

THE ANATOMY  
OF THE POETRY PERFORMANCE

GRÄBNER, Cornelia and Arturo CASAS (eds.). *Performing Poetry. Body, Place and Rhythm in the Poetry Performance* [Series: *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex, and Race*]. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011.

Rodopi's series *Thamyris/Intersecting* aims to constitute a transnational community of scholars and activists who address the analysis of society and culture by means of an interdisciplinary focus. The series is particularly attentive to the intersections through the categories of place, sex and race and their decisive impact on subjectivity and identity politics. *Performing Poetry*, the collection of essays edited by Cornelia Gräbner and Arturo Casas, succeeds in meeting the objectives of the series and is a very valuable contribution to current debates on emerging cultural practices for its cutting-edge reflections on (dis)

location, the politics of the body and the intersections of visual and sonic media in the poetry performance. *Performing Poetry* brings together fifteen scholars and poets of a broad range of nationalities who explore the porous borders of their respective discourses and scrutinize their contestation of mainstream culture. This collection, with its discussions of writers rarely available in English, is structured around three main sections: 1. Theorizing Performance Poetry: Critical and Analytical Views; 2. Registers of Performance; 3. Locations of Performance. Though the first two epigraphs might mislead us into an illusive separation of theory and practice, the essays in this collection evince the speculative and self-reflexive component of performance practices.

In their introduction, the editors highlight the main threads that run through this collection of essays: authorship, the genealogy of the poetry performance, mediatic and cultural hybridity, location and dislocation, and the articulations of the «political». By avoiding the mere summary of each individual contribution, the editors reveal not only common strategies but also divergent approaches in the way contributors handle notions such as the sense of belonging, oral tradition and heterotopia. Gräbner and Casas perceptively trace through the essays recurrent theoretical issues such as the impact of the performance of authorship on the audience's reception, or the writers' engagement with social and spatial environment.

Likewise, the introduction draws our attention to a number of similarities between the various case studies, such as SuAndi's, Chus Pato's and Roberto Echevarren's concern with the social construction of gender.

After Roland Barthes' declaration of the «death of the author» (1968) and the subsequent interrogation of the author as the origin of the text, the source of its meaning and the only authority for interpretation, it may come as a surprise to find the notion of authorship re-introduced in the context of what are often marginal and/or countercultural practices. Gräbner and Casas, however, convincingly argue how the author's presence and enunciation during the poetry performance raise questions about the author's accountability, his or her sense of belonging to or alienation from a community, as well as the capacity to experiment with alternative identities. Jonah Raskin's essay in this collection, for instance, in its analysis of Allen Ginsberg's performance of «Howl» at the 6 Gallery in San Francisco in 1955, finds that the poem was «so densely packed with images» that the listeners gathered there «missed much of it; what they caught was a feeling, a tone, and a voice. The message of the poem was the messenger himself» (26). Performing poets, therefore, need to be aware of this partial re-direction of attention from text to voice, body language and the poet's physical contact with the audience.

The editors' introductory discussion of the genealogy of the poetry performance identifies

three main sources: oral traditions, US American counterculture –the inspiration provided to performed poetry by the counterculture of the 1960s is recurrent in the essays by Garbatzky, Noel, Gräbner, Raskin and Franssen–, and the political motivation either to break with the literary establishment or to recover oppressed traditions. This political dimension is made particularly evident in those chapters, such as Pijpers', Rábade's and Picornell's, which discuss several instances of performance as a strategy to circumvent censorship. Mercè Picornell's focus on Catalan culture in the 1970s highlights not just the lingering oppression of General Franco's regime but also the dominance of discourses that struggled to recuperate Catalan identity as a homogenizing, «idyllic heritage» (230). For this reason, she analyses the resistance to an essentialist conception of the relationship between urban space and identity in the work of the poet and singer Jaume Sisa.

Genealogy, both literary and biographical, is also an important concern for the black British woman poet SuAndi –and I add all these pre-modifiers to her name because she elaborates on each of them in her essay in this collection–. SuAndi begins «Eartha Kitt Once Told Me» by stressing the difference between the performer's stage self and her personal self, a distinction that is not at odds with the author's stress on «authenticity». The performer wears a variety of masks, SuAndi claims in an essay which roots her

literary motivations in her biography. Perhaps, it is not just the stage self that explores fictive identities. The essay, through the use of tropes such as that which traces a genetic predisposition to performance, also becomes fertile ground for imaginative renderings of genealogy: «[My mother's] Irish genes were so embedded in oral history that my story telling is an art inherited» (220).

Auto-fiction, or the multifarious ways in which authorship can be staged, is also the subject-matter of the essays by Anxo Abuín, Cornelia Gräbner and Gaston Franssen. Abuín actually proposes a shrewd definition of auto-fiction as «a narrative pact that is frequently expressed as follows: "I, real author, am going to tell a story, protagonized by me, which never took place"» (159). Along a similar line, the Uruguayan writer Roberto Echevarren explores, through rock music and film, those alternative gender identities to which the hybridity and intermediality of the poetry performance are especially propitious.

*Performing Poetry* features one interview with the Galician poet Chus Pato, a poet «with whom it is impossible not to dialogue», in her interviewer Arturo Casas' words (134). Pato elaborates on the emotions she feels in the presence of an audience whose political motivations may be at odds with her literary concerns at the moment of her poetry reading. In the face of an audience Pato would like «to bring them into what [she] call[s] the site of writing» and to a «political» conception of poetry as

«a state of linguistic exception» (135, 136), while her voice fuses with her listeners' bodies. In her rejection of the reduction of poetry to the lyrical, Pato claims that the I is actually «an interminable assemblage of stages (of dramaturgies)» (137). Of particular interest is Pato's discussion of the construction of the author, whether s/he is the cause or the effect of writing, a position of empowerment or impotence, a poet or a non-poet. The writer goes on to describe the various performance interventions in which she took part either to denounce the oppression of women, ecological disasters or to occupy public spaces with poetry.

María do Cebreiro Rábade offers us a theoretically ambitious essay on mediatic and cultural hybridity which is framed by research on the history of emotions and theories of voice, as she scrutinizes the way sound in spoken poetry appeals to affect. She proposes two analytical categories, «timbral» and «accentual» approaches to performance practice, and explores «their participation in the ideological nuances surrounding modernity and postmodernity» (127). Rábade's plural perspective as a theorist, a critic and a poet enhances her discussion of the poetry performance in Galicia by imbuing what may seem like ephemeral cultural manifestations with a complex aesthetic, emotional and political context. The ephemeral quality of performance is also the object of attention of Deirdre Osborne's essay on landmark poetics, in which she contrasts the oral, aural and bodily attributes of the spoken

word of black British poets such as Lemn Sissay and SuAndi with the word inscribed in British monuments that commemorate slave trade.

*Performing Poetry* ends with an essay by Margalida Pons which is also enlightening for those interested in ecocriticism. Pons interrogates the all too common association of avant-garde with the city in contemporary Catalan literature. Her analysis of Perejaume's poetic and plastic work shows that the rural environment is not inimical to artistic experimentation. In *La creation des identités nationales* (Du Seuil, 1999), Anne-Marie Thiesse includes «un paysage typique» among the list of symbolic and material elements to be flaunted by «une nation digne de ce nom» (14). Thus, a number of contemporary Catalan artists struggle to liberate nature from late nineteenth-century discourses that rooted the essence of the nation in the rural world. The rejection of the romantic equation of landscape and nation has led to what Pons denounces as «the Catalan literary establishment's obsession with urbanity as a desirable goal» (265). New ruralism, then, constitutes a backlash against this urbanity and, in Pons's words, Perejaume's spatial poetry «imagines a world in which the rural elements are not only in the foreground, but also generate ideas and language» (268).

Although *Performing Poetry* covers a broad range of cultural practices from different regions in Europe and America, it is especially attentive to the historical and social specificity of each of them. Divergent

positions regarding the genealogy and the location of the poetry performance are acknowledged and encouraged in this miscellaneous collection. There is, however, one guiding thread that facilitates the dialogue among these multiple approaches, i.e. their common assessment of the poetry performance as a locus of resistance to mainstream culture and to the centres of cultural power.

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