Elaborative Versionings: Oral/Aural Poetics in Baraka, Brathwaite, and Vicuña
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In an oral culture where works of verbal art are orally composed and transmitted, the status of a poem, song, or story as a performance would seldom be problematic. But how does one describe the oral delivery of a written poem? Under what conditions would it constitute a performance, rather than a reading or a recitation? Do we know how to read contemporary poetries in which orality/aurality is reclaimed as a medium for poetry and not just a secondary mode of presentation, the 'poetry reading'? Writing about the oral epic in Yugoslavia, Albert Lord holds that "Once the oral technique is lost, it is never regained." For Walter Ong, the passage from orality into literacy is a kind of irreversible, teleological narrative, such that the identification of oral elements in contemporary literature would probably constitute an "oral residue" (115) or a diminished kind of "secondary orality" (115). In this paper, I want to consider the implications of the insertion of literate postmodern poetry into a performance context. Doing so proposes an implicit critique of the teleological narrative and, at the same time, it challenges the habitual privileging of the written text in literary studies. Using recordings/transcriptions of "poetry readings" by Amiri Baraka, Kamau Brathwaite, and Cecilia Vicuña, I hope to: 1) demonstrate that each event constitutes a performance; 2) explore how their performativity draws upon classically oral dynamics; and 3) show how the emergent qualities of the performances are achieved through elaboration and versioning.

Performances can be distinguished from non-performances by a set of features which "key" performances (framing or marking them for an audience), according to Richard Bauman in Verbal

Art as Performance. These keying features may include "special codes; figurative language; parallelism; special paralinguistic features (e.g. speaking tone, volume, style); special formulae; appeal to tradition; disclaimer of performance" (16). Of the keys in this catalogue, paralinguistic features have special bearing on oral art. A contemporary poet, Amiri Baraka has a reputation for giving performances in which he uses his voice to skillfully and dramatically work with such paralinguistic features as "rate, length, pause duration, pitch contour, tone of voice, loudness, and stress" (20).

Amiri Baraka's poem titled "In the Funk World" is collected in his 1996 volume Funk Lore. A diminuitive, four-line poem in the shape of a sardonic riddle (72), it is not entirely characteristic of Baraka's work; more typical in their extended, discursive play with speech-driven rhythms are poems like "The Politics of Rich Painters," "Black Dada Nihilisumus," and "Pres Spoke in a Language." As published, "In the Funk World" immediately precedes a sequence of similarly short, pithy and direct poems Baraka ironically names Lowcoup.

In the Funk World

If Elvis Presley / is

King

Who is James Brown,

God?

The interest of the poem is enhanced by Baraka's delivery of it (in an October 1996 performance in Buffalo, NY). On this evening, Baraka augmented the poem in several ways, skillfully controlling the paralinguistic dimension of performance and demonstrating a further kind of performativity. In the following clip, note first the dramatic variation of rate, tone, loudness, and stress:

[**AUDIO CLIP - Baraka - "In the Funk World"** (FL 72)]

In the Funk World

> Well you know, we created ah, you know, small band music, in New Orleans, and they said it was Dixie Land, and we created Big Band, they said it was Swing but it didn't swing, and then they told us that, uh, Paul White Man, was the king of swing or was he the king of jazz, that's right, Benny Good Man was the king of jazz, What I want to know is ...
>
> In the Funk World
> If Elvis Presley is King
> Who is James Brown,
> God?

With the announcement of the title—a framing gesture—Baraka introduces the poem in a strong voice. The pace and tone with which the next lines are delivered give them the feel of an improvisation, perhaps even an aside. This quickly, quietly delivered historical catalogue of the misrepresentations and appropriations of African American musical forms foregrounds paralinguistic features as rate, pause, pitch, tone, loudness and stress; and it raises methodological questions. How do we consider the additional material, as an intervening 'commentary'? Or is it a part of the poem? It follows the announcement of the title but has not, as far as I know, been published in any of Baraka's books. Does the second articulation of the title render the prior one a false start? Would an audience member encountering the poem for the first time and listening with closed eyes respond like the reader following along with Funk Lore in his lap? Whether improvised or prepared, the off-script catalogue establishes the poem's theme and so increases the pointedness of the punch-line, even as it sets up the aural contrast with the published closing, which is delivered in an exhortative style.

Evidencing some of the characteristic "keys" of performance, the Baraka clip exemplifies how such keys can frame a given event as a performance. Regarded as a performance, the Baraka poem allows us to think about what significance the distinction between performance and recitation holds. Baraka's approach to the occasion reflects what Bauman identifies as a central element of a true performance—an emergent dimension. As an emergent event, the performance must be dynamic, in flux at some level; Bauman explains:

> The point is that completely novel and completely fixed texts represent the poles of an ideal continuum, and that between the poles lies the range of emergent text structures to be found in empirical performance. The study of the factors contributing to the emergent quality of the oral literary text promises to bring about a major reconceptualization of the nature of the text, freeing it from the apparent fixity it assumes when abstracted from performance and placed on the written page . . . . (Bauman 40)

The augmentation of Baraka's "In the Funk World" in performance marks its affinity with oral "composition-in-performance," in which, according to Ruth Finnegan, "there [is] no concept of a correct version. Each performance [is] unique in its own right" (Finnegan 120). Aspects of composition in performance have been identified in most oral traditions. (Finnegan). In an oral performance, it would often be expected of performers to demonstrate their skill by incorporating current events, audience response, even an accident in the midst of the performance itself, into the piece. And while Baraka has presumably composed the poem in writing, upon a notebook or with a typewriter, he draws on particular African-American forms such as blues lyrics, the dozens, and jazz improvisation in his performances.

The cluster of generative or improvisational moves that distinguish an emergent performance from a poetry recitation can best be described by the term "elaboration."

Elaboration is not always reflected in the transcription of a traditional oral performances; in some cases, an extended performance may be reduced to something resembling a haiku (and then celebrated for the sparing aesthetic) (Sherwood). In literary study, the published print version of a poem may occupy a similar space. But elaboration, as a specific "key" marking a poetry performance from a recitation or reading which, as an emergent technique, gives a powerful new weight to the particulars of the event.

Where Baraka, operating with text in hand, enacts an elaboration of the source text that augments it, Cecilia Vicuña gives a demonstration of the way a minimal text might be elaborated, through a repetition and variation of patterns already implicit in the source text. The Chilean-born poet and artist, who now works out of New York, explores the themes of sound, voice, writing, and weaving in all her major volumes of English and bilingual poetry (Unravelling Words, The Precarious, El Templo, InStan). The text of "Adiano y Azumbar" recently published in El Templo, consists of thirteen lines, only one of which contains a repetition. Exemplifying elaboration through performance, the sung performance of the poem that Vicuña gave (in March of 2002, in Odessa, TX) might easily be transcribed at twice the length or twenty-six lines with fourteen repetitions:

[**AUDIO CLIP - Vicuña - Adiano y Azumbar (ET 16)**][1]

Elaboration through the repetition of lines, stanzas, and whole songs is common in the songs of traditional oral cultures (Evers and Molina; Densmore) and Vicuña's study of Andean song influences her performance style. Review of several of Vicuña's performances suggests that the patterning is neither fixed nor predetermined. Further, unlike the mechanical predictability of a

1 Ancient and Star Flowered / the purpur huacates divine / / Transforming dunes / / With such fervor / she enshadows / / With such fervor / she drinks / / Her arid / riches / / The manque and the hue / dusking purpur.

verse-refrain structure, the unit and frequency of repetition varies to suit the expressive emphasis of the poem.

In addition to demonstrating elaboration, Cecilia Vicuña's performance allows me to sketch out a second way in which textual poetry may be inserted into an oral/aural performance context. The poem above, while published in facing Spanish and English, was performed in Spanish alone, perhaps in acknowledgement of the large number of Spanish speakers in the audience. In performing another poem, "Tentenelaire Zun Zun" (Zit Zit, Hummingbird), Vicuña offered a more characteristically bilingual performance. Yet she chose not to perform the piece as published, beginning on the left in Spanish and following it with the right-hand English. Rather the performance dances deliberately back and forth between Spanish and English, creating a new arrangement—a poem in two languages that does not fully correspond to either of the two published versions.

[**AUDIO CLIP - Vicuña - Tentenelaire Zun Zun** (UW 74-7)]

Vicuña's performance cannot be called oral-composition in the usual sense; it begins with a text, and with the exception of the improvised "death" in two lines and an additional "the," no new material is added. Yet the virtuosic oscillation between Spanish and English along with selective omissions and repetitions present a poem that is quite unlike the text. Without even considering the expressive contributions of the stylized vocal qualities (paralinguistic features keying performance), it seems clear that in the active arrangement of the poems' elements a new work has emerged. I want to call this construction of a new performance arrangement— "versioning."

Versioning—creating a new version of a poem during performance—shifts our orientation towards "the" poem even more dramatically than elaboration, particularly when the aesthetic impact of the version is comparable to that of the print text. In writing about the effects of performance, Henry Sayre observes: "The concept of the 'original,' the self-contained and transcendent

masterwork, containing certain discernible intentions, has been undermined, and a plurality of possible performative gestures has supplanted it" (Sayre 94). This seems an apt characterization of the effect of Vicuña's versioning with, perhaps, one qualification. Sayre's description of pluralization recalls the indeterminacy that deconstruction proposes as an ineluctable aspect of textuality. As deployed by Vicuña, at least, the performance does not call meaning into question so much as it invites a sensual, creative engagement in the continuation of meaning making (by virtue of metaphor: song, flight, weaving, etc.)

The emergent dimensions in the oral peformance of Kamau Brathwaite are somewhat more subtle than those identified in the analyzes of Baraka and Vicuña above. Deeply and notably committed to the forging of Nation Language, an English reflective of the socio-historical richness of vernacular language, Brathwaite also draws on study and experience of oral performance in Ghana, where he worked for some years. The way in which aspects of traditional orality serve an emergent function in Brathwaite's work can perhaps be understood in light of comments by Henry Sayre, about literary performance:

> A good way to think of performance is to realize that in it the potentially disruptive forces of the 'outside' (what is 'outside' the text--the physical space in which it is presented, the other media it might engage or find itself among, the various frames of mind the diverse members of a given audience might bring to it, and, over time, the changing forces of history itself) are encouraged to assert themselves (Sayre 94).

For Brathwaite, the spoken language and the lived culture of Carribean peoples have been historically relegated to a space outside the literary realm. His project involves opening up poetry to history, to excluded languages and in particular to forms of language that sustain diasporic memory or the sounds and physical rhythms of island life.

Music and song have had a place in all three poets' work. In several poems from the same event discussed above, Baraka quite explicitly bring his poems into relation with music by humming or scatting recognizable jazz melodies to frame a poem or to establish a syncopation between word and song. Vicuña delivered one of the poems analyzed above by singing it, introducing a melody; she also often frames a performance with chants. Kamau Brathaite's poem, "Angel/Engine," published most recently in the revised Ancestors (2001), opens itself up to dance, drumming, and the interactive space of ritual. The poem loosely narrates a woman's spiritual possession by *Shango*, who he explains is the "Yoruba and Black New World god of lightning and thunder;" Shango is closely related to *Ogun*, his complement "in the 'destructive-creative principle'. . . One of their (technological) apotheoses is the train. The jazz rhythms of John Coltrane ... and the forward gospel impetus of Aretha Franklin ... are other aspects of this (Sun Poem 101).

Brathwaite performed a portion of the poem in the context of a combined talk and poetry reading at the University of Minnesota in October of 1997. The commentary Brathwaite interjects is transcribed on the handout, yet the context leads me to distinguish this from the elaboration in the Baraka poem above; a shift in tone and pace seems to frame the comments as non-performative asides. Unlike Vicuña's versioning, here the performance transcript varies only minimally from the published print version.

[AUDIO CLIP - Brathwaite "Angel/Engine" (A)]

A theme of this poem is the spiritual force of sound and rhythm, which, without venturing into the territory of high drama, Brathwaite nonetheless mangages to convey. His voicing displays how parallelism and the oral vocables, which are also present on the page, are themselves performance keys. The two sustaining motifs of the poem—"bub-a-dups / bub-a-dups / bub-a-dups / /hah" and "praaaze be to / praaaze be to / paaaze be to **gg**"—establish a rhythm that opens the poem into a spatial dimension, articulate the presence of a speaking body, and even imply an associated dance.

The rhythms set in play and the viscerally physical articulation of paralinguistic vocables and grunts do not simply ornament or enrich the text.

Each of the three poets discussed creates performance events by drawing on different aspects of orality, with related but distinct motives. (For Baraka, a vernacular consciousness of "how you sound" and a jazz-derrived interplay with audience shape his practice; for Vicuña, the spiritual symbolism of sound and the way its deployment can spatially weave listeners into an event leads to her emphasis on voice; for Brathwaite, vernacular expressivity and traditional/sacred notions of efficacious language are equally informing.) Each begins with published texts and transforms them into emergent events through the use of elaboration and versioning. Coming to the poetry of Baraka, Vicuña, and Brathwaite with these tools allows for a fuller appreciation of the oral and performative dimensions of their work, allowing us to see their performances as significant instances of the poems rather than as imperfect and secondary re-presentations of prior texts. The full measure of many contemporary written poetries cannot be taken if they are considered only in relation to the conventional, text-oriented terms of literary analysis. Scholarly consideration of how these performative poetries are positioned with respect to the speakers' mouths and listeners' ears should lead to transcription, performance analysis, and the development of new critical practices which adapt and extend the best practices of oral and literary studies.

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