

Introduction

All the arts are capable of duende, but where it finds its greatest range, naturally, is in music, dance, and spoken poetry, for these arts require a living body to interpret them, being forms that are born, die, and open their contours against an exact present.

—FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA

To study performance is not to study completed forms . . . [but to] become aware of performance itself as a contested space, where meanings and desires are generated, occluded, and of course multiply interpreted.

—ELIN DIAMOND

IN 1882 IN HIS BOOK *Specimen Days and Collect*, Walt Whitman published a short reiterative prose piece called “Ventures, on an Old Theme.” In it, he makes his case again for an American poetry free of meter and rhyme, insisting, “In these States, beyond all precedent, poetry will have to do with actual facts, with the concrete States, and—for we have not much more than begun—with the definitive getting into shape of the Union.” He calls on a new breed of lofty poet to cement the states together, to divert the danger of crass materialism and instill the virtues of “nationality and patriotism.” Whitman ends by announcing his belief in the reciprocal relationship that must exist between the artist and the public in a democracy, with the epigrammatic assertion, “To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too.”¹

That sentence has echoed through the ages, and served as both a foil and a rallying cry for American poets who have sought to understand and articulate the cultural dynamic of popularity. In a 1914 issue of *Poetry*, the editor, Harriet Monroe, and her foreign correspondent, Ezra Pound, debated the motto taken from Whitman on the cover of the magazine: “To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too.” Pound opened fire first, protesting, “The artist is *not* dependent upon his audience,” and judg-

ing that “this sentence is Whitman tired. You have only to compare Whitman to my mutton-headed ninth cousin, or to any other American of his time who had the ‘great audience,’ to see the difference.” He goes on to compare Whitman unfavorably to Dante, who “never gave way” to a desire to capture a large public, and whose terms for that public—“the rabble”; “the *vulgo*”—make clear his distaste and distinct sense of superiority: “The artist is not dependent upon the multitude of his listeners. Humanity is the rich effluvium, it is the waste and the manure of the soil, and from it grows the tree of the arts.” Monroe argues conversely that modern democracy demands a different conception of the relationship between the artist and the masses: “Modern inventions, forcing international travel, inter-racial thought, upon the world, have done away with Dante’s little audience, with his contempt for the crowd, a contempt which, however, disregarded the fact that his epic, like all the greatest art, was based upon the whole life of his time, the common thought and feeling of all the people. No small group today can suffice for the poet’s immediate audience, as such groups did in the stay-at-home aristocratic ages; and the greatest danger which besets modern art is that of slighting the ‘great audience’ whose response alone can give it authority and volume, and of magnifying the importance of a coterie.”² She finds that there must be an “energy of sympathy” reciprocal to the “energy of creation” to invigorate a democracy, and thereby validate the art of the “poet-prophet.” The Whitman motto continued to appear on the cover of *Poetry* until 1950 when the editor, Karl Shapiro, removed it at T. S. Eliot’s suggestion, much to his later regret.³

Other poets and poetry commentators have wielded Whitman’s message to express their views on the popularization of poetry and its effects. The African American poet Sterling Brown in an essay entitled “Our Literary Audience,” published in *Opportunity* in 1930, had this to say: “Without great audiences we cannot have great poets.’ Whitman’s trenchant commentary needs stressing today, universally. But particularly do we as a racial group need it.” He makes his case for the vital need of the black artist to write realistically about all of black life, including the most common elements of it, and the consequent need for the black audience to be receptive to representations of the race that are truthful even if they are not “idealistic, optimistic tracts for race advertisement.”⁴ Brown ends his essay in reaffirmation of Whitman: “Without great audiences we cannot have great literature.” On the other hand, a number of years later, in 1962, the poet Louis Simpson reacted with abhorrence to Whitman’s formulation, con-

tending, “This tag from Whitman, which adorns or used to adorn every issue of *Poetry*, is about as close to the opposite of the truth as you can get. To have great poetry all that is needed is great talent.”⁵ Simpson’s elitist sense is in line with Pound’s and Eliot’s, and suggests that the cultivation of a public in fact may be an impediment to producing a lasting literature.

More recently, an article in *Time* (December 16, 1991) on the emergent poetry slam scene ran Whitman’s sentence as its epigraph, teeing up its discussion of “the new generation of defiantly populist poets” intent on communicating poetry to as large an audience as possible, with the idea being to effect a cultural revolution. In an article in Toronto’s *National Post* (February 28, 2006) Whitman’s formulation is once again cited, this time as preface to the announcement of the North American tour of rapper Saul Williams and the industrial rock band Nine Inch Nails and the exploration of Williams’s decision to expand his reach by performing for the “white kids wearing all black” that largely comprise the audience for Trent Reznor, founder of Nine Inch Nails. As these sitings demonstrate, Whitman’s epigram increasingly is deployed in discussions about poetry in performance off the page, framing tensions between page and stage—that is, between textuality and orality—that shape so many of the discussions around poetry performance in the modern period and debates surrounding the merits of publicness.

In “The Peril of the Poetry Reading: The Page Versus the Performance” published on the website of the American Academy of Poets, David Groff, who concedes that “public poetry events bring people together, creating a community for the most intimidating of the verbal arts,” expresses reservations about the embodiment of poetry and its public appeal: “But even if the poem takes on a fresh life when it’s delivered in the voice of its maker, it loses more than it gains. . . . Only when we acknowledge that a poem performed is no substitute for a poem read in private will we truly advance the cause of the poetic word.” Many assumptions about poetry and its cultural prestige are packed into that statement, and many of them are contested in this book. Groff goes on to ask the loaded question: “In the effort to make poetry popular, is poetry-making itself de-based?” He answers his own question with lament: “There’s no chance for the poet or listener’s eye to pause, slow down, or linger over a line. How many times have you wanted to ask a poet to decelerate or reread a poem? A recited poem vanishes faster than a vapor trail.” The evanescence of performance is seen here as a failing, with no distinction made

between a poem read well and a poem read poorly (who *would* enjoy the latter?).

In his keynote address at the 1996 PEN Literary Awards, Richard Howard sounds the same note as Groff, offering up “a modest proposal that may yet restore an art that was once the glory and the consolation of our race to something like its ulterior status. My proposal is simply this: to make poetry, once again, a secret”: “We have failed . . . to make poetry known; we have merely made it public. If we are to save poetry, which means if we are to savor it, we must restore poetry to that status of seclusion and even secrecy that characterizes our authentic pleasures and identifies only our intimately valued actions.” On the other side stands future poet laureate Robert Pinsky, who, in reply to Howard, asserts that poetry is “part of our shared communal life, as surely as is the Internet,” and that the participation of poets in the public sphere is “part of the civic life of art, a part of the way society held onto the art of poetry, thereby preserving it for the unborn.”⁶

In the following pages I explore the civics of American performance poetry and the nexus of its oral and print modalities in the light of shifting political and cultural formations in the nation over the last century and a half. In many ways, my book is as much a study of public performance poetry in the United States as it is a study of the cultures that give rise to it and the performance of cultures and cultural identities within it. For too long we have not paid close enough attention to the meanings that emerge in particular performance contexts; we have not questioned fully enough the situatedness of public performance poetry or sought to understand the ramifications of certain poems as first and foremost to be read aloud, to be staged for a live audience. In an effort to help correct the balance, I analyze a range of materials, many of which have not garnered much in the way of critical attention before, including multiple printed and recorded versions of poems. Keeping in mind the dialectic of performance and text, I seek to show how performance on the page often seeks to authenticate performance off the page, and vice versa. As the anthropologist Dennis Tedlock reminds us, “There is nothing about writing, in and of itself, that requires a text to be fixed for all times and places. Writing, like speaking, is a performance.” That is to say, writing, like speaking, can resist reproduction (“Performance’s only life is in the present”) such that even if it is performed again, “this repetition itself marks it as ‘different.’”⁷ Often it is the case with the poets taken up in the following chapters that no single performance in print, just as no single oral

performance by them, is definitive. By parsing individual performance styles, I reveal the semantic value of extralexical, or paralinguistic, features, and submit to a rehearing certain poems that we thought we knew well.

In addition to these prosodic concerns, I am also interested in how audiences responded to poets in performance both on and off the page, whether live or electronically, and how those responses are shaped by the pressures of American mass culture. The politics surrounding poets' negotiations of the cultural economy and the rise of new communications technologies within it are crucial to a thorough understanding of how a public performance poetry is sounded and heard in the modern period. Often, these politics inflect the fictions of performance that poets construct in and about their work, in tropes of utterance and audition that often are imbued with national significance.

John Miles Foley, refusing the oral/written dichotomy, proposes a four-part taxonomy of oral poetry: material composed and transmitted entirely without writing; works written for oral performance ("voiced texts"); poems transmitted in writing from preliterate times, such as Homeric epic, *Beowulf*, and Mahabharata; and, finally, poetry like James Macpherson's Ossianic poetry and Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala* that is written to be experienced as oral, although read by literate audiences ("written oral poetry"). The poetry I address falls primarily under the categories of "voiced texts" (scripts) and "written oral poetry" (poetry that seeks to encode in it a quality of orality). In many cases, a poem that is performed aloud subsequently is written down, serving as a kind of transcript, and I examine closely these transpositions as well. It is important to note that Foley does not consider at any length the impact of mediatization on his types of oral poetry. Of course, writing is a medium, and so a performance that exists in printed form is always "mediated," but when I speak of a "mediatized" performance I mean, as performance theorist Philip Auslander points out (by way of Jean Baudrillard), "to indicate that a particular cultural object is a product of the mass media or media technology," that is, produced by electric amplification: "'Mediatized performance' is performance that is circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, and in other forms in technologies of reproduction."⁸ This condition of mediatization affects in essential ways our reception of performance poetry and its cultural work.

Related to mediatization is the critical concept of "liveness," which has been the subject of much lively debate within the field of performance studies of late. In opposition to Peggy Phelan, who finds that one of the

defining features of performance is that it stands outside the cultural economy, Auslander (I think correctly) “doubt[s] very strongly that any cultural discourse can actually stand outside the ideologies of capital and reproduction that define a mediatised culture or should be expected to do so, even to assume an oppositional stance.”⁹ There is a debate over the ontology of performance, with Phelan taking the view that “performance’s only life is in the present,” that by its very nature it “cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations,” and, on the other hand, Auslander asserting that there exist no significant ontological distinctions between live and mediatised cultural forms, that “in our period of history, and in our Western societies, there is no performance that is not always already a commodity.”¹⁰ While Auslander takes aim at those who would valorize live performance over the mediatised, he recognizes that many poets “impute to live performance the social, perhaps even political, function of opposing the oppressive regime of ‘electronic noise’ imposed upon us by the mass media” and celebrate the “ostensible curative powers” of live performance as well as its “putative ability to create community”; as he sees, “Concepts such as these do have value for performers and partisans of live performance. Indeed, it may even be necessary for performers, especially, to believe in them.”¹¹ That observation, along with his comments on authenticity and simulation in a digital age, will figure in my discussion, as I document the evolution of spoken poetry in a modern consumerist America and the politically freighted mythologies that attend it.

Federico García Lorca identifies spoken poetry as among those arts that “require a living body to interpret them,” one of the “forms that are born, die, and open their contours against an exact present.” In that exact present, we can speak of “performance” in two ways: bodies bring poems into being—that is, they enact poems—through a dramatic entertainment; and bodies bring subjectivity into being. Lately, in a range of disciplines, a great deal of attention has been paid to the nature of the self and the ways in which identity is constructed in the world. The sociologist Erving Goffman, for example, shed much needed light on the cultural performance of the self, showing that in everyday life we are always performing roles. Judith Butler similarly contends that identity categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality are performed rather than essential, that they are socially and culturally constructed and thus are always contested and in flux. She refers to the daily reproduction (or re-citation) of acts and practices

that affirm gender and other social norms that we inherit as “the performativity of identity.” Her notion of performativity is based on her reading of philosophers J. L. Austin and Jacques Derrida. Drawing a distinction between performative utterance and constative utterance, Austin contends that the former are not true or false and actually perform the utterance to which they refer; thus, performative utterances perform the action they designate. Derrida finds that identities are reproduced, or “cited,” as repetitions of normative injunctions; these repeated iterations both consolidate the force of identity and, as Butler believes, provide the occasion for its subversion. I will seek to show the ways in which poets acknowledge, either implicitly or explicitly, this truth about identity formation (and deformation) in their performance poetry and poetics. Thus, although Charles Bernstein argues that “the poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet; it materializes the text not the author,” my strong sense is that what is performed at a poetry reading is necessarily both the poet *and* the poem.¹²

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that what is at stake in so much public performance poetry is cultural identity itself—markers of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality. Just as with these categories, which are socially and culturally constructed and which thus evolve continually, the poetry that I examine in this book is also shifting. With respect to the construct of nation, which, as Benedict Anderson observes, is not tangible or palpable—it represents “an imaginary community”—orality offers a means by which to incarnate abstract values and ideals; it helps make “nation” feel real. Otto Bauer relatedly argues that national character is “changeable,” and declares that “ego” is intimately bound up in nation and the idea of nation; as the thinking goes: “If someone slights the nation they slight me too . . . [F]or the nation is nowhere but in me and my kind.” The egos on display in public performance poetry either go in for this thinking or strenuously resist such chauvinism, sometimes even as they undertake their own alternative nation-building.

This study stands at the crossroads of the humanities and social sciences, and the importance of anthropology and sociology not only to the performance of identity but to the textual performance of poetry in the United States cannot be overstated. In recent years, much work has been done in these fields to articulate a set of best practices for dealing with oral performance and its transcriptions. In his essay “Breakthrough into Performance” (1975), the anthropologist Dell Hymes called for a more thorough study of “variation in performance,” citing the “virtual absence of serious

stylistic analysis of native American Indian traditions and of individual performers." In essays in the early 1960s, Hymes laid out an approach that he called "the ethnography of speaking," which sought to discover the patterns and functions of speaking within specific cultural contexts in terms of setting, participants, ends, act sequence, key (tone), instrumentalities (communication channels), norms of interaction and interpretation, and genre. Through this model, Hymes helped pioneer a linguistic anthropological approach to ethno-poetics, and the various patterns and functions that he identifies will underlie discussion in subsequent chapters.

Elizabeth Fine in *The Folklore Text* (1984) discusses the history of what she calls, via the linguist Roman Jakobson, "the 'intersemiotic' translation of performance to print," and her insights shape my readings. Fine draws on a range of anthropologists and sociolinguists in her theorizing of how to handle the movement of speech into writing, to construct a "performance-centered text," that is, a transcript of a performance that would convey contextual and stylistic information, in part through typography and layout. Believing that performance is situated behavior, Fine illustrates how one would go about rendering "the oral-physical symbols of artistic verbal performance" through "the two-dimensional, visual symbols of the printed page."¹³ Although in this book I am not myself attempting to create performance-centered texts, her examination of the implications of performance theory for re-creating oral poetry in a print medium, and of the scoring methods to do so, bears importantly on the construction of performance-centered texts by American public poets themselves.

Of course, performance presumes an activated audience, and performance poetry presents itself as one of the most persistently dialogic of forms, embracing polyvocality and resisting as it does finality and closure, with the work not to be identified with any single graphical or performative realization of it. Although Bakhtin stamped poetry as monologic and the novel as dialogic, his poetics of utterance, where the only way to understand the self is in relation to an addressee, very much applies to poetry, and, in particular, to orally performed poetry, where the social and political value of intonation sounds literally. As we will see, Bakhtin's theory of the emancipatory potential of carnival also can help clarify the sometimes subversive enactments of performance poetry in the public sphere.

That phrase, *the public sphere*, also calls for comment. According to the social philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in the eighteenth century the public sphere consisted of organs of information and political debate such as

newspapers and journals, as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffeehouses, meeting halls, and other public spaces where sociopolitical discourse took place. For the first time in history, individuals and groups could shape public opinion, giving direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice. As Habermas's critics have noted, and Habermas since has conceded, the liberal public sphere that he describes was not as diverse or as tolerant as he imagined; thus, working-class, plebeian, and women's public spheres developed alongside the bourgeois public sphere to represent voices and interests excluded in this forum. Sometimes these public spheres overlap; other times, they conflict. One interest of this study is to plot the involvement of public performance poetry in emergent counterpublic spheres. Nancy Fraser defines a counterpublic sphere as a place "where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."¹⁴ As Gerard Hauser further explains, such a sphere is by definition "a site of resistance," and "its rhetorical identity is as an arena for hearing proscribed voices, expressing proscribed ideas, and entertaining the alternative reality they advance to the existing order." Whether the resistance is militant or not, the discourse of a counterpublic sphere "speaks . . . of an alternative reality to that of the majority culture and their exclusion from its processes of decision making that bear on their lives."¹⁵

Central to this matter of publicness or counterpublicness are the related concepts of aura and artistic reproducibility, with the rise of new technologies and of increasingly media-dominated public spheres impacting in important ways on public poetry and its sitings. Walter Benjamin notes that, at one time, artistic works had an "aura" deriving from their uniqueness, and that the new media shattered this quasi-religious ethos. The reproduction of works of art (by means of photography or radio transmission) means that they are actually designed for reproducibility; in cinema, for instance, we have copies without an original. Benjamin does not mourn the aura destroyed by mechanical reproduction, believing that art is thereby liberated from a "parasitical dependence on ritual" and authenticity, and so can participate in history and politics.¹⁶ The quality of *duende* (emotion, expression, authenticity) prized by most spoken word poets leads some to take a dim view of the mechanics of reproduction; in other instances, though, such technologies are embraced by these poets in an effort to forge

community on a grand scale, to catalyze widespread social and political change, typically with the idea that aura, authenticity, and cult value are not routed thereby.

Roland Barthes's 1967 pronouncement of the "death of the author" also rings differently in the situation of the artist performing live, a figure who can be seen and heard as not dead, a palpable presence. When this same poet turns to the pen (or keyboard) to craft performance-centered texts, she simultaneously affirms and challenges Barthes's view that "writing is the destruction of every voice," as she works against writing's lack in an effort to preserve and reproduce the charismatic poetic voice.¹⁷ If the presence of the poet in performance does impose some limit on the performed text, since to separate the work from its creator would seem an impossibility, we might argue that it is not always the same voice's body on display, a condition that thereby offers another form of plenitude. Indeed, if we do not identify any one performance of the poem as authoritative, we could say that there as many meanings to the poem as there are performances of it. Thus, we do not need to deconstruct the author, as Barthes would have us do, to appreciate the multiplicities of public performance poetry.

It is important to state that in this book my focus is on poets committed to an oral poetics (as opposed to poets who, while they may read their poetry on occasion, are perfectly content on the page) and who are, at the same time, public poets, by which I mean poets interested in reaching and cultivating a mass audience, not an elite coterie. So while it may be true, as a writer in the slam poetry anthology *The Spoken Word Revolution* (2003) notes, that "Robert Frost was probably the twentieth century's greatest U.S. performance poet," he is not taken up here because, although he is intensely interested in the sounds of poetry (and in "the sound of sense"—or intonation—in poetry) and performed famously on many occasions, including John F. Kennedy's inauguration, he did not compose (and recompose) for performance primarily; his poetry sits comfortably on the printed page.¹⁸ At issue in these pages is poetry made with an awareness of a live audience to whom the work could be read aloud, or of a distant reader-audience who would perform it out loud themselves.

It also is crucial to note at the outset a few other boundaries of this study. First, in these pages I primarily examine what has been termed "oral poetry," a form Richard Kostelanetz defines as "syntactically standard language written to be read aloud," rather than "text-sound art," or pure sound poetry, which "extends back to primitive chanting" and is not syn-

tactically standard.¹⁹ Second, I focus on types of lyric poetry as opposed to verse drama, where performativity is more obviously at issue. Third, my intention throughout is to read American public performance poetry and its rhetoric in the context of a technologically advanced (mass-mediated) society, a condition that Walter Ong refers to as “secondary orality,” which (as opposed to “primary orality,” that is, the orality of preliterate cultures) is “essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print.”²⁰ Therefore, I do not explore aboriginal oral poetry, where understandings and constructions of speech are far different from what they are in a literate society.

It is necessary to state, too, that the mantle of “oral poet” has not always been happily worn by some of the artists represented here, despite the fact that these same artists clearly often are writing toward performance off the page. Sonia Sanchez, for one, bristles at being labeled in this way, finding that it is “much easier to relegate our [African American] form to being always oral form,” that a double standard is at play, with a white poet like Allen Ginsberg, who often “chants” his work, not marginalized as “an oral poet” in the same way that she or Amiri Baraka, whom she claims Ginsberg based his delivery style on anyway, would be. Indeed, she has gone so far as to deny being a “performance poet,” a designation that she feels is meant “to limit us [African Americans],” “to keep us out of the arena of being poets.”²¹ I will carefully weigh the racial implications of these remarks, and my twin focus on the poem in the mouth and in print—and on the interplay between them—is intended not to relegate any of the poets discussed in the pages that follow to an inferior position, but to see them as participating in a major, though often overlooked, tradition—indeed, as squarely at the center of American literature from the 1850s to the present.

Bob Holman, whose work I address in my final chapter, refers to the oral poetic tradition as “the Hidden Book,”²² one, that is, that has rarely been read and contains within it a richness worth knowing. It is the purpose of this critical study to recover that Book and attend to its performativities. Tracing a history of performance poetry in the United States from Whitman through the rap-meets-poetry scene, I argue that the country itself and its publics and counterpublics have spoken themselves into being in the act of poetry performance, whether through registers of resonance or dissonance.

The title of my first chapter, “Walt Whitman ‘Live,’” intends to position

Whitman as modern America's first performance poet. Although he was not a widely or wildly popular poet-performer of his day, as others, like James Whitcomb Riley, were, Whitman was thoroughly committed to the idea of performance and a public poetics of voice, to the aesthetic ideals of improvisation and open-endedness. Others have pointed up the "profound significance of the voice in Whitman's thinking," but have not viewed that item in light of his poetic revisioning, which I tie to his urge to "liveness."²³ "Voice" in his work has been framed as "a crucial mediating trope," but it has not been shown yet how in his work voice serves as a metonym for nation, and for Whitman's performance of self and nation.²⁴ Indeed, too often discussions of presence in Whitman studies are separated out from the cultural work that Whitman seeks to perform through his poetry, left unconnected to the political events of his day.

As I argue, Whitman's poetry is founded on the masculine politics of the "launch'd voice" as formulated in the nineteenth century in America, and the textual instability of *Leaves of Grass* stands as a sign of his essential performativity. It is noteworthy that he would appear to be one of the first poets to record his poetry via the phonograph; moreover, his meditations on vocalism in his notebooks significantly shape his concept of a public performance poetry. While several critics have noted Whitman's debt to oratorical media, they have not examined in relation to it his typographical inscriptions or his practice of poetic revision. I show how Whitman embodies myriad cultural identities in multiple editions of *Leaves* and how his performances respond to the nuances of shifting ideologies and express his desire to forge, in the face of great odds, a national polity. Whitman's encounter with emergent sound recording technologies and with the culture of celebrity (and the issues of aura and presence that obtain there) further shape his mythologies of the spoken word and their corresponding notions about America and Americanness.

Ambivalent heir to Whitman, Vachel Lindsay cultivated a peculiar performance style that he sought to score in marginal reading directions in the performance-centered texts of *The Congo and Other Poems* (1915) and later works. In performance, Lindsay put on the forms of "blackness" through a complex affair of mimicry, trying to redeem the figure of the public poet at a time when literary popularity (and mass culture itself) was deemed feminizing. His "higher vaudeville" performance pieces stage related cultural anxieties and encode vocalization in strongly gendered terms. I read his performance of a masculine working-class identity against the perfor-

mances of other male modernists and of Edna St. Vincent Millay's famous performance of femininity in her popular recitals, and link that performance to his civic ideology. I also examine Lindsay's stage presence with respect to the rise of the radio and other communications technologies saturating middle America, interrogating his advocacy of directness and liveness, of all things unmediated. In the end, I interrogate Lindsay's disenchantment with the commodification of the spoken word and point up his predicament, the "ordeal" that he endured as a result of his bid for publicity in a fast-industrializing cultural economy.

The so-called New Negro poets demonstrate both on and off the page the vexed question of "authenticity" as it relates to vocal reproduction and an emergent racial politics. When James Weldon Johnson published his book of sermonic poetry *God's Trombones* (1927), a rescue of Reconstruction-era preaching, he chose not to include marginal reading instructions or expressive typography, as Lindsay had done. Johnson's decision not to compose performance-centered texts cuts two ways: first, it suggests his view that only those familiar with the figure of the black preacher will hear the poem properly, that it is a racially closed system; second, it insists that the black poet must refuse dissonant sound effects (dialects) that would fail to uplift the race. In addition to Johnson's sermonic poetry, Zora Neale Hurston's transcriptions of the black preaching voice in *Mules and Men* (1935) and the white southern writer Dr. Edward Clarkson Leverett (Ned) Adams's in *Congaree Sketches* (1927) illustrate the racial problematics of rehearing. The chapter goes on to consider the career of Langston Hughes and his effort to perform African American citizenship in his social poetry. I "listen fluently" (Hughes's character Simple's words) to his print and recorded voice in light of the politics of the Left (socialism and black nationalism), and against the grain of the poet Sterling Brown's voice, and end by examining Hughes's remodelings of his own previously published poetry as part of his evolving performance of a black public sphere.

In the chapter following, the curtain opens on the landmark reading of six Beat poets at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on October 13, 1955, a sitting that represents a new phase in the history of American poetry as performance art, if not a beginning. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the "carnavalesque," I show how the Six Gallery reading, where Allen Ginsberg performed "Howl" for the first time, sought to challenge the dominant culture and its social hierarchies and effect "communitas." In the process, I explore the ideology of voice that crystallizes during the Cold War, with per-

sonal audibility imagined as a potent resistance to U.S. imperialist aggression. In reading Ginsberg's divergent oral performances (and subcultural and mainstream reactions to those performances) as soundings of race and gender, I also find that the content and style of certain poems change in response to shifts in national and Ginsberg's own sexual politics. Anne Waldman, who offers a fiercely gendered reading of ritual vocalization and event in line with contemporaneous feminist performance art, provides a compelling counterpoint. I also investigate the phenomenon of jazz poetry in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with special attention to a section of Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958) and its subversive performance of American commodity culture and personal identity within it.

With the full flowering of black cultural nationalism in the 1960s, poets began to worry about and insist on the full integration of the black artist in the black community. Amiri Baraka (formerly Leroi Jones) communicates an aggressive subaltern politics in his poetry, and his performance aesthetic underscores the changeableness of gender, race, and nation. Don L. Lee (later Haki Madhubuti), in step with Baraka, develops a delivery style and scripted vocal presence that are meant to publicize poetry to the black community in a wider way, using rap to dissolve distinctions between high and low culture. Through audiotexts and the soundscapes surrounding their production, I explore as well prominent women poets of the movement, notably Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, and their chants of a new black womanhood, some of which were performed with gospel choirs and blues bands in an attempt to bring poetry—and the black nationalist message—to an expanded cross-section of African Americans. Throughout the chapter I weigh the politics of amplitude in Black Arts movement poetry and the cultural effects of the mediatization of the grain of the voice.

In my final chapter, "Slam Nation," which re-cites the title of a 1998 documentary film on the slam poetry scene (*SlamNation*), I respond to one of the most interesting and controversial new poetic forms to erupt onto the U.S. cultural scene in recent years. The poetry performed at the slam has been dismissed by some as nothing more than a sideshow attraction; however, as this cultural form has spread, making poetry more accessible to more people, slammers have continued to theorize their aesthetic in serious terms, and the form has begun to be taken much more seriously. Drawing on statements about the slam by its organizers, poets, and audiences, I trace the American roots of its participatory poetics and show how it seeks to construct what Bakhtin calls a "second culture," an alternative to the

dominant culture from whose values the poets largely dissent. I also demonstrate how a vulgar humor incites a treacherous laughter that temporarily suspends the official hierarchies of the dominant culture in effecting the participants' own identitarian politics. My chapter ends with an analysis of virtual performances of public poetry, its multimediatic extensions, and on the simulation of liveness in a digital age.

The performance theorist Elin Diamond has stated that performance is "a contested space, where meanings and desires are generated, occluded, and of course multiply interpreted." This definition is consistent with Judith Butler's contention that identity itself is a contested construct. The idea of the performance space as *agon* stands out, with poets vying in public with themselves, with other poets, with their audiences, and with American culture. Whitman observed that "the place of the orator and his hearers is truly an agonistic arena. There he wrestles and contends with them—he suffers, sweats, undergoes his great toil and extasy. Perhaps it is a greater battle than any fought by contending forces on land and sea." The person who wins, he observes, is capable of establishing the "mightiest rule."²⁵ In the chapters to come, we will assess how Whitman and descendant poets amplify this expressed ideology of the spoken word as they map for themselves a quintessentially American history and theory of public poetry.