den Händen der Träumer
die Träume blutlos werden und kalt

Einen Zauberkreis ziehen
um einen Vogel im Flug

Und ihn beschützen
vor den Netzen der Jäger.
like Kamau Brathwaite
Martin Carter
Jayne Cortez ar Amiri Baraka

i woodah write a poem
soh rude
an rootsy
an subversive
dat it mek di goon poet
tun white wid envy

like a candhumble/voodoo/kumina chant
a ole time calypso ar a slave song
dat get ban
but fram granny
    Rite
    Dung
    To
    Gran
    Pickney
each an evry wan
can recite dat-deh wan

still
inna di meantime
wid mi riddim
wid mi rime
wid mi ruff base line
wid mi own sense a time

goon poet haffi step in line
caw Boothalazy mite a gat couple touzan
but Mandela fi him
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans
Johnson’s satire on ethnically aware and politically correct literary criticism echoes his refusal to compromise with well-meaning white people in “Independant Intavenshan”. He reiterates his refusal to cooperate with such strategies because they would limit the political efficacy of his poetry. Furthermore, such demands do not let him keep his own rhythm, rhyme, bass line and sense of time. These four elements of his poetry stand for the heritage of his culture, the tools it has given him to develop and perform his own subjectivity in his writing.

The connection between cultural heritage and the performance of Johnson’s subjectivity brings me back to my critique of conceptualizations of hybrid cultural identities that orient themselves on Paul Gilroy’s and Homi Bhabha’s approaches. In my critique of Bhabha and Naficy I have made it clear that I do not find these approaches productive for a reading of Johnson’s poetry. Robert McGill offers a reading of “Tap Natch Poets” based on their approaches in his essay “Good Poets of the Black Atlantic: Linton Kwesi Johnson’s imagined Canon.” The most problematic aspect of McGill’s reading is that it clashes repeatedly with Johnson’s insistence on the political efficacy of his poetry, and McGill’s analysis of the performance of subjectivity in the poem brings these conflicts to the fore. McGill argues that Johnson performs an “unstable act of self-creation.” He continues:

Indeed, he does not even present a distilled or static ‘hybrid’. [. . . .] And even as Johnson offers himself to the interpellating gaze of audiences, his emphasis on the imaginative, subjective aspect of subjectivity – who he might be – undermines the taxonomical strategies which they might use to decide who he is. (564)

While I agree in that Johnson questions the taxonomical strategies that might be used to pin down his subjectivity, I do not think that Johnson’s subjectivity becomes unstable at all. In my reading the poem is less about the possibility of the taking on of different identities than about the refusal to do so. The chorus expresses clearly that Johnson sticks with the poetic elements that already made up his subjectivity in the 1970s, and that he values the political agency that he can claim through his subjectivity over the subtle but inefficient questioning of strategies of identity construction that McGill suggests he is practicing.

Hence, in these two late poems both Fiechtner and Johnson insist on the connection of their individuality – untouchable by whatever norms society might try to impose on them – with the elements that make up the moment in time in which they live through the raw
materials of their poetry. Both rewrite the language of subjectivity and lyricism in order to
develop a language that allows for a performance of lyrical subjectivity within “these
times”. The performance and the language of lyrical subjectivity brings me back to
Perloff’s remarks on the necessity for a new language of lyrical subjectivity. For, even
through Perloff shares this sense of necessity with Johnson and Fiechtner, she outrightly
rejects Johnson’s new language of lyric subjectivity.

In her response to McGuirk, Perloff accuses Johnson of “excessive plain speaking”
(254) and of “fairly flat and one-dimensional rhetoric” (253). She argues that the
complexity of human subjectivity cannot be expressed in such simple and one-dimensional
poetry. Perloff favours poetry like Susan Howe’s palimpsestic poetry as an alternative
model of lyricism. She quotes Vanderborg in support of her argument:

“By displacing the self to the printed word,” Vanderborg concludes, “Howe creates
a traceable tradition for her audience to follow.” The palimpsest form thus allows
for the “communal” that McGuirk also talks about. (254)

One of the problematic aspects of Perloff’s approach is that the communality she evokes is
completely different from the type of communality that Johnson creates or that Fiechtner
and Vesely struggle with. Howe leads her audience along the path of her own subjectivity;
Johnson develops his subjectivity out of the engagement with his community. The
Language poet Susan Howe comes from a white text-based environment and it is fair to say
that Language poets have their most dedicated audience among academics. Johnson comes
from a culture in which poetry is traditionally an oral experience and he writes for an
audience not all of whose members have a university education. A reading that does not
acknowledge these different points of departure and their consequences cannot possibly do
justice to both options.

One of the results of Perloff’s limited approach is her focus on the written and
visual elements of the work of both poets, whereas she pays no attention to the sonic,
cultural and political elements of Johnson’s poetry. Subjected to a reading that excludes
several layers of signification by the very approach that the critic takes, Johnson’s poetry –
and the same would go for the poetry of Fiechtner and Vesely had anyone ever subjected it
to such a reading – will naturally seem poorer and more one-dimensional than it is. If
anything, Perloff’s reading confirms McGuirk’s argument that Johnson’s poetry cannot be
isolated from his cultural work, that lyricism and collectivity are no contradiction and hence,
that poetry like Johnson’s has to be read differently. The accent would have been the analytical category that would have facilitated the connection between the subjective, the political and the social that is indispensable for an analysis of poetry like Johnson’s. For this reason the discussion between McGuirk and Perloff on how to read Johnson’s poetry shows that the notion of accent indispensable after all. It would have been one of the most important elements to focus on in an analysis of Johnson’s poetry. In his case it is the poetic device that brings the negotiation of subjectivity and communal identity into focus.

In a comparative reading of Johnson, Fiechtner and Vesely the focus on the accent is even more important. A comparative analysis of the function of the accent in the poetry of the three poets brings out the very different significations an accent can take on in performed poetry. In all three cases the accent is a marker of personal identity, a remainder of subjectivity in poems that seek to connect with their audience. In the case of Johnson the accent emphasizes the sense of belonging to a community. However, in Fiechtner’s and Vesely’s case the accent marks distance from their community, indicating their different political positions as well as their different perception and experience of history. Whereas Johnson paints a clear image of his community’s collective identity and draws his strength from his community’s unity, Fiechtner and Vesely see the only way out of a repetition of a violent past in the dissident voices of German culture, in the alternative traditions that need to be strengthened in order to avoid reliving history. The poets’ task is to make the fine traces of this dissident tradition visible because only in this tradition can both poets with their histories of travel and of exile find a place to speak from in contemporary Germany.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that the accent is crucial to the analysis of performed poetry. An analysis of its different uses of accents in the poetry of Johnson and Fiechtner and Vesely has made obvious the different approaches to community that whereas Johnson insists on the accent as a marker of a seemingly stable identity, Fiechtner and Vesely use the accent – and use accented translation – to destabilize identity, to propose a profound shift in the way identity is constructed. In this context, the accent functions not only as a speech pattern, but also as a trace.

Hence, the accent is an important category of analysis because it allows for a nuanced analysis of the interaction between subjectivity and cultural identity. In establishing this connection the accent also becomes a category of analysis that allows for
an understanding of the constant spilling over of the meaning produced by performed poetry from the personal sphere into the public sphere.

The trace is a category of analysis that can be useful in very specific cases, notably in that of the poetry of Fiechtner and Vesely. In their attempt to destabilize notions of identity the cultural and political connotations of an accent as a marker of identity seem out of place; therefore it became necessary to introduce a concept of analysis that captures the historical and political dimensions of the use of accents without insisting on the accent’s function as an affirmation of identity.

Furthermore, the cases of Johnson and Fiechtner and Vesely bring us back to the conceptualization of the poet’s subjectivity in chapter 2. As the 20th century was coming to a close, all three poets from different perspectives demonstrate that universalizing notions of identity no longer capture their experience. However, they insist that other elements of poetic subjectivity, such as the poet’s connection with the moment in time and with his audience, have lost none of their importance. The exploration of the self as forming part of, respectively as in conflict with, his community and the self as a participant in the making of history, are two defining features of the poets’ lyric subjectivities. Importantly, the work of these three poets demonstrates that style and content are inseparable; hence, Naficy’s implied contention that semiotic and militant political struggles are mutually exclusive is proven to be erroneous. This point brings me back to the distinction between academic theory and poetry that I made in chapter 1. At that point I argued that in the theoretical realm, Bhabha’s contention that speaking from a particular space implies political action, cannot be maintained in the early 21st century. Through my analysis of the poetry of Johnson, Fiechtner and Vesely I have made the same argument for the poetic sphere, which I insisted and insist has different horizons and possibilities for a performance of commitment than the academic sphere does.
Chapter 8: Poetry in the City

Introduction
In the previous chapters I have argued with several other theorists that the site of the performance is an important component of the poetry performance. I have indicated that the poets’ choices to perform poetry in clubs, bars, community centres, small art centres and other venues that are not traditionally used for poetry recitals is often a manifestation of and a commitment to a different approach to poetry. This approach conceives of poetry as a product of and a response to its surroundings. Furthermore, the approach seeks to strengthen this connection by enunciating poetry in the middle of the community that has produced it.

In such an approach the site of enunciation, here the venue, becomes the synapsis between poet, audience, text, and the social environment. In the performances that have provided the material for this study, venues have been chosen to make the poetry vulnerable to the influences from the surroundings. Peter Middleton explains the point of the venue in terms of this effect:

Most poetry readings are ragged affairs taking place in venues temporarily liberated from other activities – pubs, bars, lecture rooms, art galleries, halls, and theaters where the readers stumble over stage sets, talk above the noise of drinkers returning from the bar, or try to figure out how best to use a PA system installed for other purposes. [. . . .] Listening to poetry requires effort, and the audience’s attentiveness is vulnerable to distractions of every kind (beer, traffic, hard chairs, comings and goings, even the distracting appearance of the poet). The space is precariously and only partially transformed from its mundane use as gallery, pub, or lecture hall, whose signs remain prominently in evidence throughout the scene of textual performance, and this transformation of the backdrop tells the participants that the everyday world, despite the way it is crowded with other activities and purposes, can still provide a space for poetry. [. . . .] Poetry is only in the ascendant for a moment during which it is still in competition with many reminders of the everyday world waiting to rush back into its borrowed space and expel it. (2005b: 30)

I propose to look at Middleton’s contention that the poetry performance shows that “the everyday world [. . . .] can still provide a space for poetry” from two angles. One angle is
the everyday world as a stage for the performance of poetry. The other angle is the everyday experience of a specific location as a topic for performed poetry. In this chapter I will analyse a performance from November 2005. In this performance a Mexican group – La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís – and the Nuyorican poet Willie Perdomo shared an evening. Both parts of the performance focused on the city, Mexico City in the case of La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís and New York in the case of Perdomo.

I have chosen the city as an example because the performance of poetry is mainly an urban phenomenon. Its earliest representatives, the Beat Poets, became famous in San Francisco, poets such as Amiri Baraka and The Last Poets are distinctly linked to New York, and Dub Poetry emerged in Kingston and London. The city accommodates the multicultural environment in which much of performance poetry has emerged. In many cases, the city also provides the stage for the performance. As a consequence, the city is one of the most important topics in performance poetry. In the performance of poetry these two functions of the city as a stage and as a topic are tightly intertwined, but not identical with each other.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) Michel de Certeau discusses the intertwining of the city as physical space and of the concept of the city that emerges in its representations. He argues that in the sixteenth century the city as a fact was transformed into the concept of a city. In an analysis of urban politics he describes the relationship between the physical city and the rendition of it as a “progressive symbiosis”:

Linking the city to the concept never makes them identical, but it plays on their progressive symbiosis: to plan a city is both to think the very plurality of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural effective; it is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it. (46)

Two elements of de Certeau’s analysis are particularly applicable to my analysis. His term “progressive symbiosis” strikes me as felicitous because it emphasizes the extreme dependency of the concept of the city on the physical city. The term indicates that the two constructively feed off one another. The second element of de Certeau’s analysis that is of interest to me is his address of the link between thinking the concept of the city and of making this concept effective. At first sight this link might seem irrelevant to an analysis of performance poetry; after all, de Certeau refers to urban politics. However, analysts such as Manuel Castells have demonstrated that not only city governments are making
conceptualizations effective, and theorists such as Nestór García Canclini and Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson increasingly place a strong emphasis on the connection between the concept of the city and the city as fact. Their analyses show a much more positive attitude to the city as a concept than de Certeau’s, partly because they take to heart his recommendation to focus on practices of city life rather than on the concept of the city.

De Certeau does indeed come to argue that the concept of the city as it was developed in the age of enlightenment leads to the establishment of concrete measures that control the concept of the city as well as the city as a fact of the life of its inhabitants. De Certeau analyses this controlling and oppressive function of the city concept in terms of a Foucauldian approach as determined by a “panoptic administration”. However, he comes to the conclusion that the city no longer functions like this. By now it has developed many pockets that escape the control of the administration. De Certeau therefore proposes an analytical approach to the city that does not focus on the existent concepts of the city, but on the practices that shape it in everyday life:

one can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay [. . . ] . (48)

In this passage de Certeau opposes the analysis of a preconceived notion to the analysis of a practice of everyday life. Such an analysis figures different agents. Whereas an analysis of the preconceived notion of the city focuses on those in power and on their activities, an analysis of the practices of the city dwellers focuses on the inhabitants and suggests a horizontal approach to the distribution of power. De Certeau’s conclusion thus invites a rethinking of power relations in the city from the point of view of the analyst.

I let myself be inspired by de Certeau’s proposition without adopting it fully. On the one hand I endorse his focus on the practice of city life rather than on preconceived notions of the city. On the other hand the foreclosure of an analysis of concepts of the city can lead to a certain blindness for the impact – especially the negative impact – that urban politics and city concepts still have on the practice of everyday life in the city. For these reasons I propose to use the more flexible terms “urban imaginaries” or “city imaginaries” as the key terms for my analysis. The term “urban imaginary” is the title of a small book on the city by Néstor García Canclini. The term “city imaginary” is used by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson in the introduction to a collection of essays on urban studies. I will introduce the
two concepts and in my introduction of them, demonstrate how they can establish a link between the performed poetry and the city as its stage, its environment, and its topic.\textsuperscript{130}

**Urban Imaginaries**

Both the term “urban imaginaries” (García Canclini) and the term “city imaginaries” (Bridge and Watson) conceive of the city as the object of imagination and simultaneously as a reality that stimulates and informs the imagination. Thus, these authors argue with Jonathan Raban that the city is produced by imagination and simultaneously produces new imaginaries:

Cities, unlike villages and small towns, are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in their turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try and impose a personal form on them. [. . . .] The city as we might imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture. (2)

Raban’s formulation suggests that there is a back-and-forth movement between the imagination of the city dweller and the physical city. The city dweller moulds the city into her images and the city moulds the city dweller by its resistance against possible impositions. This movement suggests an intense, possibly violent involvement and process of negotiation between the city and the city dweller. In his argument that Raban’s book on London is the first postmodern work on the city, David Harvey sums up Raban’s conception of the city:

To the thesis that the city was falling victim to a rationalized and automated system of mass production and mass consumption of material goods, Raban replied that it was in practice mainly about the production of signs and images. He rejected the

\textsuperscript{130}In my approach I will go along with de Certeau’s suggestion to focus on practices rather than on the concept of “the city” or of a particular city. However, I need to add that those who participate in the practice of everyday urban life do not walk blindly; their itineraries are often informed by ideas. Also, they create ideas as a result of the experiences they make in their everyday life. These ideas can turn into concepts. As concepts, they can turn into important tools for communication and intersubjectivity (Bal 2002). As tools of communication and intersubjectivity they can become important factors in the struggle of citizens for civic agency in the urban environment. Therefore I do not want to discard an analytical engagement with conceptualizations of the city, but want to respond to the connection between concept, practice, and the “hardware” provided by the everyday practices of city life.
thesis of a city tightly stratified by occupation and class, depicting instead a widespread individualism and entrepreneurialism in which the marks of social distinction were broadly conferred by possessions and appearances. To the supposed domination of rational planning Raban opposed the image of the city as an “encyclopaedia” or “emporium of styles” in which all sense of hierarchy or even homogeneity of values was in the course of dissolution. The city dweller was not, he argued, someone given over to calculating rationality. [. . . .] The city was more like a theatre, a series of stages upon which individuals could work their own distinctive magic while performing a multiplicity of roles. (Harvey 1989: 4-5)

Harvey argues that Raban understands the city as a site of the production of signs and images and in doing so “records a moment of fierce tension between one of the great heroes of the modernist movement [Le Corbusier] and someone like Barthes, who was shortly to become one of the central figures of postmodernism” (6).

I introduce Harvey’s argument because he demonstrates that one cannot analyse contemporary representations of the city without reflecting critically on the relation between modernity and postmodernity. The city has been understood as an emblem of modernity and later on, of postmodernity. Therefore, the analysis of cities and of urban culture foregrounds some of the most problematic aspects of the transition from modernity to postmodernity, but also of modernism and postmodernism. Harvey’s analysis of Raban’s text as informed by postmodern thought brings out one feature of postmodernism that is central to my analysis in this chapter. Raban’s analysis of the city invites a notion of equality or maybe blindness to inequality that I have already discussed in chapter 1. One can only practice this blindness to inequality if one shifts the negotiation between the physical city and the city dweller onto the level of the production of signs and codes, as Raban does.

However, the physical reality of the cities I discuss in this chapter are to this day maintained by the powers at work in the “panoptic administration”, to which de Certeau refers. Inequality is one of the most influential elements of living in Mexico City. Having to live with these elements of the “city as fact” establishes a counterweight to a perception of the city as the site of the production of signs and codes. The analysis of the process of negotiation between these forces – or of a participation in this process of negotiation – is a challenge that postmodernist analysts have not yet met in a satisfactory manner. Therefore I need to develop an approach that gives more centrality to the physical situation of the city.
and its impact on the life of its inhabitants. I turn to Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson for a possible provisional solution. Their approach to city imaginaries focuses on the impact of the physical realities of the city on the realm of the imagination. Bridge and Watson identify several important manifestations of the city in the imagination that can serve as analytical categories.

The first category they identify is the collective imagination. They argue that the city functions as “a crucible for ideas and innovations” (7). When these ideas and innovations start to interact in the physically constraint space of the city, they “encourage bright ideas to overcome settled ways of thinking” (8). However, the encounter of different ways of thinking is not necessarily liberating. The city can also have the opposite effect and “constrain the imagination or [. . . .] consolidate it in collective imagination as tradition and authority” (8). This constraint might either have negative, limiting effects, or it can be a source of identity and security.

Secondly, the authors point out that Western imaginaries of the city were overwhelmingly visual, whereas in non-Western cities and increasingly today in Western cities “the kaleidoscope of capital and culture in non-Western cities challenges the visual imaginary through the synesthesia of the city and the importance of other senses” (8). The shift in our perception of the city from the visual to the polysensual is well taken in view of the interaction of sonic, verbal and visual elements in the performance of poetry. In the chapters on performance and sound, I have indicated that the appeal to several senses is one of the most important innovations introduced by the performance of poetry. In chapters 7 on “Accents and Translations” I have argued that one of the functions of performance and sound is the introduction and negotiation of poetic influences from different cultures. In this chapter I will complete this argument by adding a third aspect to it, that the performance of poetry is also a way to organize and negotiate the polysensual experience of the city so that it turns into a positive experience and does not “contribute to our sense of fragmented subjectivity or overload” (8).

The third category identified by Bridge and Watson is the “realization or nonrealization of the individual - the self” (9; emphasis in original). This category includes alienation which is often enforced by what they call “city trenches”, borrowing this term from Katzenelson. City trenches are dug by fortress architecture, gated communities, the exclusionary organization of neighbourhoods and other acts that “block imaginative identification with the other” (10). Thus, the city can limit groups of city dwellers to certain spaces. On the other hand, the city can offer “a space of freedom and possibility away from
the shackle of domestic life, constraint and suffocation” (10). This possible analytical focus will inform my analysis of Willie Perdomo’s poetry and its tight connection to the cultural and architectonical environment of Spanish Harlem.

Finally, Bridge and Watson argue that memory is a crucially important way of dealing with the city. They establish a link between space and memory: “The buildings and spaces of the city are formed in, and themselves form, memory, while memory becomes spatialized” (13). This statement can refer to monuments who come to stand for certain events or people, or it can refer to other physical and architectonical characteristics of the city. Bridge and Watson also point out that the geographic markers that can spatialize memory are subject to change in a globalized city:

As cities have become more complex, more global, and more diasporic it is harder to construct cultural markers which make for a simple image of the city with which to identify. At whose imagination, we may ask, is the statue, the poster, the building facade, or the pavement mosaic directed, and for what purpose? And what and whose past are we drawing on in the construction of city monuments? (13)

In my analysis of the poetry of Perdomo I will demonstrate how this artist reinterprets the function of cultural markers both in the name of a diasporic culture and as an act of rebellion against established privileges. In Perdomo’s representation of the city, the buildings, smells and music of Spanish Harlem become cultural markers.

García Canclini’s work focuses on the megalopolis, specifically on the Latin American megalopolis. He has also made important contributions to the debate on modernity, postmodernity and modernization. García Canclini argues that the Latin American megalopolis is a focal point of the tensions between modernity and postmodernity:

We are living the tension between traditions that have not yet disappeared (traditions within neighborhoods, and the forms of organizations and the styles of urban communication) and a modernity that has not yet reached the countries of Latin America and the precariousness of which still does not prevent that the postmodern is already among us. (87)
One of the consequences of the introduction of postmodernity into countries that have not yet completed modernization is the disintegration of models of civic agency in the face of growing inequality. La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís make this point strongly in the performance I will analyse further on in this chapter. For now I will introduce García Canclini’s approach to the Latin American megalopolis against the background of the incomplete modernization.\textsuperscript{131}

Through the example of Mexico City García Canclini argues that the contemporary megalopolis consists of four cities that exist at the same time. Their coexistence is in fact the key to understanding the multicultural city. The first one is the historical-territorial city. In the case of Mexico City, he refers to the historical centre and the buildings constructed in the pre-Columbian and colonial epochs. The history of the city is present in its contemporaneity through buildings and museums. The second city is the industrial city. The industrial city extends the traditional space of the city. Industrialization leads to expansion through the construction of factories and workers’ housing on the city’s periphery, and through the introduction of different types of transport and services. Thus, the city’s inhabitants lose the sense of the city as a whole and experience life in the city predominantly as life in their neighbourhood.

For his characterization of the third city García Canclini takes recourse to Saskia Sassen’s term of the global city (1991). The global city is defined as a meeting point of information. It is a node where different types of economic activities (agriculture, industry, services) are connected, coordinated, and communicate with each other. The city is connected not only with itself, but also with other cities around the world not only by conventional methods such as mail and telephone, but also by cable, fax, and satellites. In the global city, or information city as García Canclini terms it, the city centre loses its importance. Because of these new informational connections the global city grows, reorganizes and reshuffles its dimensions in the every day experience of its inhabitants.

García Canclini argues that our experience of the city by far exceeds our physical experience of it:

[. . . .] we imagine while we travel [through the city], we develop speculations about what we see, about who our paths cross with, the neighbourhoods of the city that we do not know and that we have to cross to get to a different destination [. . . .]. A large

\textsuperscript{131} For more Latin American publications on this matter see Casullo 1993. For a publication that seeks to engage Latin American perspectives with the perspectives of North-Western scholars on the issue see Beverley 1995.
part of what happens to us is imaginary, because it does not emerge from a real interaction. All interactions contain an imaginary element, but even more those evasive and fleeting interactions that take place within a megalopolis. (89)

García Canclini goes on to theorize city imaginaries as cultural heritage and as imagined communities, arguing that the imaginary aspect of city life is as important as its physical aspects. In the following essay in the same volume, he makes a case for urban politics that engage with urban imaginaries, and he suggests ways in which urban imaginaries can be the object of investigation for urban anthropologists, who in turn can provide information and guidelines for urban politics based on citizens’ imaginaries of the city. For my purposes in this chapter the idea of participation through the mobilization of the urban imagination and the construction of urban imaginaries is key.

The performance I study in this chapter took place in November 2005 at the Casa del Lago in Mexico City. The event, which featured the Nuyorican poet Perdomo and the Mexican group La Lengua together with the poet Rodrigo Solís, formed part of a festival entitled PoesíaEnVozAlta.2005, which took place in November and early-December 2005 at the Casa del Lago, the cultural centre of the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). It is primarily a university environment that also attracts a substantial number of attendants from other environments. The participants at the discussions organized during PoesíaEnVozAlta.2005 turned out to be university professors, students, journalists, HipHoppers from underprivileged neighborhoods, performance poets, senior citizens involved in theatre groups, and other members of artistic and performance projects.

The stage of the performance was an emporium on the terrace of Casa del Lago in the Parque de Chapultepec, the largest park in the centre of Mexico City. The Parque de Chapultepec is a spot of peace, relatively uncontaminated air and relative quiet within this metropolis. The outside location of the event exposed it to the relative peace of the Parque de Chapultepec, but also to the distant traffic noise from Paseo de la Reforma, the most important avenue that cuts through the centre of Mexico City from East to West and which runs along the Parque de Chapultepec. This self-exposure to the sounds of the city and to one of the contradictory moments of Mexico City – the moment between quiet and noise, between nature and traffic – resonates with the vulnerability to sounds from the outside that

132 [. . .] imaginamos mientras viajamos, construimos suposiciones sobre lo que vemos, sobre quiénes se nos cruzan, las zones de la ciudad que desconocemos y tenemos que atravesar para llegar a otro destino [. . .]. Gran parte de lo que nos pasa es imaginario, porque no surge de una interacción real. Toda interacción tiene una cuota de imaginario, pero más aún en estas interacciones evasivas y fugaces que propone una megalopolis.
Middleton points out in the passage I quoted earlier. It also functions to make the city not only the topic, but also the stage of the performance. La Lengua added to the function of the city as stage by running a photography installation on a screen during their performance.

The twofold function of the city as stage and topic reflects the situation of the urban imaginaries. The subjects who develop and participate in them – in this case poets and audiences – are situated with one foot in the everyday practice of city life and with the other foot in the reflection on it. The refusal to give up on either of these two footholds, no matter how difficult it might be to keep one’s balance in such an act of straddling a divide, is an important element of urban imaginaries that are developed with a concern for the agency of city dwellers. To get a better grip on the specific urban imaginaries at play in particular occasions, I return to Freire, whose notion of dialogue I developed in chapter 2. Freire emphatically points out that any type of agency needs to be based on an equally balanced combination of action and reflection. Only then does agency not paralyze itself through too many reflections that become disconnected from everyday life, nor does it become a chaotic expression of “blind activism”.

Upside Down
La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís were the first to perform that night. The members of La Lengua are Solís (poet), Santiago Chávez (musician, plays chord instruments) and Judith de León (percussionist). Solís and Chávez were born and raised in Mexico City, and are therefore chilangos. De León is from Argentina. Solís has been working as a poet for 15 years. La Lengua in the formation of Chávez and de León has existed since 2002. Since mid-2005 Solís has participated with the group. The performance showed several specific characteristics. One was the tightness of the group in performance. The interaction between the three group members is comparable to the interaction between Fiechtner and Vesely, in whose performance music and the spoken word engage in a conversation. Furthermore, the three members of the group occasionally broke into conversation or comments, thus emphasizing that there was no hierarchy between them, and breaking down the hierarchy between themselves and the audience. This is particularly noticeable in their performance of the piece “El Ché” which I will analyse shortly.

Their performance was also characterized by the spontaneous and enthusiastic responses by the audience. The sense of irony and self-irony which characterizes Solís’ texts as well as the lyrics of Chávez’ and de León’s songs, and the commentary of the music on some of the texts, was greatly appreciated by the audience. Also, the texts
responded to everyday experiences that people living in Mexico City share or have seen happening. The appeal to these shared experiences and its effects will form a central part of my argument. I will investigate to what extent the performance created a sense of community among the audience members and between audience and artists through the appeal to these shared experiences. A sense of community could indicate the existence or the possible development of a shared urban imaginary.

The texts performed by La Lengua are either poems by Solís that are being put to music by Chávez and de León, or they emerge out of conversations and jam sessions between the three artists. Thus, their work reflects their immediate concerns with their environment. One of the most important concerns in a gigantic city like Mexico City is travel. As García Canclini points out in *Imaginarios urbanos*, travel is one of the most frequent activities and an everyday experience of the inhabitants of Mexico City. Also important in the work of La Lengua are questions of participation and civic agency.

The performance started with a song performed by La Lengua and continued with a poem spoken by Solís. This alternation was maintained during the performance. At times the musicians accompanied the spoken word parts, thus commenting on them in a similar way as Vesely comments on poetic texts through musicalizations, and emphasizing certain aspects of the text, or adding to the tension build-up. The first pieces set the tone for the performance, combining melodious pieces with poetic and often ironic texts. Their ironic sense of humour considerably loosened up the atmosphere. Thus, the audience was in high spirits and tuning in with the performers when the poem “Teté” was performed.

“Teté” tells the story of a 14-year-old girl named Teté living in Mexico City. Teté receives a horrible diagnosis from her doctor; he tells her that she will die if she smokes one more cigarette. Since Teté is a non-smoker she starts thinking about the source of damage to her lungs and comes to the conclusion that it must be pollution. Teté tries to avoid the pollution in a paradoxical and almost fatal endeavor to survive, only to finally renounce these attempts because they make life impossible. She lights the first cigarette of her life, falls asleep, the mattress catches fire, and Teté dies. Solís speaks the poem with great seriousness. The irony of the poem is created by its tempo, by the changes in pace and by the pauses, and by Solís’ enactment of the poem. When Teté stops breathing in the attempt to not inhale any more smoke, Solis stops breathing. When Teté’s body loosens up, so does Solis’. The written version of the poem preserves the emphases and the pace of Solís’ speaking. The first two stanzas build up tension because they play with a misconception by the listener:
1 cigarro, Teté. 1 cigarette, Teté.
1 cigarro más 1 more cigarette
y te mueres. And you are going to die.

Así dijo el doctor. That’s what the doctor said.
y la cosa es que Teté tenía 14 años And the thing is that Teté was 14 years old
núnca había fumado. she had never smoked

The first stanza leaves the listener with the impression that the poem is about a chain smoker. Thus, the diagnosis that she will die if she smokes one more cigarette is tragic, but not unusual. The first line of the second stanza reaffirms the listener’s wrong preconception by quoting a generally recognized authority on health matters, Teté’s doctor. The second line of the second stanza destroys this preconception just a fracture of a second later: “y la cosa es que Teté tenía 14 años/ nunca había fumado”. The tab space in the last line of stanza 2 reflects an effectful breathing pause of Solís when he speaks the poem. At the end of stanza 2 the audience in Mexico City already guessed that contamination was going to play a vital role in the poem and happily admitted to their erroneous interpretation by bursting into laughter.

The slow pace of the first two stanzas the poem increases in the following lines through very pointed questions (“¿cuánto humo le cabe a 1 cigarro?”, “how much smoke fits into one cigarette?”) that make up one whole stanza and are spoken with held breath, and further to Teté’s fast-paced reflections, in the performance illustrated and sped up through gestures, and its equally fast-paced consequences:

but after this bus there came another one and another one and Teté continued living here, breathing as little as possible to keep herself alive until she went blue and pulled her belly far in – she pushed up her chest, pushed out her buttocks – and the boys thought that she was beautiful and sent her kisses between the fumes.

and Teté liked boys
but she thought: if a cigarette kills me
a kiss
The terrible sense of humour that surfaces in this stanza shows how very upside down things are in the postmodern megalopolis. I borrow the formulation “upside down” from Eduardo Galeano’s book of the same title. In this book Galeano demonstrates through a collage of short texts the reversed logic of life in the neoliberalist system. His method is similar to that of the Subcomandante Marcos in the text I quoted in the first chapter. Meanings are appropriated by the system. What should be pleasurable becomes a liability, what should be genuinely coming from a person comes from the commitment to patterns of consumption. What is a compliment becomes a liability to Teté’s project of survival, what almost kills Teté makes her look beautiful to the boys, and suddenly a kiss is more dangerous than a cigarette.

It is tempting to come to the conclusion that Solís’ serious tone and his use of pace take the audience into Teté’s logic because the minds of the audience move exactly as fast as Solís speaks the poem; the listener cannot think faster than the speaker enunciates. It would be even more tempting to conclude that this equality of pace together with the shared experience of life in Mexico City makes Teté’s reactions absolutely logical and understandable to the audience, and therefore, that the audience members are not laughing about the absurdity of Teté’s reactions, but because they recognize themselves in her. In that case Teté’s tragic death breaks the tentative identification between the audience members and Teté: the audience members go on living, Teté dies. I could argue with García Canclini that after all, we all suffer from contamination, no matter to which social class we belong.

Yet, I believe that this would be a misinterpretation. It would not account for Solís’ at times very distant and descriptive performance of the poem. This distance surfaces in lines like “Y a Teté le gustaban los muchachos”, “and Tété liked boys”. Solís tone of voice enacts distance from Teté. In doing so, he establishes his role as a compassionate but distant third-person narrator, a poet-author who is not identical with the textual author and emphatically does not aim for an identification of himself or the audience with Teté. The
interpretation I offered above also does not respond to the hilarious and bitter irony that is so characteristic for the performance of the poem. Instead, my misinterpretation would reconcile the social difference between Teté and the doctor, who is obviously not familiar with the amount of pollution to which unmotorized citizens of Mexico City like Teté are exposed. Differently from García Canclini, the doctor does not admit that pollution blackens people’s lungs, and he certainly does not accept Solís’ contention that pollution causes as much damage as smoking. Instead, the doctor presents Teté as an irresponsible person who does things that are hazardous to her health. If his daughter had Teté’s problem the doctor would acknowledge that she is not responsible for it and move to a less polluted area. But Teté does not have such options, nor does she have the assistance of a wealthy parent. She does her best at the cost of renouncing the pleasures of life and of putting herself on the verge of death – yet, her health is still as much at risk as it was before.

Manuel Castells’ concept of collective consumption is helpful in clarifying the types of inequality that surface between Teté and the doctor. In his article “Collective Consumption and Urban Contradictions in Advanced Capitalism” Castells argues that housing, socio-cultural facilities and transport are domains “essential to individuals and to economic activity” (109). Therefore, these areas of collective consumption become key components of the creation of a new inequality. These areas are partially maintained by the state and partly by private corporations. However, the private sector becomes increasingly important in domains of public consumption and brings with it the notion of status. Castells outlines how the individual tries to move from the public transport system to the private car:

[. . . .] collective transport becomes a synonym for discomfort, for congestion, for oppression, for compulsory timing, if not [. . . .] for personal insecurity. Then one thinks only of escaping it, of autonomy, of the capacity for individual unrestrained mobility; the “need” is thus created and the market is there, all ready to satisfy the demand of the consumer – it is the reign of the “car for individual freedom” (120).

Unfortunately individual freedom in the intricate net of city transportation collides with the necessities of those who do not own a car. The car becomes the source for a new inequality:

This need for the automobile as a means for mobility, made necessary by urban organisation and by the way common transport is managed, is in turn a new source of inequality: on the one hand, because the level of income thus comes to order the
capacity for mobility and individual security [. . . ]; and on the other hand, because this extreme dependence on the automobile creates new sources of discrimination—all non-drivers are seen as virtually handicapped, even more impaired because intra-urban transportation is based on individual means. (121)

In this upside-down practice of urban transport those who have the money buy, and are consequently entitled to, increased mobility, personal safety and flexible timing. Those who cannot pay for a car are not entitled to these benefits. On top of that, they are more exposed to the pollution caused by those who can afford to own a car. However, their discomfort is no longer an issue, while those who do own a car are influential enough to complain about the discomfort caused to them. The final consequence is a reification of collective necessities of an urban population; anything can be bought and nothing is for free.

This reification has a dramatic impact on the drivers’ psychology and on road culture, as the poem “Kleto”, performed after “Teté”, argues:

pero subes al coche  but you get in your car
y eres  and you are
choferkonduktorchafireteloko chauffeurdrivercrazycabby

y en chilango pensamiento and in the chilango way of thinking
la humanidad estorba el paso humanity blocks the way
de tu coche of your car

en algún momento tu cerebro at some point your brain
plomizado, azotado por carteles, is filled with lead, plastered by billboards
que tortura el lokutor como periko tortures the speaker like a parrot
y repites con él: and you repeat with him:
el mundo sería mejor sin marchas the world would be a better place without gears

ni semáforos and traffic lights
ni paraderos and stop signs
ni bicis and bicycles
ni motos and mopeds
ni más cruces and any other crossings
At this point the inequality created by collective consumption reaches its highpoint. Personal security no longer means being safe from being robbed or attacked on the underground, but includes the right to endanger the personal safety of all those who are not “equal” to the car driver, i.e. all those who do not have a car.

Seen from this perspective the reaction of the audience members to poems like “Teté” or “Kleto” cannot be viewed as that of a diverse group of people who connect on the basis of the experience of collective consumption. At least some of the audience members at Casa del Lago probably turned into “choferkonduktorchafireteloko” after the performance, ready to run over the performing poet in his role as bicyclist. As for their compassion for Teté, one has to enquire into the nature of this compassion. Do the audience members really understand Teté, or do they laugh about her lack of basic health education? Do they respond to the desperately funny absurdity of the inequality-based logic of the postmodern megalopolis, or do they experience the poem as a funnily grotesque story about a curious and finally tragic incident? Do they respond to the subversion of the doctor’s privileged position, or do they realize that the doctor for perfectly explicable reasons subverts the ideal of equal treatment of patients who come from different social classes? By inviting these questions La Lengua and Solís question models of association and community building that are supposed to create agency and enable subversion. Instead of sustaining this failed model of agency, the artists address a society so fragmented by social inequalities that this very fragmentation destroys possibilities to claim agency.

Hence, the world as we know it today is upside down: the developments that promised progress for everyone have brought increased inequality, the same developments promised democratization but have brought about the sophistication and stabilization of the power structures that govern cities. In such a situation, imaginaries emerge as ways of escaping those power that shape the city dwellers’ conditions of life; at the same time, one has to be careful that the imaginaries do not become dreams, but become ideas that inform the construction of new realities.

**Urban Agency in Postmodernity**

This returns me to the question of agency, which has informed all my analyses presented so far and which I have addressed in detail in chapters 1 on “Commitment and Analysis”, in chapter 5 on “Sound”, and in chapter 8 on “Accents and Translations”. I have pointed out
earlier in this chapter that urban imaginaries and the subjects who develop them straddle a divide between the practice of everyday life and the reflection on it, a divide that is related to the divide between thought and action. To clarify the divide and the way in which urban imaginaries might be able to straddle it I turn again to an analysis by Castells, a scholar whose work has been very much informed by his own attempt to straddle this divide in analyses of urban culture. I will take collective consumption as an example.

In his study *Luttes urbaines et pouvoir politique* Castells argues that issues surrounding collective consumption crystallize the concept of urban agency. He argues that collective consumption brings two major contradictions of the capitalist organization of cities to the surface. The first develops out of the economic unrentability of the areas of collective consumption. Nevertheless, these same areas are indispensable for life in the city:

Collective consumption (housing, equipment, transport etc.) therefore become at the same time indispensable functional elements, a permanent object of collective demand, and a sector of deficit in the capitalist economy. (16)

Thus, collective consumption is always there as a potential source of conflict. But the second contradiction is even more important for the point I seek to make here. Castells writes:

But the process of collective consumption also develops a second contradiction: that between the individual mode of appropriating the living conditions (“each his own life”) and the collective mode of management of this process, to the extent that urban organisation forms a whole, and it is unthinkable to tackle problems of housing separately from those of transport, and the two of them by failing to take into account the creation of new urban centres. (16)

The question at the heart of Castells’ analysis is that of the agency of city dwellers. How do they take control of their lives, and of the conditions that impact on their lives in such an
important way? Castells makes a case for an organization of city politics that relies on collectivity. The question that comes right afterwards is “What type of collectivity?” In the study I just cited Castells offers four case studies of urban social movements as examples of urban agency. But since Castells’ study was published in 1973, things have changed. The questions he raises are as acute now as they were then, but the concept of urban agency encounters a very different society.

The piece “El Ché” addresses the encounter of contemporary Mexican consumer society with the concept of agency. The central story of the piece is performed and narrated by Chávez. The other two artists join into the conversation to move it on or, as de León does on several occasions, to give it a different direction or shorten passages that threaten to become too long. Audience members also occasionally join into the conversation. The piece is about the revolution, which will take place tomorrow at four o'clock. The time of the revolution is being announced to Chávez while he is surfing the internet, by the Subcomandante Marcos, Ché Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos:

C: The other day I was walking around. No no, I wasn’t walking around. In fact I was sitting down. I think I was in internet. And I was sitting there smoking and somebody taps me on the shoulder and I turn around, and who do you think it was?
S: Jung.
L: God.
S: Stop pulling my leg!
C: No, no, that one doesn’t know where I live. Because I still haven’t changed my address.
S: So who was it?
C: It was the Subcomandante Marcos.
C: Yes, and I turned this way, and then I turned that way – really I don’t know where I turned and it was Ché Guevara.
S: Stop pulling my leg!
A: That dude takes drugs!
S: Did he look like Gael?
L: He doesn’t have light-coloured eyes.
C: He was in black and white. Okay, so the Subcomandante Marcos tells me... Fine, he says, the revolution is tomorrow. And I ask him: Is there going to be free coffee,
or what? Yes, he says, it will be cold and it’s at four o’clock and you are the elected.
And there was Cienfuegos as well, and he tells me…

L: He tells him, he tells him, he tells him…

C: The revolution is tomorrow, dude, and the revolution won’t be like we thought it would be, a whole bunch of people, but no, it will be individual, dude, or in couples, right? Or in trios, but you know that trios are complicated. So everybody can organize on the family level, let’s say.

S: On the molecular level.

C: Molecular.

L: On the individualic level.

C: Individual. That was the word he used, I didn’t remember because you know that Tacho doesn’t speak very well, he doesn’t pronounce Spanish worth a dime, so he started to speak in tongues. But the truth is… It’s that I don’t… Languages and me, that’s fine, but not those kind of languages… But it’s not my fault, I went to school, I learned English French German Russian, I learned many languages, but those from here no, those from here I didn’t learn.

L: Okay now!

C: And there was the Subcomandante Marcos on one side of me and Ché Guevara on the other side, and they started to discuss about why individualistic and why individual and I asked them, why? And I explained it to them.

L: Why you?

C: And why me? The thing is this, I tell you so that you know, because it will be tomorrow. Everybody has to do what he can within the range of his possibilities and to the extent of his necessities! And that’s it!

The audience starts to applause but Judith de León interrupts them by asking the technician to turn up Santiago Chávez’ jarana which she cannot hear properly.

Solís also interrupts the applause by continuing the conversation with Chávez:

S: Listen, what are you going to do?

C: Me? When I’m grown up, you mean?

Chávez starts to play the next song, entitled “When I’m grown up”.

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137 C: El otro día estaba yo caminando... no no, no estaba yo caminando. En realidad estaba sentado. Creo que estaba en internet. ... Y estaba yo fumando ahí y me toca en el hombro y me volteo y ¿quién crees que era?

S: Jung.

L: No, diós.

S: ¡No mames!
“El Ché” is an ironic reflection on the possibilities of the revolution in contemporary society, when people do not walk around anymore but surf on the internet, and when they do not organize together with others but organize “on the personal level”, or on the individual level. The three characters of Marcos, el Ché and Cienfuegos are all guerilleros who dedicate or dedicated their lives to the realization of their ideals. Two of them, el Ché and Cienfuegos, died in the struggle for their ideals. The speaker of the poem, who has also been elected for some revolutionary function that he does not understand, is a postmodern internet-surfing and probably pot-smoking individual.

The piece picks up on the communication difficulties between Cienfuegos and the generation of the speaker, as well as on the failure of Latin Americans to understand each other because they focused too much on understanding Europe. It should leave the audience

C: No, ése no sabe donde vivo. Porque no he cambiado de dirección.
S: Y entonces, ¿entonces quién era.
C: Era el Subcomandante Marcos.
C: Si me volteé para (mira derecha)... me volteé para (mira izquierda)... no me acuerdo para donde me volteé y era el Ché Guevara.
S: ¡No mames!
P: ¡Toma droga el cabrón!
S: ¿Se parece a Gael?
L: No tiene los ojos claros.
C: Era en blanco y negro. Bueno... entonces el Subcomandante Marcos me dice... bien, me dijo la revolución es mañana. Y yo le pregunto, ¿va a haber café o qué? Y ¿va a hacer frío, no? Sí, va a hacer frío y es a las cuatro y tú eres el elegido. Y entonces estaba ahí Cienfuegos y me dice... me dice...
L: Me dijo le dice le dijo le dijo...
C: La revolución es mañana buey y la revolución no es como pensábamos, antes pensábamos que la revolución la íbamos a hacer todos juntos. Un chivo de gente y no, va a ser individual, cabrón, o en pareja, no? O en tríos. Pero ya saben que los tríos son complicados... Entonces cada quién puede organizarse a nivel familiar digamos, no?
S: Molecular.
C: Molecular.
L: A nivel individualista.
C: Individualista... Esa fue la palabra, no me acordaba porque tu sabes que no habla bien Tacho o sea el español no lo pronuncia el chivo, entonces me empezó a hablar en lengua... pero la verdad... no... es que no.... yo la lengua si pero no de esas... pero bueno no es mi culpa, yo fui a la escuela, estudié inglés francés alemán ruso, yo estudiaba muchas idiomas, pero no, los de acá, no.
L: ¡Bueno!
C: Y entonces estaba el Subcomandante Marcos por el otro lado (señala el lado), el Ché Guevara por este lado (señala el lado) y entre los dos se pusieron a discutir por qué individualista y por qué individual y yo les digo ¿por qué? Les expliqué.
L: ¿Por qué tu?
C: Y yo ¿por qué? Y la cosa es así, se lo digo para que sepan porque es mañana. La cosa es así: Cada cual tiene que hacer lo que pueda en la medida de sus posibilidades y en función de sus necesidades. ¡Y ya!

The audience starts to applaude but Judith de León interrupts them by asking the technician to turn up Santiago Chávez’ jarana which she cannot hear properly. Solís also interrupts the applause by continuing the conversation with Chávez:
S: Oye, ¿tú qué vas a hacer?
C: ¿Cuando sea grande, dices?
Chávez starts to play the next song, entitled “Cuando eras jóven”.

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with a lot of questions that it is the postmodern internet-surfing and probably pot-smoking
know-it-all impersonated by Chávez who finally and with much greater finality (“¡y ya!”)
than the somewhat clueless Cienfuegos and than Marcos and el Ché who are still in
discussion with each other, explains to the audience how the revolution has to be achieved.
The revolution Chávez talks about is an egotistical one in which nobody takes any
responsibility for anybody else, and nobody seems to communicate with anybody else except
for the people he or she is close to anyway. The piece invites the audience to think about if
and how one can make a revolution with this type of revolutionaries.

The invitation to reflection on one’s own attitude towards the revolution is bound up
with the form of the piece. The piece demonstrates the thesis I set up in Chapter 2 when I
argued with Rée that conversation does not necessarily serve to establish and perform
hierarchical power relations, but that it can have the contrary effect. The device of
conversation can help to renegotiate power relations if, and only if, all conversation
partners are willing to participate in this renegotiation. Middleton makes a similar point
when he argues that the conversation in poetry performances is part of the performance and
serves to loosen up the atmosphere and break down hierarchies. Therefore I argued that the
device of conversation is inherently participatory. But confronted with the use of
conversation as a device by La Lengua and Solís, I have to specify the conclusions I came
to earlier.

La Lengua and Solís use conversation to very specific ends and in a very specific
way that differs from the use of conversation in other poetry performances. First of all, in
most poetry performances the conversation is clearly separated from the “poetry”. Here, it
is not. Secondly, in most poetry performances the conversation is directed from the poet to
the audience. The authority to invite the conversation remains with the poet. In the case of
La Lengua the authority of the performer was fragmented between three different people
from the start. “El Ché” starts as a conversation and is a conceptualized one, which is hard
to put into practice when there is only one performer. All these factors lowered the barrier
for the audience to join in because they fragmented the authority of the performer.

The second major difference between the three artists’ use of conversation as a
performative device and the use of the same device by other performance poets is the unity
between conversation and art in the way La Lengua and Solís employ conversation. They
present the conversational piece “El Ché” as one piece of their performance. In doing so,
they suggest that there is no difference between the poetry and the songs – the aspects of
the performance that are obviously “art” – and the critical engagement with hierarchies and
forms of participation. The conversation about “El Ché” is part of their art, not an addition to it. De León's interruption of the applause in the end of the piece should be understood in this context. La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís do say explicitly that they would rather not have applause. There are several good reasons for this. One reason is that applause turns pieces like “El Ché” back into pure “art” and in doing so, separates it from its critique of hierarchies. Also, applause shows that the audience is happy with the piece they saw and heard. They approve of it and are ready to move on. In this sense, applause marks a closure. However, the renegotiation of hierarchies and of power relations, and the reflection on forms of participation that La Lengua are proposing, have to unfold after the performance if they are to have any effect at all. Therefore the audience must ideally not come to a closure.

The performance ends with the following poem:

but if you look closely at the puns of the road
you will see the fissures through which this other world that is possible
sneaks into this world,
the impossible,
just in time to avoid that your brain falls to pieces,
that your willpower splits off,
or that your intestines start to proselytize,
and that they shackle your soul

N O B O D Y
for president

If I wish my analysis to respond to the tradition of the performance of poetry that insists on its connection with the moment of enunciation, I need to provide some background information on the context of the moment in which the poem was spoken. In November 2005 the election campaign for the following presidential elections in Mexico was starting

\[\text{Pero si te fijes bien en los retruécanos del camino}
\text{vas a chechar las fisuras por donde es otro mundo que es posible,}
\text{traspasa hacia este mundo,}
\text{el imposible,}
\text{justo a tiempo para evitar que se te asambleice el cerebro,}
\text{se te escinda la voluntad,}
\text{o tus tripas empiecen a hacer prosilitismo}
\text{y te grillen el alma}
\]

N A D I E
para presidente
forcefully and very aggressively. Around that same time the EZLN started their most recent campaign, *la otra campaña*. During the preparations for *la otra campaña* the Zapatistas and the Subcomandante Marcos in particular received a lot of criticism for not having tried to change the existing political system from within. They rejected all presidential candidates and refused to support López Obrador, the candidate favoured by the left. Many groups and individuals from the left criticized their position fiercely, arguing that the Zapatistas were throwing away an opportunity for change. Instead, the Zapatistas maintained their position of rejecting the political system as inherently corrupt and unfair and of demanding a change of the system so radical that it cannot come from within. In this context the poem’s closing statement “N A D I E / para presidente” rejects political leadership along the lines of the rejection formulated by the Neozapatistas and appeals to the need for a radical change in the way things function.

“This world” as it is, is impossible to live in; the performance has demonstrated various facets of this impossibility. The reference to “that other world that is possible” evokes one of the slogans of the anti-globalization movement, which is also the motto of the World Social Forum. This other world enters the impossible world we live in through the fissures in the path, the cracks in the system. It prevents the fragmentation and consequently, the cooption of the body of the subject by the political system. The poem indicates that psychological and physical integrity and survival are being made impossible by the destruction of agency through fragmentation. Only the hope encouraged when the other world enters through the cracks can save the individual from the disintegration into insanity generated by a world that is upside down.

La Lengua and Solís depict and reflect on the fragmentation that characterizes the postmodern city. They embrace it in that it seems to resist overarching, totalizing narratives. They criticize and reject it because it is being mobilized by the political system to destroy the agency of citizens. Urban imaginaries as a possible source of agency are painfully missing in their work. Mexico City is the focal point of modernization gone horribly wrong. Basic conditions for survival are in danger and fragmentation has led not to the emergence of groups that are equally strong, but to the oppressive domination of some groups who have little or no money and little or no influence by others who have a lot of money and a lot of influence. Fragmentation has helped this progress along and has made it difficult to criticize because of its claim that all groups have the right to pursue their own interests; an invocation, however, that turns out to be disconnected from reality because of the unequal means at the disposal of these different groups.
Following this line of argument I return to the question raised by García Canclini quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the question of how postmodernist ideas affect societies whose living conditions have not yet completed modernization in the way that North-Western industrialized countries have. It is against this background that certain elements of postmodernist thought become paralyzing. In his study *Itinerarios de la modernidad* the Argentinian scholar Nicolás Casullo addresses particularly the lack of agency that is assumed by a postmodern culture. He ties the lack of agency to Christine Buci-Gluksmann’s argument that through processes of mass-mediatization reality stops feeling realistic and the virtual starts feeling real:

If everything is a spectacle, an unstoppable movible, then why should one believe in the movie even though one does not know anymore where the other went? The other, do you remember? The real things. Indifferentiation, absolute equivalente, permanent reiteration. [. . .] Everything is the same. Everything is valid. This situation becomes catastrophic when we get to the territory of values, of behaviour, of ideals. If everything is the same anyway there are no more possibilities left to choose from or to decide what is good and what is bad. (213)\textsuperscript{139}

Casullo indicates that the problematic aspect in the emerging picture is agency, especially civic agency. He argues that claims can no longer be made, simply because the reality of the basis on which these claims are being made becomes questionable. This is even more problematic in societies that are still informed by violence, corruption and classism. In such societies those in power can easily manipulate such sources of reality as the media, and anyone who contradicts the fictional reality they are in fact proposing is silenced through violence. Under these circumstances certain elements of postmodernist society become handy tools for those in power.

The reality that La Lengua and Solís are portraying in their performance is one which is not present in the media and which is shunned by the corrupted establishment (“posesión de drogas: cárcel / posesión de coche: estatus”; “possession of drugs: prison/possession of car: status”). Their project, characterized by the dialogic element that Ian

\textsuperscript{139} Todo es espectáculo, moviola indetenible ¿por qué creerse la película aunque ya no sepamos ¿dónde quedó lo otro? ¿Lo otro, se acuerdan?, las cosas reales. Indiferenciación, equivalencia absoluta, reiteración permanente. [. . .] Todo es lo mismo. Todo vale. Lo catastrófico de esta situación es cuando pasamos al terreno de los valores, de las conductas, de los ideales, donde si todo es también una misma película, entonces ya no hay posibilidad de optar o de decidir cuál es el bien, cuál es el mal. (213)
Gregson identifies as postmodern, engages with the postmodern megalopolis and crystallizes its function as a focal point between modernity, modernization and postmodernity. Their critical engagement with the issue of agency in the postmodern city and society takes many of its cues from the attempt to develop a model of urban agency that combines cultural diversity with political agency, using democracy, justice and freedom as connectors between diversity and agency, not the supply and demand relationship developed through a supposedly equal participation in the market.

“Where I’m From”
One of the aims of the festival Poesiaenvozalta.05 was to present examples of both U.S. American and Mexican spoken word poetry in order to be able to explore the interconnections between the various currents of poetry in performance in the two American countries. Consequently, all evenings of the festival consisted of a performance by a Mexican and a performance by a U.S. American artists. La Lengua and Solis ended their performance before an enthusiastic audience, and turned the stage over to the Nuyorican poet Willie Perdomo. Perdomo is one of the most famous poets among those whose work became popular after their performances in the Nuyorican Poets Café, a venue located in Manhattan, New York City.

Perdomo grew up and still spends much of his time in Spanish Harlem. This area of New York City, located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan island, is predominantly inhabited by Hispanics. The poems that Perdomo read at Casa del Lago are all focused on Spanish Harlem and life in Spanish Harlem. Perdomo locates his poetic work within the area’s spatial, cultural and sonic dimensions. Because of this, Spanish Harlem is not only the topic of Perdomo’s poetry, but also provides the raw materials for it. Therefore, Spanish Harlem has a strong presence in his poetry instead of his poetry being about Spanish Harlem. In my analysis I will consequently focus on the polysensual characteristics of Perdomo’s representation or rendition of Spanish Harlem, and on his reinterpretation of cultural markers as predominantly relying on smell, taste and sound, rather than on geographic characteristics.

I will return to a concept that I elaborated on in more detail in my chapter on sound, referring to Rivas Gamboa’s analysis of the album Casa Babylon by Mano Negra and her concept of “imágenes sonoras” or “sonic images.” Rivas Gamboa uses this term to point out the process of simultaneity in the work of Mano Negra, a process that I call “sonic layering”, continuing in a development of her argument. Rivas Gamboa connects sonic
images explicitly with Benjamin’s methodology in the Passagen-Werk, a strong point of reference in any contemporary piece of theory that addresses cities. Perdomo’s polysensual poetry, which evokes sound, sight and materiality, engages in a similar process of simultaneous layering that I will call “polysensual layering”. Furthermore, I will argue that the technique of layering is constitutive to the emergence of the performance of poetry as a poetic device. Layering techniques enable poets to incorporate a multitude of experiences into poetry that could not be represented by traditional, print-based forms of poetry. Such a device becomes crucially important for a poetic response to an environment informed by as many cultural influences such as Spanish Harlem.

Perdomo says himself that he conceives of the city not as a geographic experience but as a spatial experience. This means for him that the city as a space is constructed in the life of the city dwellers and not by an abstract conception of it, an observation that resonates with Michel de Certeau’s assessment of city concepts as oppressive. Like de Certeau, Perdomo advocates a perception of cities that is developed out of the everyday life of their inhabitants. However, I would add that Perdomo presents everyday life very much as an interactive construction between the city’s inhabitants, along the lines of Doreen Massey’s analysis of the concept of place and yet, as I will demonstrate, in conflict with it:

The uniqueness of a place, or a locality, [. . . .] is constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are actually constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, [. . . .]. Instead then, of thinking of places areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extra-verted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local. (66)

This paragraph seeks to unite two conceptualizations of place but in doing so, opens up a gap between them. On the one hand Massey argues for the local character of place in terms of the particularity of its interactions. On the other hand she proposes an understanding of these very same relations as being “constructed on a far larger scale”. By uniting the two perspectives she hopes to come to an understanding of place that does not rely on a
“Heideggerian view of Space/Place as Being”. The problem with her point of view arises in places where the individual city dweller has a limited amount of agency in personal and other very specific interactions, for example with the police or with the administration, and no or almost no influence on the construction of these same relations on a larger scale. I will demonstrate how this problem becomes very clear in Perdomo’s representation of Spanish Harlem.

Perdomo’s poetry is much in line with Bridge’s and Watson’s point that the city appeals to many other senses than vision. His poetry demonstrates that the life of the city dwellers contains many sensual experiences that cannot be captured by maps or visual descriptions. In Perdomo’s poetry music, the taste and smell of food, and the experience of violence and tenderness in human interaction are particularly important experiences that shape the city as a spatial experience. His appeal to the polysensual characteristics of Spanish Harlem will allow me to develop the concept of “sonic layering” into the concept of “polysensual layering”.

In the performance at Casa del Lago Perdomo opened his part of the evening with the prose poem “Where I’m From”:

Because she liked the “kind of music” that I played and she liked the way I walked as well as the way I talked, she always wanted to know where I was from.

This introductory sentence of the text is characterised by its fluidity and its fast tempo, generated by the speaker’s paraphrasing of several statements of the poet’s interlocutor. Furthermore, the alternation between /ai/ sounds in liked, kind and I, with /ei/ sounds in played and way, and /w/ sounds in way, walked and well creates a complex pattern of repeating sound patterns. The sonic construction reaffirms the statement made by the textual I of the poem, who indicates that “his ways” are characteristic of him and his origin because of the music he listens to, his speech patterns and his movements. Even when he is not in his area, these characteristics are identified by strangers as cultural markers of where the speaker of the poem is from. Thus, “where he is from” cannot be explained in terms of the map.

He realizes this when he tries to explain where he is from in geographical terms. This dialogue changes the rhythm of the poem and in doing so, is indicative of an alienation of the speaker from the language he is speaking:
“I’m from New York.”
“Where in New York?”
“Manhattan.”
“Where in Manhattan?”
“Spanish Harlem.”
“Spanish Harlem?”

The dialogue demonstrates that New York is a small country of its own where one has to be precise about where one is from in order to give meaningful explanations about one's habits, one’s style and one’s preferences. Manhattan is not specific enough, yet, Spanish Harlem is too specific for someone who does not know the area’s particularities, as the question that ends the dialogue suggests. The speaker is left with the task to explain to his interlocutor what “Spanish Harlem” actually means, what it is like and why and how his way of being is related to Spanish Harlem.

To do this he turns inwards towards himself and to his memories. The interlocutor who initially functions as addressee for the poem does no longer figure in the poem. Instead the speaker starts speaking about her in the third person, conceivably directing himself to the audience or the reader:

If I said that I was from 100th Street and Lexington Avenue, right in the heart of a transported Puerto Rican town, where the hodedores live and night turns to day without sleep, do you think she might know where I was from? Nope.

The seemingly bohemian description of Spanish Harlem caters to simplified notions about the Puerto Rican’s mentality. The poet plays on a superficial understanding of diaspora in describing Spanish Harlem as “a transported Puerto Rican town”, mobilizing stereotypes of Puerto Rico as a place of crime and sleeplessness. While his tone suggests that there is some truth to this, the question format of the sentence indicates that this is not all there is, that the reality of Spanish Harlem is much more complex. He goes on to capture the reality of Spanish Harlem through the evocation of situations and characters that are characteristic of its inhabitants:
Where I’m from, Puerto Rico stays on our minds when the fresh breeze of café con leche y pan con mantequilla comes through our half-open windows and under our doors while the sun starts to rise.

In this stanza, Perdomo displaces Puerto Rico into the realm of memory.

In doing so, he establishes a contrast to his previous formulation that Spanish Harlem is a transported Puerto Rican town. He makes the physical absence of Puerto Rico explicit. It is precisely this absence that leads to a mobilization of memory through sensual perceptions like the smell of coffee with milk and buttered bread that comes in from the neighbouring apartments in the very early morning. The Spanish terms and the smell itself function as traces, in the sense discussed in the previous chapter. The smooth rhythm evokes the smooth and sweet smell of the food. In doing so, it brings the traces of the past – or of a different, geographically removed reality – to life in Perdomo's rendition of an early morning in Spanish Harlem.

In tone and content the following stanza is the bridge from sweetness to violence:

Where I’m from, babies fall asleep to the bark of a German shepherd named Tarzan. We hear his wandering footsteps under a midnight sun. Tarzan has learned quickly to ignore the woman who begs her man to stop slapping her with his fist. “Please, papi! Por favor! I swear it wasn’t me. I swear to my mother. Mameee!” (Her dead mother told her that this would happen one day.)

The image of the babies falling asleep to the bark of a German shepherd with a very American name creates a sense of estrangement. Babies should be falling asleep to lullabys or to the quiet voices of their parents in the kitchen, but inside the flats of Spanish Harlem things are not as they should be. Domestic violence is the first type of violence to creep into the poem. Tarzan, who once was compassionate towards the beaten-up woman, has learned to ignore her cries. Werewolf-like, he takes his walks under the midnight sun, figuring as the spooky focal point for a sunset scene that has nothing of the idyllic character of the sunrise described in the previous stanza.

In the following stanza, the speaker focuses on the violence that is brought to the apartments from the outside:
Where I’m from, Independence Day is celebrated every day. The final gunshot from last night’s murder is followed by the officious knock of a warrant squad coming to take your bread, coffee and freedom away.

Domestic violence turns into public violence with the ironic and bitter comment that “Independence Day is celebrated every day”. U.S. independence has no respect for the wish of independence of the Puerto Ricans. The taking away of bread, coffee and freedom resonates with the importance of the smell of buttered bread and coffee, small details that indicate the presence of the past and become important and positive markers of identity. Criminalized violence is countered by police violence.

The speaker goes on to develop the violent scenario. He now includes himself and the listener in the scenario through the use of personal pronouns, thus making the violence come closer and closer:

Where I’m from, the police come into your house without knocking. They throw us off rooftops and say we slipped. They shoot my father and say he was crazy. They put a bullet in my head and say they found me that way.

Where I’m from, you run to the hospital emergency room because some little boy spit a razor out of his mouth and carved a crescent into your face. But you have to understand; where I'm from even the dead have to wait until their number is called.

The abuse lived by the hands of the police repeats itself in the violence of those who are supposed to be having a childhood and in the violence of other, supposedly benevolent authorities like the medical service. The stanza shows that the authorities cannot be relied upon. They figure in the lives of the residents of Spanish Harlem by exposing them to different registers of violence and abuse: murder and physical abuse through the police, institutionally approved violence through bad medical service.

Like the child who spits out the razor blade and carves a crescent into the addressee’s face, the speaker and his friends lose their childhood in this scenario:

Where I’m from, you can listen to Big Daddy re-telling the stories on his corner. He passes a pint of light Barcardi, pouring the dead's tributary swig on the street. His philosophy is quite simple: “I’m God when I put a gun to your head. I’m the judge
and you in my courtroom.” We laugh when he makes us the heroes in his stories. And some of us wait until no one is looking so we can cry because the price we paid for manhood was too goddamned expensive.

Where I’m from, it’s the late night scratch of rats feet that explains what my mother means when she says slowly, “Bueno, mijo, eso es la vida del pobre.” (Well, my son, this is the life of the poor.)

Big Daddy is one of the figures in Perdomo’s poetry that strongly refutes romanticized accounts of Puerto Rican immigrants who maintain their traditional customs, such as drinking Bacardi and the dead's tributary swig. Big Daddy’s maintenance of his traditional customs is paired with a philosophy that thrives on the abuse of power. Big Daddy’s appeal to both heavenly and earthly authorities highlights his hybris, which does not receive the punishment, neither of the gods nor of the courts. Big Daddy is also the author of master narratives. He makes the teenagers “the heroes in his story” probably both on a practical level by getting them involved in crime and on an imaginary level by manipulating their imagination and their expectations. Some of the youngsters who are the protagonists of this stanza thrive on the experience of their initiation into manhood by carrying on the tradition of violence. Others suffer because of this same initiation.

Big Daddy’s abusive attitude is opposed to the mother’s quiet acceptance of her situation, and her gentleness towards her son contrasts with Big Daddy’s pretentiousness. She stands out strangely in a situation characterized by violence and poverty. The contrast between the attitude of the two characters towards the same person and the same circumstances evokes the sense of madness that I already pointed out in several of the poems performed by La Lengua and Solís, and which I will analyse in detail in chapter 9 on “Borderlands” through the example of Chao’s song “Bixo”. But other than La Lengua and Solís and Chao, who focus on this madness and make it the point of departure for discontent and protest, most of Perdomo’s characters end up turning to hard drugs, as he himself did for a time.

Perdomo deprives poverty of its abstractness with the “late night scratch of rats feet”. The reader might want to interpret this as a metaphor, but the dryness of the language and the tenderness of the mother’s comment “Bueno, mijo, eso es la vida del pobre” make it all too clear that it is not one. The rats’ feet, reminiscent of the most repulsive aspects of poverty like the lack of hygienic living conditions in deteriorated housing, are only too real.
The brusk refusal of the addressee’s desire to hide between interpretation and metaphor in the face of the speaker’s reality disarms the listener right before the last, gentle stanza:

Don’t get scared. Where I’m from, it’s sweet like my grandmother reciting a quick prayer over a pot of hot rice and beans. Where I’m from, it’s pretty like my niece stopping me in the middle of the street and telling me to notice all the stars in the sky.

The beginning of the stanza, “Don’t get scared”, breaks with the beginning of all previous stanzas and thus, with the accelerating rhythm of the poem. The phrase “Where I’m from” is repositioned and rethought with the slightly ironic intention to calm down the listener. The previous stanza’s refusal of a metaphorical reading lets the actions and the objects – the quick prayer, the pot of hot rice and beans, the niece stopping the speaker in the middle of the street and the stars – stand for themselves, as touchstones in the foggy space between a physical and a metaphorical landscape.

The foggy space between the physical and the metaphorical landscape is the space in which the physical characteristics of the city such as its apartment buildings and the streets interact and become part of the lives of the inhabitants that unfold inside and around this space. Among other things, it is brought about by the use of the adjectives “sweet” and “pretty”. These two adjectives express the effect of polysensual layering. “Where I’m from, it’s sweet [. . . .]” is not really a grammatical construction because “it” refers to a general atmosphere or a way of life and the adjective “sweet” is not generally applied to describe an atmosphere. However, “sweet” also refers to the gesture of the grandmother, it simultaneously evokes taste because it is named in one sentence with food, and it includes the words of the prayer. Similarly, “pretty” is not applied to characterize Perdomo’s niece as a “pretty girl”. It refers to a gesture that she makes, to her attitude towards a minor detail, to her desire to share her discovery of the pretty starts with someone else, and to the prettiness that all of this together brings about. In the performance, all this comes with a softening of Perdomo’s tone of voice. The result of polysensual layering is the emergence of the foggy space between the physical and the metaphorical landscape of the city. In this foggy space the urban imaginary comes into play.

Polysensual layering allows Perdomo to perform the involvement of his characters into the city; they live it, make it, are victimized by it, and sometimes write it, as the protagonist of the prose poem “Writing About What You Know”, the first two segments of
which Perdomo read as an encore during the performance at Casa del Lago. In this poem polysensual layering plays a much more important role than in “Where I’m From”. The poem is about different stages in the life of Papo, a Puerto Rican boy growing up in Spanish Harlem. The first segment of the poem is set when the protagonist Papo is still a young boy. His schoolteacher takes his class to the public library, where Papo has great difficulties to immerse himself into the offered material:

Up and down the block there are jingles for *manteca, yuca, tamarindo, matadona, plátano maduro y pan caliente* and Papo is listening to the Head Librarian lecture on the value of learning the Dewey Decimal System. “If you need something on Earth Science, you first go to the card catalog and” – but all Papo can hear is the wahwahwahwahwah of urgent police sirens speeding toward the projects. (64)

The jingles and the speech of the Head Librarian are clashing with each other, the Spanish and the English language clash with each other, and the meals announced by the jingles clash with the value of learning the Dewey Decimal System.

Here we encounter an evocation of sonic layering, of the simultaneous interaction of various types of sounds. They are paired with evocations of smell and tastes of several types of food. Papo’s perception establishes a hierarchy between these different appeals: the jingles for the familiar meals reach Papo’s perception, while the Head Librarian’s lecture on the Dewey Decimal System and the card catalog is disconnected from Papo’s reality. However, Papo’s disinterest for the Head Librarian’s lecture is not due to a disinterest in books:

He turns his head toward the one-week Express Book section. There’s a book with a picture of his block on the cover. He can tell by the identification tags on the wall telling him who loved who and for how long. The book says that there is poetry inside. The title buzzes on Papo’s tongue like a biscuit of neon announcing instant Lotto and liquor. The poet is standing in the reflection of a lamp post that beams on Puerto Rican flags dangling chest forward out of tenement windows. Cuchifrito stands blink their 24-hour fluorescent crowns for the late night tree blazers who end their cipher sessions with a taste for un relleno de papa and a large cup of sesame seed juice. (64)
The cover catches his attention because it picks up the pieces of Papo’s reality that are neglected by the head librarian’s approach to finding literature. The block and the identification tags on the wall become cultural markers that mobilize Papo’s memory and make him recognize the picture of the block as his own. The book cover picks up elements of Papo’s life.

The whole passage is a prime example for polysensual layering because it responds to sound, taste, tact, and vision. The book “says” that there is poetry inside, the title “buzzes” on Papo’s tongue like a biscuit – here Perdomo appeals to the sense of taste – but in fact the biscuit is of neon and announces something, so that visuality enters the equation. With liquor Perdomo returns us to the realm of taste. Cuchifrito stands blink, but they undoubtedly also smell, and the passage ends with a reference to the taste of “un relleno de papa and a large cup of sesame seed juice”, a phrase which mixes two different languages.

The elements of Papo’s life are as complex as the poetic technique of polysensual layering. One important element of Papo’s life is Puerto Rican nationalism or rather, the dream of the fight against the conquerors. The title promises an experience related to liquor and gambling, the cuchifrito stands suggest concrete associations with the culture that distracts Papo through its jingles. These two paragraphs show many clashes between Papo’s urban life in Spanish Harlem and literature. “Earth Science” is tucked away somewhere in the card catalog, whereas Papo’s world starts right outside the library and enters it by ways of sound. The slow pace of the head librarian’s lecture is starkly contrasted with the high speed of the jingles that can be heard up and down the block.

The “Express Book section” sets a different pace than the search in the card catalog. The cover of the book sets off a fast chain of associations, poetry being the most mysterious of them: “The book says that there is poetry inside”, suggests that Papo does not know too much about poetry. He thinks of the book as if it was a box of chocolates, or as if poetry was a living creature that inhabits a book, instead of a printed text. Poetry’s liveliness is most probably brought about by the cover images. In this case the cover images function as a frame for the poetry inside the book. They suggest to Papo that if the poetry is framed within Papo’s lively reality and lived experience of the Puerto Rican flag, instant lotto, liquor and the cuchifrito stands, then the product of such liveliness has itself to be lively. However, the product of liveliness is not for kids: only adults can check out Papo’s exciting discovery. Fortunately Papo overcomes this boundary between himself and poetry by getting his father to check out the book for him.
I propose to read the book from the Express Book Section as an allegory of the performance of poetry. As I have demonstrated previously, the performance of poetry seeks to incorporate sound, materiality and personal interaction into poetry. This is precisely what the book promises to Papo. We do not find out whether it finally keeps its promise, but we do know that Papo’s first idea of what poetry is like is informed by sound, smell, and the connection with his surroundings. Since this book turns out to be the beginning of Papo’s own career as a poet, his early conceptualization of poetry is significant.

The second chapter of the piece describes the beginning of Papo’s career as a poet:

Papo tells his Creative Writing teacher that he’s having a difficult time finding something to write about. The teacher says, *Write about what you know. And remember: don’t tell me, show me.*

Papo’s first encounter with writing poetry is characterized by contradictions similar to his first encounter with reading poetry. The contrasts that were noticeable then, like the contrast between the quiet inside of the library and the jingles outside, the contrast between the sterile discipline of earth science and Papo’s lived experience, or the contrast between the lecture of the Head Librarian and the polysensual appeal of the city outside, are still there. However, Papo’s world is no longer that of an adolescent but that of a young adult, and it is therefore much more dangerous:

That night he was hillin’ in front of Caridad's Grocery with Baby Face Nelson and Green-Eye Raymond. A silver BMW drives by with a jukebox in the trunk. The Yellow-Top Crew just cracked their first bottle of champagne. The tempo for Papo’s first assignment will be set by a round of Uzi shots ringing off the Wagner Project rooftops. The shots are supported by a heavy, deep, hip-hop jeep, bass line thump with a stream of furious congas keeping rhythm in the background, warning you to strap in and hold on tight.

The contrast between the teacher’s grammatically neat and tonally pedagogical, encouraging and polite request, made probably with little knowledge about Papo’s world, and Papo’s world is so striking that it invites the question of how to write poetry about a reality like Papo’s.
The poem gives one answer by suggesting a change of tempo. A poem written to the rhythm of a library or a classroom will have a different rhythm and a different pace than a poem whose tempo is set “by a round of Uzi shots ringing off the Wagner Project rooftops”, accompanied by a hip-hop bassline and congas. Crucially, in a poem like Papo’s rhythm and tempo will be crucial elements, whereas both the Head Librarian’s and the teacher’s speech are characterized by a lack of rhythm and by their slow pace. Furthermore, Papo’s world does not leave him many choices to make about the language he will use because its rhythms are “warning you to strap in and hold on tight”. This indicates that the rhythms will be at least as important and meaningful as the words themselves. Just like Williams in “Twice the First Time”, Perdomo employs rhythm and beats to link the poem, its moment of enunciation, and speech to the moment of the performance. The accelerated speed of Perdomo’s reading makes the listener share Papo’s feeling of acceleration. Here I recall my previously advanced argument that the rhythm and the pace of the poem – especially when it is spoken – are important elements of sonic layering and as such, of polysensual layering.

The poem then contains an element unusual for poems, a dialogue:

Green-Eye Raymond: Sounds like they pullin’ somebody’s wig back in Wagner, sun. How many shots you heard?

Papo: Like ten.

Baby Face Nelson: Word. That’s what I heard. And those shots sounded like they had names and addresses.

The language of the three friends, two of which have names from a gangster movie, does not adhere to the rules of grammar or “proper” language. If one tries to imagine the same conversation in “proper language” one realizes that proper language would do badly in a casual conversation about shootings on the Wagner project rooftops. Proper language itself would denote social status and a certain allegiance to the establishment. Therefore, conventional poetry is not applicable to Papo’s reality. “What Papo knows” is in many respects the contrary of everything poetry traditionally is supposed to be. In his world there is little space for introspection in the struggle of everyday life, there is no obvious beauty in the language, and the environment is not humane.

Papo’s attempt to capture his world in a traditional poem has the following result:
After the ambulance and police come to break the set, the streets go back to what they were saying and Papo goes home to do his assignment:

_To Live and Die in Spanish Harlem_

_His name was Papo._
_We didn't know his real name._

_He was born with a plastic spoon melting in his mouth._

_His face was carved from marble._

_He had silver daggers for eyes._

_His heart shaped like a green toy soldier, ready to attack._

_He had hawk wings attached to his brains._

_He crawled to the corner and started running after death._

_He played follow the leader by himself._

_He lived and died in Spanish Harlem._

Papo’s own experiment with proper language and free verse demonstrate how very unsuited they are to frame or capture Papo’s reality. Papo’s poem leaves an impression of flatness and a one-dimensionality that makes it impossible for Papo to express what he wants to express.

Perdomo’s writing with his use of polysensual layering does much better in its engagement with the reality of Spanish Harlem. Poetry like Perdomo’s demonstrates to
skeptical critics and scholars that in order to address a world like Papo’s, poetry needs to give space to the representation of an environment that appeals to many senses, and poetry needs to accommodate a place that has nothing to do with the tranquil and protected environments in which we traditionally read and write poetry. Migration, urbanization and social policies have created environments in which people live and write poetry that almost necessarily clashes with the traditional forms of poetry. The performance of poetry is one successful attempt to accommodate these new, polysensual environments.

Perdomo can be considered one of the most important representatives of poetry performers or, as they are usually called in the U.S., spoken word poets. In his performance he skilfully mobilizes all the registers that characterize the performance of poetry of the 1980s and 1990s. His appeal to the polysensual experience of the city and of identity construction, his rhythmic and sonic poetic style and his intense engagement with his community make the most of the possibilities that the performance of poetry has to offer. Another characteristic of his poetry is his masterful use of rhythm and the effect his use of rhythm has on prosody. In printed form his poetry does not look like verse. However, it undeniably sounds like verse. Perdomo has pushed the performance of poetry to a point at which verse and prosody are redefined from the perspective of sound and rhythm, an element of poetry that seems to be of very subordinate importance in printed poetry. Yet, Perdomo’s poetry shows that the gap between sound and writing, the two of which have so often been declared incompatible, can be bridged.

Perdomo’s poetry is an excellent case in point for a postmodern model of urban agency and also, for the failure of this very model. On the one hand, his poetry is a demonstration of a postmodernist openness towards difference and new forms of representation. Polysensual layering is a prime example for this. As Papo’s example shows, new possibilities for agency form part of such new techniques of representation and expression. On the other hand, polysensual layering ties poetry to the material, to the everyday practice of city life, and in doing so it clearly points out that the postmodern model of urban agency has its limitations. For, the improved modes of artistic representations do not come with changes of the social situation. The housing is still poor and the people still see no productive outlet for their anger and frustration.

Here we see that Massey’s approach of reconciling the local and the global in her conceptualization of place falls short because it does not account for the unequal power relations and the consequences of the unequal distribution of power. Poets like Perdomo can articulate the concerns of their community and they can develop novel poetic forms that
incorporate the polysensual dimensions that could not be incorporated into print-based poetry. But the everyday practice of living in Spanish Harlem is still characterized by drug addiction and by violence on all levels; a violence that the inhabitants of Spanish Harlem replicate, while they do not and cannot break the cycle. The step from revolutionary forms of poetic representation to social and political agency is not being made because the conditions for making this step do not exist.

The flâneur Got Robbed and Run Over
Both performances open up the question of agency, but neither of them propose or perform a model of agency that functions in the postmodern megalopolis. In search for such models of civic agency I want to tie up agency with subjectivity once more. An important literary figure to analyse the representation of subjectivity in the city is the figure of the flâneur. Charles Baudelaire introduced this figure as an expression of modern subjectivity. In The Arcades Project Walter Benjamin develops the figure of the flâneur in a Marxist line. In the analysis of city representations it has emerged as an important figuration of sujectivity:

> The flâneur, though grounded in everyday life, is an analytic form, a narrative device, an attitude towards knowledge and its social context. It is an image of movement through the social space of modernity [. . . .]. (Jenks 29)

The conception quoted above, developed by Chris Jenks in his article “Walking the City”, creates the basis to conceptually rescue the flâneur into postmodern theory. I will engage his analysis of the figure of the flâneur with that of Mireille Rosello. These two reinterpretations of the flâneur bring to the surface a tension between Marxist and Postmodernist approaches that has been surfaced at several different points in this chapter. The emergence of these tensions will allow me to clarify my own position.

Jenks argues that the figure of the flâneur might be a good conceptualization of the position of the cultural critic, though he does suggest some modifications. He refers to the penetrating gaze of the flâneur that enables him to see deeper into postmodern society:

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140 Benjamin’s concept of the flâneur has mainly been elaborated in visual terms, most importantly in Buck-Morss 1989. In this study I have focused on strategies of representation that appeal to the sonic and the tactile. My analysis of the work of La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís is a case in point. The sonic and tactile focus invites closer critical attention to the consequences of non-visual elements of city life, such as traffic, and to the consequences they have for the physical health of city dwellers.
No longer the stimulus-bombarded and shell-shocked inhabitant of Simmel’s “philosophy of money”, the flâneur must shake off the “blasé attitude” and proceed to a critical appreciation of the falsehood, fabrication and replication at the heart of postmodernity’s volatile network of meaning – so often symbolised as the “city”. [. . .] today’s flâneur requires engagement with the crowd. (36)

Jenks’ conceptualization of the postmodern flâneur as someone who “experiences downward mobility” (37) and exposes postmodern “falsehood, fabrication and replication” is not applicable to the city representations I have discussed here for two reasons. One reason is its hidden evocation of a vanguard function of the postmodern critic disguised as flâneur. The second reason is the inadequacy of the proposal because it does not acknowledge the inequality that prevails in postmodern cities.

Jenks’ positioning of the flâneur as someone with a type of vanguard function evokes ideas of leadership that groups like La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís have already discarded. For them, the issue at stake is not the establishment of “better” leaders, but the end of leadership. Furthermore, he ties in the vanguard function of the flâneur with that of the cultural critic. But he does not acknowledge that the cultural critic is in a socially privileged position. Consequently, the vanguard function of a socially privileged flâneur betrays the downward mobility that Jenks evokes.

My second point is related to practicality. When Jenks figures the cultural critic as flâneur, he suggests that this critic will actually go to places like Spanish Harlem and in some way associate with the people. He might also suggest that people from Spanish Harlem will turn into flâneurs and cultural critics, though he mentions only downward, not upward mobility. This suggestion, hidden within the connotations of Jenks’ concept of the flâneur, clashes to an extent with Perdomo’s vision of Spanish Harlem, and it clashes completely with Mexico City in the representation of La Lengua and Solís. Assuming that Jenks allows for upward mobility as much as for downward mobility, I can take Papo as an example of a possible flâneur. Papo does indeed become a poet and creative writing teacher at the end of the story. In this function he becomes something like a spokesman of his community. However, Papo’s community-oriented approach to his new job draws on his experience as a young boy and not on a penetrating gaze acquired as a young adult. He is decidedly not a flâneur at any point in his life. His gaze is not penetrating, and he participates in the self-destruction through drugs instead of analyzing or exposing it.
Also, a flâneur with downward mobility would probably have great difficulty conversing with Green-Eye Raymond and Baby Face Nelson. In the class-based megalopolis of Mexico City the fate of the flâneur would be settled right from the start. He would probably get run over, or nobody would properly talk to him because he would be either below or above the social strata of his interlocutor; or the flâneur would have to buy a car, which would cut him off from many experiences of the city, or his head would explode in a clash with a model of modernization that on the social and political level has gone horribly astray and that has become unnarratable in literature.

Mireille Rosello critically analyzes the figure of the flâneur in her study Declining Stereotypes, taking an approach that focuses on the engagement with difference. She opposes the representation of the beggars in Marie Féraud’s short story “Oh, le pauvre malheureux!” and Charles Baudelaire’s prose poem “La fausse monnaie”. The two texts choose two very different angles to the figure of the beggar. In Féraud’s text, a rich Maghrebin merchant is mistaken for a beggar by an old French woman, simply on the basis of being Arab and of sitting by the side of the street. In Baudelaire’s text, the dandy who takes the position of the flâneur turns the beggar into a “translated object of study”:

It becomes rather obvious that the narrator [of Baudelaire’s prose poem] should not take much credit from the fact that he can read eyes, since what he finds there is but a caricature of what he thinks he already knows about poverty. What he thinks he has read is a stereotyped definition of otherness. And what is even more striking in this supposedly sensitive reading of the beggar’s eyes is that the dandy never doubts that his interpretation is the correct one. For him, visual texts are simple, unsophisticated, eminently interpretable. The narrator seems convinced that the eyes’ “mute eloquence” address him directly and have a clear and unambiguous message for the rich passerby. The poem downplays the element of encounter between two differences, one of which is relegated to the role of translated object of study. (95)

The dandy puts his own obsessive gaze at the centre of his perception of his surroundings. In doing so, his subjectivity gives meaning to everything. However, what is beyond his imagination and experience is excluded from his perception of the world. Instead of making an attempt to reconfigure the figure of the flâneur, as Jenks does, Rosello sticks with a Benjaminian reading of this figuration of urban subjectivity. Her analysis demonstrates the
usefulness and importance of the figure of the flâneur for an analysis of human encounters in contemporary cities because this figure is allowed to analytically capture the blindness of those who are “constantly scrutinizing others’ eyes” (95) but are in fact perpetuating stereotypes.

Instead of reconfiguring the flâneur, Rosello shifts the focus on his silent interlocutor, the beggar. She argues that the move that opens up a different horizon comes from the beggar. While he is silenced in Baudelaire’s prose poem, he is the central character in Féraud’s short story. The supposed beggar Si Bachir is in fact an elderly rich merchant who has come to France for medical treatment of his eyes. During his stay he sits down outside of his son’s house and starts “philosophizing”. All of a sudden he finds an elderly French woman standing in front of him who makes the exclamation that provides the title for the story and gives him a coin. Si Bachir is mortified, but does not say anything because he thinks that if he complains, she will not ever again give a coin to another beggar, whom she might consider to be an “impostor” as well.

Rosello argues that Si Bachir’s silence is a gift to the old woman:

His gift is, at the same time, a nonviolent reversal of an ideologically violent situation and an implicit comment on the way in which the poem deals with the encounter between the dandy and his other, the rich and the poor, the dominant and the dominated. By defusing the potential violence of a confrontation, the North African merchant gives the old woman a magnificent present. (92)

This gift, which implies that Si Bachir gives a stereotype to the old woman, an identity that is not his, contains a treason and at the same time, opens up a new horizon:

All things considered, this gift is a triple form of treason: Si Bachir betrays himself, betrays the old woman, and betrays the others who look like him and whom he has been forced to represent. Si Bachir betrays himself as a rich shopkeeper and philosopher, but he also betrays the old woman because he treats her like a rather stupid, slightly pathetic, and terminally uneducable human being. By refusing to speak to the old woman, Si Bachir treats her with the same condescending contempt as the narrator and his friend treat the poor beggar in Baudelaire’s poem. Once again, the poem’s ideology is implicitly criticized and receives a sort of implicit philosophical change. And finally, Si Bachir also betrays those very people he
pretends to protect by preserving the possibility of future alms, for he unilaterally imposes the vision of a typical beggar who happens to look like him. (93)

The author of the short story and its readers are the agents who make these treasons available as tools for a new horizon. Whereas Si Bachir and the old woman remain stuck in the stereotypes, the author and the critic make them obvious to her readers. If this process of making stereotypes obvious results in a process of speaking and listening – rather than a situation of preaching and following as it would be in a situation brought about by a representative of the vanguard – it can lead to the creation of a new horizon which seeks to break down stereotypes and opens up new spaces of social agency for everyone involved in the situation.

I appreciate Rosello’s perspective because it keeps a fine balance in its analysis of social inequality and cultural and racial difference. As I pointed out in chapter 1, contemporary theory frequently tips this balance towards an emphasis on cultural difference that neglects those sheer physical facts of inequality that so painfully shape contemporary urban culture. Rather than analyzing social inequality away through a reinterpretation of the figure of the flâneur, Rosello leaves the figure intact but rethinks it in order to turn the flâneur into a useful tool for analysis that allows her to put her finger on the interaction between two forms of stereotyping and discrimination.

Rosello’s case study comes from narrative. In my final argumentative move of this chapter I will turn back to the performance of contemporary urban subjectivities in poetry. In his comparative analysis of poetic representations of Buenos Aires, New York, Mexico City and other cities, Javier Gómez-Montero comes to the conclusion that the modern experience of the city is being replaced by a postmodern point of view that employs its own devices. He argues that subjectivity in postmodern city poems is often constructed from a peripheral position. The most notable devices employed by many poets are polyphony and memorialistic techniques. While modern representation of the city and of the subject within the city emphasize the utopia of coherence and centrality of the subject, post-modern poets tend to present cities as the centre of disconnection, often symbolized through the representations of the city as an accumulation of ruins. While Spanish Harlem and Mexico City are not presented as literally being in ruins, the civic and social models that once informed urban politics in these cities are “ruined” in the sense that Fiechtner mobilizes to suggest to “ruin the destroyers”, as I pointed out in chapter 7. Polyphony is represented by techniques such as sonic layering, but also by the cacophony of traffic in the poems of La
Lengua and Rodrigo Solís. Furthermore, La Lengua, Solís and Perdomo all construct their subjectivities from positions that are peripheral to the established and recognized parts of their societies. However, they do not construct these positions as a form of evasion. La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís in particular, level a profound and far-reaching criticism at the dominant theoretical paradigms that interpret peripheral positions into positions of resistance without realizing that those in power have in many cases managed to conflate rebellion with consumption. In doing so, they have transformed rebellion into consumption, thus making it palatable to the dominant system.

In a highly contested territory such as the contemporary megalopolis, the *flâneur* is a problematic figure. As Rosello points out correctly, his distanced gaze makes it impossible for him to position himself. His point of view – and consequently, the point of view of Jenks’ cultural critic – loses itself in the postmodern, neoliberal megalopolis.

**Conclusion**

At this point I return to the question about civic agency raised several times in this chapter and formulated clearly by García Canclini. Both parts of the performance show a highly problematic disconnection between subjectivity and civic agency. In Perdomo’s poetry, the inhabitants of Spanish Harlem are constantly and on many levels victimized by the authorities. Their only – however inefficient – means of expressing their disagreement with the way things are, are violence and drug consumption. The city participants in the poetry of La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís make their own subjective decisions but keep clashing with a hostile reality, one that seems to be beyond their control. What do we do, thus, with a “post-utopian” sense of subjectivity as Gómez-Montero calls it, carefully constructed in interaction with the cities the poets inhabit, but in the end turning out to be a sense of subjectivity that cannot turn into civic agency because of the circumstances that characterize life in these same cities? The development of new urban imaginaries might be part of a solution. However, the question remains about how and according to which standards, values, or pursuing which ideals they can be developed.

In terms of the performance of poetry as an expression of community and as a tool for community action, performances like that of Perdomo and of La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís show that the performance of poetry in the city of the information age is reaching the limits of the political potential that performance poetry claimed for itself in the 1970s and that still worked in the 1980s. In the present chapter I have outlined how the performance of poetry functions as the expression of a community and in many cases managed to
channel the energy it captured into community action. In the early 21st century the fragmentation of communities and new and subtle modes of repression have led to a situation in which the performance of poetry still captures a shared sense of urgency, in particular when it comes to issues of collective consumption. But what happens with this shared sense of urgency once the performance is over? How can it lead to or interact with civic agency without the proximity of a social movement that stands there ready to channel the energy released?

In the last chapter, on “Borderlands”, I take up some of these questions in my discussion of another frequent locus of enunciation of the performance of poetry, which I call a mobile locus of enunciation.
Chapter 9: Borderlands

Introduction

In the previous chapter I analysed two poetry performances that are explicitly situated in a local context. The engagement with Spanish Harlem and Mexico City provided Willie Perdomo and La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís with a locus of enunciation from which they claim recognition for their communities in the case of the former, and from which they critique the global phenomena of neoliberalist globalization and postmodern thought in the case of the latter. The focus on the local is characteristic of one important current in performance poetry. However, it presupposes a sense of geographical and cultural belonging that is not available to all poets. The work of Jean Binta Breeze, for example, and also the later work of Linton Kwesi Johnson are characterized by a constant back-and-forth movement between the U.K. and Jamaica. This back-and-forth movement has always been characteristic of the work of Fiechtner and Vesely, and manifests itself in different forms in the work of Sissay, who searches for, but never finds a geographical locus from which he can speak his poetry.

In this chapter I theorize a mobile locus of enunciation. To conceptualize it I focus on an issue that has been fundamental to the performance of poetry, multiculturalism and multiculturality. In chapter 5 on “Performance” I introduced Beasley’s theorization of performance poetry to point out that migration and multiculturality have been constitutive of the form of performance poetry and also of the causes it has championed. Johnson’s work is a case in point. We have seen in chapter 7 that form and content are inseparable and hence, that the concrete political demands he makes are inseparable from the culturally determined poetic form in which he articulates them. Hence, cultural identity manifests itself both in the form of the poetry and in the political demands it champions. The mobile or multicultural locus of enunciation of the performance poets whose works I have discussed in this study is characterized by this interlacing of cultural and political identity, and I will therefore treat them as inseparable.

The combination of the two identities created a locus of enunciation for many poets, among them Johnson, Breeze, Pato, and Fiechtner and Vesely. However, in recent years the direct connection between cultural identity and political demands seems to have been interrupted. In an interview from 2002 Linton Kwesi Johnson reflects on his “new” sense of dislocation and the reasons for it:
I’m a little bit more dislocated than I used to be, because my main involvement was with the radical black movement. [. . .] But I am still deeply committed to the idea of social justice, and to bringing about racial equality and radical change. My audiences are getting younger and younger. There is a radical current out there among the young people. They are looking for something to get involved in, to channel their rebellion into, but ‘tings an times’ have changed, and 2002 is not like the 1980s. (Prasad 2002, no page numbers)

In this passage Johnson points out that social struggles and the structure of the groups and movements that fight them has changed profoundly since the 1980s. He himself has difficulties to affiliate himself with any particular movement; therefore, he feels dislocated.

Earlier on in the interview Johnson mentions that the anti-globalisation movement is an important point of inspiration for him. This is his reply to the following question: “Increasingly music is adopting a hybrid form – it is borrowing from many cultures. Do you see any connection between that and the development of a global movement against capitalism?” In this question interviewer Yuri Prasad implies that there might be a connection between hybrid art forms and a “global movement against capitalism”. Johnson responds to this implied contention with caution:

It [hybrid music] is a reflection of the world in which we are living – reggae itself was a hybrid music. People talk about the global village – everywhere you go people are fighting back against all kinds of oppression. Whether it has taken on a global dimension I don’t know. What I do know is that I am 100 percent in support of the anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movement. [. . .] It’s good that filmmakers, singers, songwriters and dramatists are dealing with these issues. How people respond is up to the individual artist. You can’t legislate for art. (Prasad 2002, no page numbers)

For my purpose in this chapter it is important to point out that Johnson immediately establishes a connection between hybrid or intercultural art forms and his critique of international politics, especially of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. However, the passage I quoted earlier problematizes this connection. The critique of
the IMF and the World Bank, and the antiglobalisation movement, do not provide the structures in which Johnson can feel politically, intellectually and poetically “at home”.

In his earlier quote, Johnson implied that there is a direct connection between cultural identity, political demands, and the poetics of the performance of poetry. It seems that in recent years this connection has been interrupted, and this interruption (or disruption?) seems to be related to the process that Johnson terms “globalization”. Considering that the proponents of globalization argue that globalization brings about multiculturality, Johnson’s problem seems paradoxical. I contend that it is not. I will make the argument that the ethical and political stance that performance poets take is incompatible with globalization as we know it. With “globalization as we know it” I mean neoliberalist globalization. I contend that neoliberalist globalization has appropriated the concept of multiculturalism and has emptied it of the demands for social justice and racial equality that many proponents of multiculturalism felt were part and parcel of the concept. The appropriation of this important ideological and political platform of performance poetry by neoliberalism hits the art form in the heart. Poets such as Johnson, who are still committed to principles like racial equality and social justice and consider these issues to be at the heart of their poetry, are faced with the choice of either abandoning one of the most important platforms that allows them to speak from within their cultural identity, or of continuing to use this platform at the price of being co-opted into implicitly supporting a system they disagree with.¹⁴¹

Performance poets – especially in Europe – find themselves at these crossroads at the moment. I do not know which poets will make which choice. Some poets seem to accept complicity with globalization and neoliberalism, others feel the loss of their platform but have not yet created a different one or, for that matter, have not yet decided whether they want to create a different platform or whether they want to fight for the one that was taken away from them. As a theorist and cultural analyst I cannot offer a solution to this conundrum. However, I want to bring these issues up for debate and I want to make a contribution to this debate from the point of view of the literary and cultural analyst. In order to do so, I will analyse some conceptual elements of the concept of multiculturality and some examples of a locus of enunciation that is mobile, yet positions itself clearly in

¹⁴¹ I have chosen multiculturality as a case in point, but I could have chosen almost any other element of performance poetry. The increasing emphasis on the show element of performance poetry is another indication of the commodification and co-optation of performance poetry by a neoliberalist culture industry (see Gräbner 2007). The fate of slam poetry is another instance of the same process (see Gräbner 2006).
opposition to neoliberalist globalization and its implications. These concepts all circle around ideas of borderlands.

**Mobility, Hybridization, Border Thinking**

Here, I introduce three approaches to different conceptual elements of multiculturalism: mobility, hybridization, and border thinking. I address mobility through a discussion of the article “Theorizing Place” by Timothy Cresswell. In a second instance of analysis I turn to Néstor García Canclini’s concept of hybridization, and as a third example I introduce Walter D. Mignolo’s theorization of border thinking.

Mobility is one of the constitutive elements of multiculturality. However, there are many different types of mobility; some are enforced, some are voluntary, others are so much part of the mobile subject’s identity that they may be called compulsive. The concept itself has ambivalent connotations. Cresswell tries to salvage the terms place and mobility from two contexts of use that come from different political directions, but use the concept in equally unproductive ways. On the one hand, place has been privileged over mobility because it allows for an essentialist and exclusive notion of cultural belonging. On the other hand, mobility has been privileged over place in an uncritical endorsement of a – frequently enforced – cultural nomadism that denies the importance of place for the construction and performance of identity.

Cresswell critiques both approaches. The first one excludes the perspectives of all those who do not fit into the pattern of the dominant culture. Cresswell’s criticism of the second approach hinges on its a-historicity. He writes:

Presence and becoming cannot be understood outside of history. We exist in time. [. . . .] An analysis of “being-in-the-world” will always be unsatisfactory if it is not historicized. History and geography matter. The operations involved in throwing like a girl [. . . .] cannot be understood outside of time and space – outside of context or, if you like, pre-existent (but not established in the sense of final) systems. We have to raise the question of the production of systems which people implement in order to get things done. [. . . .] To provide an account of “creative social practice” we are obliged to indicate what the conditions of possibility are for that practice to be so creative. (23 – 24)\(^{142}\)

\(^{142}\) For a critique of the idealization of nomadism, see also Boer 2006.
Cresswell proposes the conception of “practiced place” as an analytical category that facilitates the analysis of creative practices in space and time. He writes:

The conception of practiced place revises the older ideas of place as the center of authentic existence with its own neatly circumscribed culture and identity. As an anti-essentialist notion it does not allow for an easy correlation of place and culture. Simultaneously this open conception of place provides an antidote to the celebration of nomadic hybridity in which place all but disappears. Place as practice and practice as placed always relies on the symbiosis of locatedness and motion rather than the valorization of one or the other. (29)

The concept of practiced place seeks to evade the argumentative deadlocks of a nationalist conception of place and at the same time, “the celebration of nomadic hybridity in which place all but disappears”. Hence, Cresswell’s argument is close to de Certeau’s and Massey’s arguments. All three are concerned with the development of a concept of place that allows for diversity and that combines locatedness with an unessentialist concept of identity. However, I have cited de Certeau’s and Massey’s approaches in order to address performances that are tied in with the identity of specific cities; I cite Cresswell’s approach in order to theorize a mobile locus of enunciation.

However, while I endorse the connection between place and practice and find it useful and important in light of the poetry I discussed in chapter 8, Cresswell’s conceptualization of practiced place leads to similar problems as de Certeau’s and Massey’s approaches. This becomes clear when I read Perdomo’s poetry through it, this time focusing on the performance of agency rather than on the articulation of cultural identity. “Practiced place” applies perfectly to Spanish Harlem as a performatively constructed place. It allows the analyst to take into consideration both the context of the emergence of Spanish Harlem and its function as a place in which a particular identity is constructed and performed. This includes drug abuse, domestic violence and street violence as well as the narrator’s niece’s prettiness and his mother’s warmth and care. This contradiction is the status quo of Spanish Harlem. Cresswell’s approach clearly affirms the identity of the inhabitants of Spanish Harlem. But in doing so and nothing else, it inadvertently affirms the status quo of violence and discrimination. The concept itself does not connect to the incentive to change the status quo. I have made it clear in chapter 1 that I want to respond to the poetry I discuss in this study from a point of view that is committed to changing the
status quo. Thus, the analytical focus that Cresswell proposes does not go far enough for my purposes. It does not facilitate a theorization of the tension between contemporary politically militant performance poetry in the multicultural context. The conceptualization of this tension remains locked in a logic that leads to the affirmation of the poets’ cultural identities and to the contestation of the dominant cultural identities, but it does not include change among its goals. Therefore, a theoretical analysis of performance poetry along the lines of such a model would exclude an important element of politically militant performance poetry.

Another frequently used concept in the context of multiculturality is that of hybridity or hybridization. My position towards Bhabha’s theorization of the concept is clear from my analyses in chapter 1 on “Commitment and Analysis” and chapter 7 on “Accents and Translations”. However, I hesitate to discard the term completely because it brings out the intertwinement of cultures that characterizes the work of artists such as Chao, Perdomo, and even Fiechtner and Vesely. I will therefore turn to a theorization of hybrid cultures that directly addresses the role of neoliberalist globalization in processes of hybridization.

In his seminal study Culturas híbridas (1989) Néstor García Canclini develops the concept of hybrid cultures in an analysis of Latin American cultures. García Canclini points out that Latin American societies are based on a hybrid mixture between immigrant and indigenous cultures. Therefore, cultural heterogeneity and hybridity have a long – and conflictual – tradition in Latin America. García Canclini argues that consequently, hybridity cannot be conceived of as a state but that one should instead talk about processes of hybridization. Similar to the argument that Bhabha made several years later, García Canclini locates processes of hybridization particularly in popular culture, which he understands to be in resistance to an oppressive and cultural homogeneous state.143

Members of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group and Walter D. Mignolo criticize the concept of hybridity as well as García Canclini’s approach to it. Their criticism is also applicable to Bhabha’s theorization of hybridity. John Beverley’s criticism of García Canclini’s argument brings some of the most frequently criticized points to the fore when he writes:

If hybridization is, in effect, coextensive with civil society in Canclini’s argument, the binary that is not deconstructed in it is the one that is constitutive of the concept

143 As I pointed out earlier, I have focused on tactile and sonic manners of representation. For an analysis of visual hybridity in Latin America see Serge Gruzinski.
of hybridity itself: that is, the state/civil society antinomy (where civil society is seen as the place where cultural hybridity appears, as against the supposedly monological and homogenizing narrative of the nation-state). However, in making this identification – which seeks democratically to displace hermeneutic authority from the bourgeois high culture to popular reception – cultural studies paradoxically ends up in some ways legitimizing the market and globalization. (54)

Beverley exposes an argumentative move that is characteristic of contemporary left-wing cultural theory and that is also crucial for Cresswell’s argument. Beverley suggests that the concept of hybridity is conceptually based on an antinomy between the state and civil society because it claims that the narrative of the nation-state is monological and homogenizing. To democratically counteract the homogenizing impulse on the nation-state, the conceptualization of hybridity emphasizes the culturally hybrid aspects of civil society. The problematic aspect of this argument is the basic assumption that the forces of the market work in the favour of and in an alliance with popular reception, an assumption that is not investigated by the theorists of hybridity. According to Beverley, this leads to a legitimization of the – often undemocratic and exploitative – forces of the market and of globalization.

In his work since Culturas Híbridas García Canclini has taken these criticisms to heart. He draws ever sharper lines of distinction between the market, civil society and the state as agents of cultural production. In his later study Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts (1995) the interaction between these three agents of cultural production is one of the central issues. García Canclini analyses the consequences of the neoliberalist consumer society on cultural identity and civic agency. He exposes several strategies that mass media and politics employ to reconceptualize civic agency as the agency of the consumer, thus displacing agency from the political arena into the arena of consumption where it loses its ability to intervene in the structures that shape people’s lives, or, phrased more simply, he exposes and deconstructs “the confusion of civil society with the market” (158).

García Canclini considers this confusion to be one of the difficulties of developing a concept of agency in a contemporary multicultural consumer society that he is facing as a theorist and that artists are also facing. He admits that he does not know how to resolve it, though he does end his book with a suggestion. He invites artists, writers, and scientists to “rediscover the role of the intellectuals vis-à-vis the state and civil society” (161):
Allow me to characterize this challenge by stating that we are not obliged to believe ingenuously in civil society, nor to take a calculating concern for the limits of governability and the realm of power. “Intellectuals speak as if they were ministers,” observes Ricardo Piglia, and “politics has become a practice that decides what a society cannot do. The politicians are the new philosophers: they decree what should be taken as real, what is possible, what are the limits of truth.” It occurs to me that our first responsibility is to salvage these tasks that are properly cultural from their dissolution in the market or in politics; that is, to rethink the real together with the possible, to distinguish globalization from selective modernization, to reconstruct a democratic multiculturalism from its foundation in civil society and with the participation of the state. (161)

García Canclini’s final proposition aims first and foremost at the construction of an oppositional practice of intellectual labour. He argues that three issues need to form the basis of it: those who engage in this practice must not limit their conception of the real to what is prescribed by those in power, they need to recognize the inequalities in the process of globalization so as to be able to develop new models of globalization and multiculturalism, and they need to re-establish the connection between multiculturalism and democracy that used to be part and parcel of the concept. This connection needs to be re-established both in terms of the demands made by a multicultural society, and by making civil society the primary agent of a multicultural society, assisted by the state. The market is no longer an agent in the scenario proposed by García Canclini.

His clear suggestions and demands provide one possible point of departure for a theoretical and literary discourse that separates multiculturalism from globalization and agency from consumption. However, the above passage is a proposition and not an analysis. In this sense it is a projection towards the future. Hence, in the present we do not yet have such discourses and practices.

Walter D. Mignolo is one of the scholars who attempts to construct a methodological approach to literary and cultural analysis that is oppositional to neoliberalist globalization. He does so in most detail in his book Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking (2000), but also in his article “Coloniality at Large” (2002). His approach to intercultural encounters is informed by the tense co-existence of modernity and coloniality. He argues that coloniality is the
flip-side of modernity. The two are produced by the same mode of thinking. Hence, modernization cannot lead to an end of coloniality. It can only reinscribe it in different forms because the mode of thinking and the patterns of domination and subordination remain the same. For this reason, Mignolo’s intellectual project is “the search for a different logic” (2000: 22).

Mignolo argues that hybridity both as a concept and as a practice is being articulated from a locus of enunciation from within modernity/coloniality. As an alternative concept to describe the mindset of people who live in the cultural borderlands between modernity and coloniality he develops the concept/practice “border thinking”. Drawing heavily on Gloria Anzaldúa’s observations on the interaction between different languages in *Borderlands/La frontera*, he defines border thinking as based on different aspects of belonging to different cultures, such as a “double consciousness” and “bilanguaging”. He argues that it is not enough to describe the heterogeneity or hybridity of the enunciated, maintaining at the same time the homogeneity and purity of enunciation” (2002: 256). Thus, he points out that most important is not only the message of a cultural product, but also its form.

Consequently, language is crucial to the practice of border thinking. Mignolo understands national languages as an outcome of coloniality and of an imperialist system. By privileging the language of the dominant power over the languages of the colonized population, colonial power instilled a self-hatred and lack of self-respect into the colonialized population. Moreover, the dominance of certain languages over others has led to the privileging of certain epistemologies and traditions of knowledge over others and as a consequence, colonized peoples cannot develop self-respect and a sense of identity on their own terms, but only on the terms of the colonizer. This argument links up to the dominance of theoretical texts written in English that I criticized in chapter 1 in relation to the debate between Moretti and Kristal.

Mignolo points out that colonialized peoples are frequently bilingual, speaking the indigenous language of their land as well as the language of the colonizers; or that they are precisely not bilingual anymore, their indigenous language having been eradicated by the violence of colonialism. Mignolo therefore argues that the “bilanguaging mind” “is the ‘mind’ inscribed in and produced by colonial conditions, although diverse colonial legacies engender dissimilar ‘bicultural minds’” (2002: 267). One of Mignolo’s objectives in his study is a shift of the “locus of enunciation” of scholarship from inside coloniality to outside of coloniality, and from dominating nation states to a transculturality that is
permanently negotiating its origins with the cultural influences that have been introduced by colonialism. In line with this goal, he argues that

[. . . .] bilanguaging and educational projects become necessary subjects of disussion for public policy, for conscientization (sic.) in bilingual education, for contributing to building new communities, and for exploring new epistemological avenues in cultures of scholarship. Bilanguaging as a way of living in languages in a transnational world, as an educational and epistemological project, rests on the critique of reason, of disciplinary structures, and of cultures of scholarship complicitous with national and imperial languages (2002: 273).

The “bilanguaging mind” becomes therefore a locus of enunciation in itself. In many respects the concept of the bilanguaging mind and border thinking seem to provide a way of thinking an oppositional practice of a multicultural locus of enunciation. However, Mignolo theorizes them from a position that I already critiqued by quoting Brennan (Brennan 2001) in chapter 1. Mignolo posits that a state of being is the prerequisite for the ability to articulate a profound critique of power relations as they are at this moment. Hence, he posits identity as location and not as position, to paraphrase Brennan (2006: 26). Unless one assumes that cultural identity necessarily entails a political position such an argument leads to the supplanting of civic agency by creative agency, a move I criticized there.

The approaches by Cresswell, García Canclini and Mignolo have brought out that we are still in the very beginning of the construction of a multicultural discourse that is in clear opposition to an unjust and repressive type of globalization. The three approaches to mobility and multiculturality that I have introduced provide some points of departure for the discourse that needs to be established. I want to reiterate Cresswell’s emphasis on the necessity of positioning – not situating – the enunciating subject in space and time. García Canclini’s acute consciousness of the lack of a democratic multicultural discourse, and the issues he proposes to address, add another layer of possible topics of discussion. Finally, Mignolo’s emphasis on the process of articulation contributes the sensibility that the content of this new practice is not all that matters, but it is just as important in which terms it is developed and articulated.

In order to bring out the necessity for the rethinking of the connection between cultural identity and politically militant performance poetry I will end this study with a short analysis of two motives that feature prominently on Manu Chao’s second album
Próxima Estación...Esperanza. The first motive is Chao’s positioning of his sonic I in space and time, the second motive is a reflection on madness. I will bring out how the position of the speaking subject and the sonic I in space and time is performed through the interaction of sound, music and language in sonic texts in which sound, music and language are sonically layered. In Chao’s case, this mode of articulation is tied in with a clear political position.

Orality and sound are frequently portrayed as alternatives to the technologized word, for example by Beasley and Ong. This view does not account for the equally technologized status of the recording. This is why I do not wish to portray the work with sound and the spoken word as a return to the long-lost roots of spoken language and to an equally long-lost communal space of enunciation. Instead, I place recording as a technique that emerged out of centuries of the experience of the technologized word. One consequence of the technologization of the word has been an acute sensibility to the difference between “sounds” and “words”, and the institutionalization of music that, as Attali describes it, has led to an equally acute sense of the difference between “sounds” and “music”. Chao, rather than collapsing these boundaries, performs the borderlands between sound, music and words as a place of encounter and of interaction. The emphasis of the last tracks on the album is clearly on the dislocation of sound, words, music and voice. By dislocating them all, Chao addresses them from and moves them into their own borderlands region. In these borderland regions power is not reaffirmed or appropriated, but constantly questioned and undermined. Chao’s practice of sound, music, voice and words proposes an antiauthoritarian and counterhegemonic interaction that reflects back on the power relations at work in the sonic text itself.

Sonic Maps of Space and Time
In this section I focus on the relationship between space and time, and on the position of the enunciating subject towards the two. The enquiry into the precise moment in which we are living, into its implication for the future, and its relationship towards the past are crucial to the process of positioning oneself. At the same time, the historical moment that we are living is at least partially defined by where and under which conditions we live it. The place where we are born contributes important elements to our cultural identity. It also defines the rights granted to us, the extent to which we can travel freely, and often times, how we are treated in an international environment. One of the artists discussed in this study who is most keenly aware of the interaction between space and time is Manu Chao. In Esperanza,
he situates himself both temporally and spatially through sounds. Two crucial sonic texts in which he performs his situatedness in the global are the first track of the album, “Merry Blues”, and the track “La primavera.”

*Esperanza* starts with a mixture of noises: radio announcements, commentary of a radio station, an unarticulated chorus of voices, video game noises, ring tones, beeps, and other unidentifiable sounds. The mixture of these sounds continues for several seconds before the song “Merry Blues” crystallizes out of the seemingly chaotic amalgamation of sounds. “Merry Blues” introduces many of the themes of the CD. Most of the sounds we hear in the beginning, during and in the end of “Merry Blues” will later on return in the album, sometimes in prominent places, sometimes deeply woven into the texture of the songs. Important sonic themes will be the recordings “Atento!”, “Attention!”, and “Permanece a la escucha! Permanece a la escucha!”, “Stay tuned and keep listening!”, but also many of the ringing tones and video game noises. That the song crystallizes out of these noises points to a sense of connectedness between music and the seemingly chaotic sounds of the world: the music in the album emerges out of the meeting of many different sounds, responds to them, interacts with them, and is therefore inseparably connected with the world, not an escape from it.

The song’s cheerful tone establishes the generally happy and positive tone of the album. Its title “Merry Blues” through an oxymoron indicates a sense of self-irony and humour: a blues can be many things – troubled, sad, rebellious – but merriness is not considered to be one of its characteristic. Through a play between the title and the music the song furthermore shows the interaction between music and language: the linguistic oxymoron of the title is picked up through a musical oxymoron in the song’s tune and rhythm, which are reggae, not blues. The lyrics feature a sonic I who is feeling “blue”: the person he is infatuated with is not available, either because she is absent or because she does not respond to his feelings. However, rather than complaining, the sonic I is celebrating “being blue” in a cheerful manner and “high” spirits:

So many nites
With your shadow in my bed
So many nites
Baby you whisper in my head
So many nites

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144 For more information on the blues, its history, style and contents see Evans (2002).
Sing along the Merry Blues
So many nites…
I told you once
I told you twice
The Merry blues…
I can not sleep
Haunted by your pretty body
I can not sleep
I want the world set on fire
So many nites
Can’t keep from goin’ down loose…
I told you once
I told you twice
The Merry blues...
Hellenadinadoyoudododododo
IfeeldoohappywhenIseeseeseeseeyou
Youmakemesingalikeadoubadoubadé
Iknowyoulikeitlikeazoumbouzoumboué
Hellenadinadoyoudododododo
Ifeeltethoodlyliketopickypickyyou
Iknowyoulikeitlikearubadubstlylee
Iknowyoulikeamarihuanasmokey

Clearly, this lyric conveys a playful and interactive attitude. In this initial combination, the sounds that are introduced suggest eclecticism based on the openness for different sounds. Many of the same sounds that introduce “Merry Blues” return in other pieces in the album.

The sonic motives reflected on in the song “La primavera” shed a different light on the cheerfulness of sonic interculturality. They make the bridge to one of the thematic focuses of Esperanza, the situatedness of the subject in time and space. The recordings are the time announcements of the Cuban radio station Radio Reloj. Radio Reloj broadcasts nothing but time announcements for different places in the world. The same recordings already figured in Clandestino, most notably in the song “Je ne t’aime plus”. In this song they underlined the theme of separation and of travel. In Esperanza, however, the time announcements feature much more prominently. Also, they are framed within and provide
the frame for a different theme which can be summed up in the question “where and when are we?” The question resonates powerfully with the performance of poetry that always takes place in the “here and now”. The time announcements are introduced in the song “La primavera”, one of the best known, in its beauty most haunting, and in its frequent recurrence most characteristic musical themes of the album. Chao develops the song around the theme of the recording:

¿Qué hora son mi corazón? What time is it, my heart?
(four times and then once after each question)

¿que hora son en inglaterra? What time is it in England?
¿que hora son en gibraltar? What time is it in Gibraltar?
¿que hora son allá en fisterra? What time is it there in Fisterra?
¿que hora son hey byebyeboom? What time is it, hey byebyeboom?
¿que hora son la vida entera? What time is during the whole life?
¿que hora son en el japón? What time is it in Japan?
¿que hora son en mozambique? What time is it in Mozambique?
¿que hora son en washington? What time is it in Washington?
Nos engañaron byebyeboom! They deceived us byebyeboom!
Nos engañaron con la primavera! They deceived us with spring!
Nos engañaron bye bye bom! They deceived us byebyeboom!

Bombala bombala bombala...
Bombala bombala bombala...
Bombala bombala bombala...

¿qué hora son mi corazón? What time is it, my heart?

By means of the inclusion of the time announcements, “La primavera” takes the questions of “time” and “space” to a metaphorical level. The haunting question of “What time is it?” asked in the political context of the album suggests other questions, such as “What is happening?”, “At which point in history are we?”, “What can we do?”, “Will we do anything?” This interpretation is strengthened by the double meaning of “mi corazón”, which can be a term of endearment or can literally mean “my heart” and refer
metaphorically to the most intimate manifestation of subjectivity. The interpretation of time as much more than a fixed moment in someone’s subjective perception is also supported by lines such as “Qué hora son la vida entera?” and “Nos engañaron con la primavera”. These lines evoke the notion that it is time to do something, to rebel against the deception, to make the moment happen.

Simultaneously “the point in time” becomes dislocated and subjective. There is a time difference between Washington and Mozambique. Also, many of the places he names are suggestive of a larger history. The combination of England and Gibraltar invites the reference to colonialism. The combination of Japan, Mozambique and Washington evokes the difference between North and South, between the First World and Africa, and it alludes to civil war and underdevelopment that are the consequences of imperialism. While the inhabitants of these different places live in the same time, they do not live under the same conditions. Hence, they do not conceive of each other as of “living at the same time” – yet, they are. Like Fiechtner in “Poetry, maybe”, Chao suggests in “La primavera” that we all live in personal and global time at once and thus, are always connected to what is around us. By connecting time with always different locations he connects the ephemeral with the physical and the location of our existence with the moment of our existence. The recurrences of the time announcement and the theme of “La primavera” throughout the album turn these issues into a recurring theme that informs many of the topics addressed by other songs.

The combination of space and time in Chao’s work leads to the creation of a locus of enunciation that is spatially mobile and at the same time, temporally – or historically – situated. By finding a language and a sound that articulates and performs the connection between the two he creates maps that give access to these loci of enunciation and to the thought that interacts with the sounds that are characteristic of them. Chao’s commitment to a particular moment in time implies his commitment to the construction of just and democratic societies. Thus, the sonic maps he creates are of both sounds and thought, of art just as much as of politics, of realities as well as of imaginaries.

**Resignation is a Permanent Suicide: Madness and Globalization**

“Merry Blues” and “La primavera” stand for the two sides of mobility and multiculturalism: the eclectic, creative and joyful mixture of sounds in “Merry Blues” and the sense of dislocation and of urgency in “La primavera”. The two songs perform the sonic I’s travels from one cultural context to the next. While so much travelling has its joyful sides and
enables new modes of expression, it might also be experienced as destabilizing. In
Esperanza Chao introduces different variations of the theme of madness, both as a
difficulty in communicating oneself from a mobile locus of enunciation because of a
complex system of references, and as a condition brought about by an economic and
political system that destroys the conditions of life both in our societies and on our planet.

In the song “Bixo” Chao focuses in an indirect way on the dark side of travel and
transculturality, and on its consequences for society and for the individual. “Bixo”, sung in
Brazilian with a Galician accent, addresses the theme of madness, but not in a
straightforward manner:

O bixo do coco entro en minha casa
A coconut bug got into my house
e minha cabeça puxose a abalar
and my head began to shake
O bixo do coco entro en minha casa
A coconut bug got into my house
Levouse toda minha ilusión
Taking all my illusions.
Levouse os cartos, levouse a mulher
Taking os cartos, taking my woman
Deixo tormenta, nada de comer
Letting in the torment
O bixo do coco entro en minha casa
Nothing to eat
Mirome a os olhos, e a meiga falo
Looking into my eyes, and to her I say
Cuando a cabeça fode
When the head gets fucked
Hasta ya reventar
Until it breaks
Cuando a cabeça fode
When the head gets fucked
O bixo vai pegar.
the bug grabs you

Chao has implicitly addressed the issue of madness before in a context that is helpful to the
understanding of “Bixo”.

He was and is involved in the project “La Colifata” which I have cited in an earlier
footnote in my analysis of Chao’s engagement with the figure of the jongleur and street
musicians. “La Colifata” is the name of an Argentinian radio station, a musician project as
well as of an album. “Colifata” is an Argentinian term for a madhouse, and the residents of
the neuropsychiatric clinic “Borda” in Buenos Aires have named the radio station that they
themselves run with the help of some supervisors “La Colifata”. News about the program
made its way to Barcelona and led to the foundation of the project “La Colifata”, in which
Manu Chao was heavily involved.
The Barcelona project assembled pieces of Barcelona musicians and street musicians, many of which had never recorded before, into an album entitled *La Colifata: Siempre fui loco* (I have always been crazy). Those pieces are framed by and often respond to or integrate pieces of radio broadcasts, thus developing a musical reflection on madness in response to the inmates of the clinic, on the definition of madness by society and its different facets and components. The album calls into question what we mean by madness and who decides on what madness is. Many of the songs address issues such as illegality (of immigrants), right-wing violence and lack of communication. Thus, the album explores the different layers of madness, its emergence and its construction by social conventions. It also suggests that some issues of contemporary society are not considered madness according to the hegemonic logic, but should be. “Bixo” has a similar trajectory.

In the song lyrics we deal with three agents: the speaker, the coconut bug (“o bixo do coco”), a malicious bug – a little animal or a virus – that spreads madness, and the “meiga”, a type of witch. In this particular context the word “bixo” might refer to the expression “bicho de la cabeza”. This expression refers to an obsession that will finally completely dominate the will and reason of the possessed person. The witch appears together with the coconut bug:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bixo do coco entró en minha casa</th>
<th>The coconut bug got into my house</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mirome a os olhos, e a meiga falo</td>
<td>He looked into my eyes, and the witch says</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuando a cabeça fode</td>
<td>When the head gets fucked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasta ya reventar</td>
<td>Until it breaks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuando a cabeça fode</td>
<td>When the head gets fucked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O bixo vai pegar</td>
<td>the bug grabs you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The witch explains when madness enters: when everything gets too much, when the mind cannot deal anymore with the onslaught of the realities that surround it. Once madness enters, “minha cabeça puxose a abalar”, “my head started to be in a precarious balance”.

The term “abalar” is Galician and may refer to a rock known as “pedra de abalar”. This rock, which was situated in Muxía but has since been destroyed by a storm, was an attraction for people to balance themselves on it, like on a slow swing. In the context of “Bixo”, “abalar” indicates the maintenance of a precarious mental balance. The sonic I,
once affected by the coconut bug, attempts to maintain this balance, but subsequently loses it because he has nothing to hold on to: the coconut bug

Levouse toda minha illusion He takes all my illusions
Levouse os cartos, levouse a mulher He takes os cartos, he takes my woman
Deixo tormenta He lets in torment
Nada de comer Nothing to eat

Thus deprived of any touchstones in his life, the sonic I gives in to his obsession. He lets himself go and slides towards absolute failure, towards desolation, towards the loss of everything, and towards death. … The character that speaks shows a resignation that turns him into a tragic agent because of his submission to what is coming, …, a lo que adviene, al hado. (Casas 2005)

In the context of Próxima Estación...Esperanza as well as La Colifata: Siempre fui loco both madness and resignation invite interpretations on several levels. Whatever the origin of the madness is and whomever the coconut bug and the witch stand for, the sonic I starts to put all his energies into the maintenance of a precarious balance only when these outside agents appear in his house, i.e. in his life. At this point we return to the question that is asked in La Colifata: What is madness? The answer would be: a system that makes people mad, that encourages people to be obsessive and that makes communication and contact difficult or impossible. The sonic I is therefore caught in a double bind. The system he functions in is itself mad, and as a result, it does not allow for a way out of his own madness. His submissiveness and his resignation are signs of the sonic I’s sense of helplessness and of being overwhelmed.

On a different level “Bixo” refers to a precarious balance on the level of language and communication. The language slides between Galician and Brazilian and at times mixes the two languages or mixes Galician cultural references into the Brazilian text. Such a double identity can itself be “mind-blowing” because it gives the person who lives it little sturdy ground to walk on, no stable system of reference that is understandable to people who are not familiar with the different reference systems within which the person functions. Communication can then become very difficult. At the same time, having different reference systems available might enable the sonic I to say more, to have more modes of
expression at his disposal. The meaning of a text written between languages cannot be straightforward. Hence, if one does not want to produce a straightforward text, a mixed language that vacillates between different reference system might be just the type of language to use.

The one thing that a person living between different languages or between different ideas of sanity may never do is let go and submit themselves to malicious forces that impact from outside, because then the mind will not be able to “abalar”, to maintain the precarious balance, and will explode. This problematizes Mignolo’s concepts of bilanguaging and border thinking. They do not respond to this difficulty in communication; indeed, in his development of them Mignolo focuses on the speaker and on his possibilities for expression, but he does not analyse to whom the speaker is talking and for what purpose. The focus of Mignolo’s concepts is therefore not on a dialogue between speaker and listener or on a triologue between speaker, listener, and the language that is being used. Instead, Mignolo re-establishes the dominance of the speaker but at the price of him withdrawing into a space outside of coloniality / modernity (to recall Mignolo), leaving the system intact.

The social and political dimension of madness are even more clearly addressed in the second last track of Esperanza, “Vacaloca”. The vacaloca is a contemporary *danse macabre* enacted on the occasion of the mad cow disease and its consequences. The song evokes a procession of cows going to their death:

```
pal cementerio se va
la vaca de mala leche.
pal cementerio se va
inocente condenada.
pal cementerio se va
la vaca de mala leche
pal cementerio se va
ni dios le va a perdonar.
pal cementerio se va
la vaca de mala leche
pal cementerio se va
pudriéndose la sociedad.
```

To the cemetery she goes
the cow of spoiled milk.

Innocent condemned.

To the cemetery she goes
the cow of spoiled milk.

not even god will pardon her.

To the cemetery she goes
the cow of spoiled milk

rotting away society.
The image evokes a procession of cows, similar to the procession of the condemned in the medieval and contemporary images of the dances of the death. The perspective of the looker-on is detached. He observes the cow as if he was not concerned: “There she goes, the mad cow, there she goes”. The detached attitude of the viewer who sees an important part of his culture disappear is reflected upon in the refrain of the song:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>bailemos todos el vacaloca</th>
<th>Let’s all dance the mad cow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ese ritmo terminal</td>
<td>that terminal rythmn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bailemos todos el vacaloca</td>
<td>let’s all dance the mad cow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bailemos todos hasta el final.</td>
<td>Let’s all dance to the end...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “vaca loca” is no longer a disease or a symptom. In the refrain of the song the “vacaloca” comes to be a term of its own. It consists of the apathy of the human beings as well as of the sickness of the mad cows. Together, they form the “vacaloca”, the dance of death for European civilization as we know it.

My reading of “Vacaloca” is enforced by a cross-reading of the piece with the text “El ser y la vaca” by the Galician writer Manuel Rivas. In this text, which was written for the “Feria de la mentira”, organized by Manu Chao in Galicia at the occasion of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st millenium, Rivas portrays a culture at a turning point. The symbol for this turning point is the relationship between men and cows. Rivas claims that buried in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela is not the apostle Jacob, but a cow with the traditional shell instead of a heart. According to legend, the cow had carried the coffin of the person buried in the cathedral from its place of death to Santiago de Compostela.

The cow, argues Rivas, is a thinking and thoughtful animal. It has lived with its keepers for centuries in a mutually supportive relationship, without ever giving in completely to the human being. The cows that Rivas describes are stubborn and do not lend their services to anyone, as does the cow Mora, who only releases milk when milked by her owner, the blind woman Dosinda. They cannot be understood in terms of rentability, as the policy-makers in the European Union understand it. Rivas argues with Milan Kundera that human beings are dependent on cows and that a civilization in which cows disappear from the daily life of their keepers – as E.U. policies require – will be different from the one we now know. The cruelties that the cows are submitted to reflect back on the human being. Rivas writes: “The ‘mad cow’ disease is in fact a human disease. The disease of the
parasite’s greed” (38). As some groups in Europe destroy the lifestyle of other European citizens, they destroy the basis for their own existence. Consequently, everyone goes mad: the cows, the people who eat them, and society as such.

“Vacaloca” is sung over two tracks. One is its melody, the other is a type of litany which was used by the keepers of the cows when they went with them to the pasture. The rhythm of the litany provides the basis of the rhythm of the song. “Vacaloca” is thus literally sung over its own now barely audible cultural background. The “terminal rhythm” makes its own past inaudible and at the same time, depends on it rhythmically. The vacaloca’s dependency on the almost inaudible past indicates that the “Vacaloca” will end with this civilization. It really is a dance of death, a performance of the death of its singers.

The mad cow becomes a symbol for the normalized madness of our society. We survive on an economic system that destroys our cultures, our relationship to nature, nature itself, and that makes us terminally ill. The “mad cow disease” demonstrates clearly that the economic and agricultural system we live in is not tenable. Hence, the term “mad cow disease” raises the question of who is mad: the cows, or those in power? According to Chao and Rivas those in power are the mad ones because they attempt to normalize a state of affairs that upon a closer look is insane, because self-destructive.

With its evocation of the medieval dances of death, the song adds another dimension to the position of the singer. In an analysis of medieval versions of the dances of death, Helmut Rosenfeld points out that the musician in the dances of the death is usually either death itself or Christ (18ff.). In Chao's dance of death, death figures as the secularized image of “calavera”, the skull, an image that resonates with both European and Mexican culture:

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calavera no llora  skull does not cry
seranata de amor  serenade of love
calavera no llora  skull does not cry
no tiene corazón...  he has no heart
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One can read the detached singer of “Vacaloca” as a rendition of the musician who lures its listeners into death by way of the seductive rhythm of his song. The song should then be understood as another reflection on ourselves (i.e. contemporary society) apathetically and obediently performing the dance of our own death without rebelling against it. The song
ends with one of the non-semantic interventions (to recall Bernstein) of the author through the Madrid metro announcement “Próxima Estación…Esperanza. Final del trayecto”.145

I have indicated previously that there are many of such non-semantic (Bernstein) interventions, mainly in the form of recordings. In this particular case, the author intervenes with a paratextual call for hope to counter his sonic I’s flirt with resignation.146 Both the title of the CD and the frequently repeated recording “la resignación es un suicidio permanente”, “resignation is permanent suicide”, make the point that keeping up hope and not giving in to resignation is indispensable for survival in a society that has changed the terms for the definition of sanity, so as to make madness appear sane. The album is a document of the struggle for the precarious balance between madness and sanity, between resignation and hope.147

In this context, I want to briefly return to Mignolo’s theorization of bilanguaging as a linguistic borderland. His approach seems to be applicable to Chao’s work in a number of ways. Chao, like many of the examples that Mignolo cites, grew up bilingual (in French and Spanish) due to his parents’ enforced exile from Spain to France. The scope of consequences of bilanguaging that Mignolo claims for it are reflected in Chao’s work, his ever-changing sonic I, his easy interaction with different languages, his interaction with sounds that come from many different cultures and places and his critique of power relations as well as of power as such. However, Mignolo’s conception of the “bilanguaging mind” is not applicable in so far as Chao is, after all, Spanish, i.e. he does not speak from a subaltern perspective from outside of coloniality as Mignolo proposes to conceptualize such a locus of enunciation – or does he?

I perceive Mignolo’s conception of the locus of enunciation to be a simplification of European history and identity. In the study I have quoted above, as well as in his article “Coloniality at large”, Mignolo projects a simplified image of European history and European identity. This simplification is due to his failure to address heterogeneity within European countries and cultures. Yet, these have never been homogeneous or at least, easily compatible, as it is frequently suggested by idologues of the European Union who seek to homogenize European cultures in order to make life easy for business. Spain is possibly the country that demonstrates the heterogeneity within European cultures and

145 The sonic interventions that I have here called “non-semantic” can also be called paratextual.
146 Note this manifestation of the split between sonic I and poet-author. In moments like the one I just described the author treats the sonic I as if it existed separately from himself and at times developed its own dynamic.
147 “Resignation is a permanent suicide” alludes to Honoré de Balzac’s phrase “La resignation est un suicide quotidien”.

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nation states most obviously. In spite of the repression of the Franco dictatorship the Basque country, Catalunya and Galicia among other regions have maintained a cultural identity and languages different from that of the dominant, Castilian culture and language. Chao was born in Paris as the son of a Basque mother and a Galician father; where would that put his locus of enunciation on the geopolitical map Mignolo proposes?

My preliminary answer would be that he cannot be pinned down. Like the “desaparecido”, he never stays in one place long enough to make it a fixed locus of enunciation. This does not mean that he or his sonic I become flimsy, on the contrary. As much as the album emphasizes movement, it also emphasizes continuity. The fluid transitions between the songs in both albums suggest movement. The recurring motives (rhythm, melody, phrases and nonsemantic interventions) reaffirm this sense of movement. At the same time, Chao deploys them to perform a continuity of commitment and of ideology. The result is a mobile locus of enunciation that is bound together by the manifestations of the author’s subjectivity and his being in time. Through these two elements of his performance he theorizes a seeming contradiction: the world seems to look so different from different places at the same moment. However, if one looks at it through a perspective that is informed by the concern about the structural maintenance of inequality and poverty, by the rejection of imperialist politics, and by the concern for the balance of the ecological system and of the human being as a part of the ecological system, one encounters possible loci of enunciation in all places. Chao engages “time” in the metaphorical sense with the geographical locus of enunciation, thus creating a complex, flexible, anti-essentialist and politically fiercely committed mode of speaking. His use of sonic, verbal and musical elements in his interventions reflects and complexity of the mobile locus of enunciation. Hence, Chao in Esperanza performs a “multilanguaging” (my term) of his means of expression while at the same time he claims a spatially mobile, temporally fixed locus of enunciation.

**Conclusion: Art against Planetary Reconciliation**

In closing, I suggest that in recent years the situatedness of politically militant performance poets between different cultures has been subtly transformed into a location. This location pretends to bestow certain rights on the poets and his community, and it does. Following my arguments in chapters 1 and 7 I argue that those who define the location define the rights that are bestowed on the community in question. They define the limits of the location, and they define the situation that surrounds it. Frequently, this situation impacts on the space in which the poet and his community live. We are now at a point at which it
has become necessary to rethink situatedness and location in terms of position. The positions need to be defined by shared political goals. The enunciations that come from this position can be multilanguaged and manifold; they need to accommodate the processes of hybridization that have after all characterized our societies and that have been so important for the performance of poetry.

In his introduction to the 2001 edition of *Culturas híbridas* García Canclini responds to many of the points of criticism raised against his approach as well as to the changes in the political and economic situation that have taken place between the publication of the first edition of 1989 and the year 2001. At this point I focus particularly on two aspects of his argument. One is his argument that a strong public sphere and a more open conceptualization of citizenship have to be a prerequisite for a globalized society:

One of its [a transnational public space’s] prerequisites is that we also globalise civic rights, that multinational hybridizations that are the result of massive migration movements are recognized in a more open concept of citizenship which is able to accommodate multiple belongings. (xx)\(^{148}\)

In this passage García Canclini points out that the creation of a strong transnational public space is a prerequisite for and not a consequence of successful and equal processes of hybridization. Hence, anyone who is interested in furthering processes of hybridization needs to formulate clear demands to politics and economic policies in order to create a situation in which hybridization does not turn into the buying out of cultures.

The second argument I want to bring out is the following one:

I have to point out [. . . ] that nowadays a different threat replaces that folklorizing and nationalist direction. It is the threat brought about by the seductiveness of the globalized market: reduce art to a discourse of planetary reconciliation. The standardized versions of films and world music, the “international style” of visual arts and literature, sometimes suspend the tension between what communicates itself and the heartbreak, between what globalizes itself and what insists on its being different, or what is expelled to the margins of mundialization. [. . . ] the equalization of differences, the simulation that the asymmetries between centres and

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\(^{148}\) Uno de los requisitos para ello [el espacio público transnacional] es que además globalicemos los derechos ciudadanos, que las hibridaciones multinacionales derivadas de migraciones masivas sean reconocidas en una concepción más abierta de la ciudadanía, capaz de abarcar múltiples pertenencias. (xx)
peripheries are disappearing, make it difficult for art and culture to be spaces in which the elements that resist hybridization can be named. (xxii)\(^{149}\)

In this passage García Canclini suggests that as theorists we need to shift our focus when we discuss issues like mobility, place, or transculturality. Nationalist and folkloristic attitudes are no longer the main danger to a just model of transculturization and hybridization. They have been replaced by (or, as I would suggest, in some cases have been transformed into) the “seductiveness of the globalized market”. This development requires scientists, theorists and artists to rethink conceptualizations of hybridity, hybridization and multiculturality within this new framework. The avoidance of nationalist and folkloristic attitudes must no longer be the privileged focus of theorizations engaging with interculturality and multiculturality.

The formulation of “art as a discourse of planetary reconciliation” raises a point that is important in the work of many artists whose work I have discussed here. This point is even more important for the future of the performance of poetry. I have insisted on the belligerence of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poetry and on his address of what is untranslatable and should not be translated because it forms part of his community’s cultural space and should not be appropriated and commodified by others. Urs Fiechtner’s and Sergio Vesely’s accented translations make a similar point about the necessity of space, though they are more concerned with a respectful intercultural and intermediatic communication. Manu Chao’s work addresses very similar issues as that of Fiechtner and Vesely; yet, where Fiechtner’s and Vesely’s work has its roots in the experience of exilic migration and the struggle against the dictatorships of the Southern Cone, Chao’s work is informed by the critique of and resistance to neoliberalist processes of globalization and possible alternatives to them. The work of the three artists in conjunction demonstrates that there is a line from exile to globalization and hybridization. Their respect for the untranslatable makes Chao’s and Fiechtner’s and Vesely’s poetry so very compatible with the localized poetry of La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís, with whom Fiechtner and Vesely share many poetic strategies and with whom Manu Chao shares the political sympathy for Neozapatism.

\(^{149}\) Debo decir [...] que otra amenaza reemplaza en estos días a aquel destino folclorizante o nacionalista. Es la que trae la seducción del mercado globalista: reducir el arte a discurso de reconciliación planetaria. Las versiones estadarizadas de las películas y las músicas del mundo, del “estilo internacional” en las artes visuales y la literatura, suspenden a veces la tension entre lo que se comunica y lo desgarrado, entre lo que se globaliza y lo que insiste en la diferencia, o es expulsado a los márgenes de la mundialización. [...] la ecualización de las diferencias, la simulación de que se desvanecen las asimetrías entre centros y periferias, hacen difícil que el arte y la cultura sean lugares donde también se nombre lo que no se puede o no se deja hibridar. (xxii)
The experience of Mexico City is untranslatable. But the ideology that has made an important contribution to the problems that Mexico City has to contend with has its consequences in other parts of the world as well. Europe is one example. The U.S.A. are another. The poets whose work I have discussed in this study all make the point that under the circumstances planetary reconciliation is impossible and indeed, undesirable.

I have dedicated the last chapter of this study to the analysis of an artist whose profile does not fit that of a “classical” performance poet. I did so because once again I wanted to point out the permeability of music, sound and the spoken word, and because I wanted to demonstrate that if poets choose a clear – if mobile – position for themselves, then the traditional tools of the performance of poetry are still very useful for an art form in opposition.

Performance poetry has come to a forking of the paths. The many meanings of the term “performance” indicate the different directions that are there to take. On the one hand, there is performance as “showing”, as show, as a staged performance. On the other hand, there are the anti-shows of poets like Saul Williams or La Lengua and Rodrigo Solís, and the “showing doing” of poets like Lemn Sissay. In recent years an exaggerated emphasis has been placed on the show-element of the poetry performance and on the public figure of the poet. On a different note and at the same time, the separation of the multicultural locus of enunciation from concrete political demands for justice and equality has led to the disorientation and dislocation of poets who were at the forefront of politically militant performance poetry. The platform they used to speak from has not yet been replaced. Chao’s mobile locus of enunciation, constructed through a relationship between space and time that makes the critique of the neoliberalist system from a hybrid identity its point of departure, points towards one possible solution. However, to construct such a locus of enunciation one needs to clearly identify what one wants to stand up against and what one wants to stand up for. The identification of these goals by performance poets is in most cases still outstanding, and it remains to be seen how the identification of these goals will impact on the performance of poetry as a medium of poetic expression.
Conclusion

I ended this study, by implication, with an invitation to performance poets to leave behind what made them famous: the stage. Considering my case study of Neruda in chapter 2 and 3 this invitation might almost look like the desire to return to an earlier epoch. But I am trying to make a different point. Neruda did not need a stage. On the contrary, his stage performances were usually considered disappointing. But his performance of his public figure in the immediate interaction with people was a success and had a much greater effect on peoples’ lives than his stage performances did. His example goes to show that it takes more than literally “taking the words off the page” to bring poetry to work as a cultural practice.

In this study I have discussed the work of a diverse group of poets from Europe, Latin America and the U.S. who take the word off the page in more than one sense of the word. Most importantly, they do not replace the page with the stage. They use the performance of poetry to stage words and stage the speaking of words in order to investigate the effect they have in a social context. Phrased differently and paraphrasing a quote from Richard Schechner that I used in the introduction to this study: they show, they expose what words do and how they work. Making the social impact of words transparent means to make it addressable, debatable and finally, changeable. The poets whose work I have discussed here take words both off the page and off the stage and return them to a cultural and dialogic practice. In their practice, poetry no longer depends on an experience of reading one’s way into isolation, inspiration and wisdom, to paraphrase Frances Wilson.

From the perspective of literary studies the contention that poetry is a cultural practice can easily seem preposterous. Too often it is easily associated with one-dimensional rhetoric, as Marjorie Perloff writes about Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poetry in the article I quoted in chapter 7. I have made the point that such a reading of performed poetry is the result of the exclusion of many of its most important elements from the methodology of literary studies. In this study I have developed categories of analysis that help us as literary and cultural critics to overcome this lack of methodology. Most of these categories come from cultural analysis and I have reframed those that come from literary studies within the methodology and the terminology of cultural analysis. This is a necessary move for the analysis of an art form that so emphatically places poetic language within the cultural sphere.
When I argue that the performance, sound and accents are elements of the repertoire of poetic devices that are deployed in the performance of poetry I make the point that poetry consists of more than words. It also consists of how the words that make up the poem are spoken, where they are spoken, under what conditions, by whom, and who listens to them. The different figurations of the poet-author, modes of address, and the practice of translation are poetic strategies that connect performed poetry with its surroundings by mobilizing the devices of performance, sound, and accents. The poetic practices I have analysed here take their inspiration from and create the loci of enunciation of their authors. In some cases the locus of enunciation is as precise as Spanish Harlem or Mexico City, in others as difficult to pin down as the borderland region of sound, word, and music. The interaction of these concepts and strategies in the performance of poetry demonstrates that the significance of it by far exceeds the page as well as the stage. Hence, the comments I made at the end of chapter 9 indicate the faithfulness of performance poets to the political commitment that informs many poetry performances: at stake is not artistic virtuosity only, but the engagement of artistic virtuosity with the social position of the poet, of the audience, and of the social function of language.

While researching for this study I have tried to practice the theoretical equivalence of taking the words off the page as well as the stage. I have tried to take cultural and literary theories out of their biotope – the academic mind residing in the research institute, in my own case – into the world that surrounds them. I took them to the location and into the venues of many poetry performances; they have travelled to London, Stirling, Santiago de Compostela, Mexico City, Germany, and they have spent time in a number of different venues in and around Amsterdam. They did not always travel easily and putting them to work involved a great deal of struggle; chapters 1 and 9 in particular address the difficulties I experienced and did not always manage to resolve.

I started and ended this study with chapters that address my theoretical preoccupations because this structure reflects my own trajectory. I started out with the desire to situate myself as a politically thinking academic in an intellectual environment that was committed to many principles I also feel committed to. Yet, I quickly realized that commitment is not enough, especially because it can easily turn into complicity, as I point out in chapter 1.

Furthermore, I was dealing with politically militant poetry, and many of these poems are performed from a well-developed standpoint by poets who clearly articulate their demands. In order to not just paraphrase and uncritically endorse the poems I analysed, I, too, needed to situate myself and develop a space from which I could answer back to my
strong-willed, belligerent and obstinate objects of analysis. I preliminarily managed to do so in the process that led to the writing of chapter 1. I then wrote a study on the performance of poetry from the perspective of my own, newly discovered situatedness – only to develop new theoretical intranquilities as I dug deeper into the poetic material and subjected it and myself to more encounters with the realities that play such an important part in its production. In some respects the sources for my intranquility in chapter 9 are similar to the ones in chapter 1. The lack of enquiry into what limits, determines, marginalizes or enforces processes of hybridization preoccupied me in both chapters. However, the 2001 edition of *Culturas híbridas* and Mignolo’s work should have liberated me from many of my preoccupations. They did indeed liberate me from some. However, they only enforced the sense of walking head-on into a wall when it comes to the attempt of developing a methodology for the analysis of poetry as a cultural practice – or for the analysis of any cultural practice – that does not take neoliberalist ideological constructions and modes of production as their paradigm. Thus, cultural theory in my opinion finds itself in a place similar to the one in which politically militant performance poets like Johnson find themselves.

Chapter 9 on “Borderlands” also raised questions about my own situatedness. In chapter 1 I made much of the comparative scope of this study. There, I endorsed the critique levelled against Moretti’s Anglo-Saxon based bibliography. This critique referred mainly to Moretti’s literary case studies. It can be extended to include the use of theoretical and methodological texts in the North-Western academy. The globalization of research and education has not led to the hybridization of the methodology of comparative literature. My own experience of Mexican interdisciplinary literary studies at the CEIICH, a research institute of the UNAM in Mexico City, left me with the distinct impression that we in the North-West have much to gain from an engagement of our methodological and theoretical approaches with those employed by our Latin American colleagues. Yet, while our colleagues in the South are well-versed in our approaches, our knowledge of theirs is extremely limited. Hence, in the end of this study it only remains for me to admit that my theoretical approach yet has to undergo the process of hybridization I would have liked to occur in the beginning of it.

I end on the note of urgency that several performance poets have very recently voiced to me in personal conversations: something is amiss in the way we address our realities. This goes for poetry as well as theory. In both discourses we relate ourselves to our realities through language. Language offers ways into and ways out of our realities, it is
how we conceptualize perspectives and perceptions. Poetic language searches for the connection between our perception, perspectives, and our realities in a particularly intense way. From a different perspective, the language of cultural analysis should provide analyses of our realities that enable us to understand them so keenly that we can decide whether we want to change them or leave them as we are. In recent years both poetry and theory struggle with a discrepancy between poetic and theoretical languages and our realities.

In both areas we need to develop languages that do not talk past our realities but that latch onto and hook into them, languages that enable us to pull apart our realities and that allow us to put them back together. We also need to recognize the limitations of language. Understanding and analysing our realities is one thing; changing them is another. Poetry and theory can make a contribution to the former. They can even contribute to the development of a language that allows us to implement changes on different terms than has been done up to now. But, to return once more to Edward Kamau Brathwaite whose work has been so important for performance poetry: “It is people, not language, who make revolutions”.

The performance of poetry has provided poets with new ways of engaging language with realities and theorists with new concepts and a new terminology to conceive of and analyse language as simultaneously individual and social, public and intimate. The task remains to take these possibilities where performance poetry always meant to take them: off the page and off the stage.
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Samenvatting

In deze studie bespreek ik het werk van dichters die een methode ontwikkeld hebben die hen toelaat taal te beschouwen als tegelijk poëtisch en sociaal: de poëzie performance. De poëzie performance schept een situatie waarin poëtische taal verbonden is met de fysische aanwezigheid van de spreker en de toeschouwer binnen één enkel moment en één plek van articulatie.

Dit creëert een verbondenheid tussen de individu en andere mensen, de locatie, en het specifieke tijdsmoment. Dit aspect heeft nog weinig kritische aandacht gekregen, waarschijnlijk omdat het binnen literatuurstudies meestal beschouwd wordt als onderdeel van dichterlijke voordracht of poëzielezingen, en omdat er geen samenhangende methodologie is die het binnen literaire en culturele analyse mogelijk maakt te reageren op de elementen van betekenis die de poëzie performance eigen zijn. Deze elementen omvatten, bijvoorbeeld, de stem van de dichter, inclusief inflectie, intonatie, accent, pauses, en vloeiend of stotterend spreken; andere geluiden zoals melodie, percussie, opgenomen geluiden; en het publiek en mogelijke reacties zoals applaus, gejuich of inmengingen; en de aanwezigheid ter plekke van de dichter die de mogelijkheid van directe interactie met zijn publiek met zich meebrengt.

De performance van poëzie mobiliseert deze elementen van betekenisgeving en betrekt de omgeving zowel in wat het gedicht zegt als in hoe het gezegd wordt, met andere woorden, in het gebruik van poëtische taal. Het stimuleert de ontwikkeling van een poëtische taal die constant overloopt vanuit de afgesloten eenheid van het gedicht naar de culturele, sociale en politieke omgeving. Dit betekent niet dat het werken met poëtische taal ondergeschikt wordt aan het sociale en politieke. Het betekent wel dat een analytische benadering die zich alleen bezighoudt met het woord, en andere poëtische elementen zoals hierboven beschreven staan buiten beschouwing laat, of die de taal beschrijft los van context, ontoereikend is voor een analyse van poëzie performanceen. Mijn doel in deze studie is het ontwikkelen van een methodologie die het de literaire en culturele analyst mogelijk maakt recht te doen aan de vele elementen van betekenisgeving die betrokken zijn bij het uitbeelden van dichtkunst, en te doorgronden welke invloed deze elementen hebben binnen de culturele context van de poëzie performance.

Om deze methodologie te ontwikkelen bespreek ik het werk van dichters niet in chronologische volgorde, ook al zou een studie van de geschiedenis van poëzie performance in de Westerse wereld niet misplaatst zijn. Zo’n project vereist allereerst een
bepaald gereedschap om gedichten adequaat te kunnen analyseren, en het is dit
methodologisch voorwerk dat ik in deze dissertatie verricht, door middel van conceptuele
benadering. De concepten die ik voorstel als gereedschap voor de analyse van dichterlijke
voorstellingen zijn de volgende: de dichter-auteur, de dichter als openbare figuur en de
tekstuele persona van de dichter; spreken en luisteren; adressering; voordracht; geluid;
accenten en vertalingen; de stad; en grensgebieden.

Voordat ik deze concepten ontwikkel voor de analyse van poëzie performanceen,
maak ik in hoofdstuk 1 mijn positie duidelijk en geef een context voor mijn theoretische
benadering door verschillende concepten te bespreken die relevant zijn in de vergelijkende
literatuurwetenschap. Deze concepten zijn wereldliteratuur, autonomie, performativiteit, en
“agency”. Het voordragen van poëzie is vaak gebruikt binnen de context van sociale
bewegingen, of om bepaalde eisen over te brengen. Alle dichters waarvan ik het werk hier
baspreek maken gebruik van de kracht van de poëtische taal in voorgedragen dichtkunst als
een middel om de relatie met het sociale te onderzoeken. Om hun werk recht te doen heb ik
de relatie tussen de theorie en de praktijk, en tussen denken en doen opnieuw moeten
beschouwen. Deze heroverweging ligt ten grondslag aan deze hele studie, en aan het eerste
hoofdstuk in het bijzonder.

Nadat ik mijzelf in dit hoofdstuk positioneer en het “commitment” van de
dichterlijke voorstelling analyseer, ontwikkel en bespreek ik vanaf hoofdstuk 2 de
verschillende analytische concepten. De eerste concepten die ik bespreek – de dichter-
auteur in zijn verschillende manifestaties en het spreken en luisteren – betreffen de relatie
tussen dichter en publiek. In hoofdstuk 2 beargumenteer ik dat de aanwezigheid van de
dichter op de plek van de voorstelling, en zijn aanspraak als bron van het gedicht door
middel van zijn persoonlijke voordracht, de meest opmerkelijke kenmerken van
performance poëzie vormen. Voor veel academici zijn deze kenmerken problematisch
omdat ze beslag lijken te leggen op het idee van autenticiteit en oorspronkelijkheid dat
binnen de literatuurtheorie allang achterhaald en gedeconstrueerd is ter vermijding van
intentie-gerichte interpretatie. Ik stel dat het herstel van de dichter als auteur niet hoeft te
leiden tot intentie-gericht lezen. Des te meer omdat de herdefiniering van de dichter als een
auteur die ter plekke aanspraakbaar is de autoriteitsstructuur van het auteurschap en van
interpretatie juist bevraagbaar maakt. Om deze kwestie op een analytische manier te
benaderen hanteer ik drie categorieën in de analyse van de manifestatie van de dichter
binnen de poëzie performance: dat van de dichter-auteur, de tekstuele persona, en de
publieke persona van de dichter.

In de daaropvolgende hoofdstukken ontwikkels ik de concepten “performance,” “adressering” en “geluid.” Deze concepten houden zich bezig met de performatieve en sonische elementen van performance poëzie. In hoofdstuk 4, over “performance” maak ik de overgang van openbare dichtkunst naar poëtische “performance.” Door middel van een analyse van gedichten door Gil Scott Heron, Lemn Sissay en Chus Pato ontwikkels ik concepten voor het analyseren van de voordracht zelf en de culturele betekenis ervan. Ik stel het gebruik van “open” en “gesloten” interactiviteit voor als categorieën van analyse in mijn lezing van het gedicht “Whitey on the Moon” door Scott Heron. In mijn analyse van een opvoering door Sissay maak ik gebruik van een voorstel door Mieke Bal dat voordracht en performativiteit aan elkaar verwant zijn, en ontwikkels dat verder. Ten slotte, in een discussie over de interactie tussen dichtkunst en het dichterlijke in het werk van Chus Pato stel ik een model van performance als interactie tussen dichtkunst en het dichterlijke, en tussen politiek en poëtisch werk samen.

In hoofdstuk 5 vestig ik de aandacht op het concept “adressering” in het uitbeelden van dichtkunst. Theoretici zoals Jonathan Culler, Barbara Johnson en William Waters beweren dat adressering een belangrijk onderdeel uitmaakt van de lyriek. Hun verschillende analyses van adressering en, specifiek, van apostrophe, maken gebruik van voorbeelden uit de geschreven dichtkunst. Ik stel voor dat voorgedragen dichtkunst net zo toegespitst is op adressering omdat het contact tussen de dichter en zijn publiek een situatie schept die sowieso altijd een adres inhoudt. Door middel van een analyse van de gedichten “Fair” en “Architecture” door Lemn Sissay, en van het gedicht “Act III Scene 2 (Shakespeare)” door Saul Williams, en “Ordinary Mawning” door Jean Binta Breeze, kijk ik naar de
verschillende aspecten van addressering binnen de voorgedragen dichtkunst. Tegelijkertijd onderzoek ik de specifieke kenmerken van dictie door vrouwelijke dichters die een publiek aanspreken.

In hoofdstuk 6, dat over geluid gaat, wijk ik af van de “live” context en leg me toe op geluidsoptnamen. CD opnamen worden steeds meer belangrijk geacht binnen de context van poëzie performanceen. Door middel van een analyse van het eerste solo album van Manu Chao ontwikkel ik categorieën voor de analyse van verschillende elementen van geluid, namelijk: muziek, het gesproken woord, non-muzikale geluiden, en ritme. Ik ontwikkel de categorie van de “sonische ik” en laat zien hoe Chao eerst de autoriteit van deze “sonische ik” construeert en dan ondermijnt door het gebruik van verschillende geluidseffecten.

In hoofdstuk 7, over “accenten en vertalingen”, keer ik terug naar de live performance, deze keer door middel van een analyse van accenten en vertalingen in performance poëzie. In een analyse van gedichten door Linton Kwesi Johnson beargumenteer ik dat accenten functioneren als een brug tussen persoonlijke identiteit en de identiteit van een gemeenschap. Waar de verbinding tussen persoonlijke en gemeenschappelijke identiteit een manier van machtsokekenning is in de diasporische context waarin Johnson deze gebruikt, wordt die verbinding geprobleematiseerd in de “accentvertalingen” van het Duits-Chileense duo Urs M. Fiechtner en Sergio Vesely. In hun concertvoorstellingen presenteren zij een serie vertalingen van Spaans naar Duits (en andersom) en van muziek naar het gesproken woord (en andersom). Hierdoor verstoren zij het idee van een stabiele identiteit en de notie van een enkelvoudige bron.

De laatste twee concepten, die van grensgebieden en van de stad, houden zich bezig met de plaats van articulatie. In hoofdstuk 8, getiteld “dichtkunst in de stad,” beweeg ik van de metaforieke positie van articulatie binnen het grensgebied tussen geluid en muziek, naar een analyse van de zeer concrete articulatie van locatie. Ik analyseer een voorstelling van La Lengua en Rodrigo Solís en van Willie Perdomo in Mexico City. In deze voorstelling functioneren de steden waarin de voordragers wonen (Mexico City en Spanish Harlem, NY) als zowel onderwerp en, in het geval van Mexico City, als podium voor de voordracht. Mijn analyse spitst zich toe op de stedelijke verbeeldingen als mogelijke bron van stedelijke agency.

In hoofdstuk 9, getiteld “grensgebieden,” beargumenteer ik dat het gebruik van geluidseffecten in combinatie met het gesproken woord een sonisch grensgebied creëert dat ook een cultureel grensgebied is. Ik bespreek Homi Bhabha en Néstor García Canclini’s
begrip van hybriditeit en Gloria Anzaldúa’s opvattingen over het grensgebied door middel van de kritiek van Walter D. Mignolo, en betrek deze verschillende concepten op een analyse van Chao’s tweede solo album Próxima Estación...Esperanza. In dit laatste hoofdstuk maak ik gebruik van het concept van grensgebieden om terug te keren naar het argument dat ik ontwikkel in hoofdstuk 1 en plaats ik mijn analyse van poëzie performanceen op het grensgebied van de theorie, de poëzie en de politiek.