Ain Shams University

The Real and the Symbolic in Selections of Performance Poetry from John Agard's *Alternative Anthem* (2009) and Jean 'Binta' Breeze's *Third World Girl* (2011): A Psycho-Cultural Approach

An MA Thesis

by

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Abstract

Performance poetry designates the revival of oral poetry. Orality, however, has long been deemed inferior to literacy. Oral cultures have been disparaged for elevating the spoken word at the expense of the more civilized written word, the word that was brought by the West to civilize and educate the purportedly uncivilizable colonial subjects. The resurgence of performance poetry in the West thus entails literary and ideological resistance to Western hegemony and assimilation. The marginalized minority groups and immigrants reawakened the need to reconnect with their oral cultures and traditions. It also prompted the members of the dominant culture to re-evaluate their knowledge about the ostracized other and his/her culture.

Knowledge about the other is often imposed by the prevailing political, social, and economic power. Therefore, knowledge, about the other and the world as well, only has the *appearance* of truth; it is not the real truth. This thesis adopts Slavoj Žižek's premise that social reality is virtual in that it is made up of fantasies about the established hegemonic power, i.e. the big Other, the subjects, the others and the social relations between them. The subjects are members of the dominant social, racial and religious groups that are made to believe in the superiority and unassailability of the big Other, while the others are those who diverge from the norm. The relationship between them is influenced by "phantasms" fabricated by the big Other about the other's identity, culture, and traditions. Meanwhile, the big Other is perceived by the subjects as omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent; they believe he is always watching them to ensure that his laws and rules are upheld.

The thesis thus examines performance poetry as a means for subjects to traverse the British symbolic's fantasies about the Caribbean other through the performance of selected poems from John Agard's *Alternative Anthem* (2009) and Jean Binta Breeze's

Third World Girl (2011). While most of the theses on performance poetry approach performed poems as primarily textualized poems, paying little or no heed to the visual and aural qualities of the performance, this thesis examines all the technical features of the selected poems, both written and performed, with great emphasis on Žižek's theory of the three Orders. The analysis of the poems is particularly mindful of the Žižek's adopted Lacanian concepts of the symbolic, the real, the *objet petit a*, the symptom, the gaze, the voice and the act. Accordingly, the thesis explores how the textualized and performed poems enable the audience to free themselves from the ideological straitjacket of the symbolic and find in this multimedia genre a free and unimpeded access to the real.

Keywords: performance poetry – Anglo-Caribbean poetry – subjectivity – the real – the symbolic – textualized orature – the voice – the real

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Preface

"A photograph is always invisible, it is not it that we see."
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1980

Truth as such is invisible if the world is nothing but a picture reflected in the eye of its beholder. This is how Lacan explains the development of the subject. When a child first sees himself/herself through a mirror, s/he formulates an image of himself/herself that does not accurately reflect his/her real self. This ideal image to which s/he will aspire for the rest of his/her symbolic life will be backed up by a screen through which s/he will see the world around him/her, that screen being language. Truth is thus shielded from him/her one layer at a time, the truth about himself/herself, the truth about those around him/her, and the truth about the symbolic world s/he lives in. This is the premise of this thesis; that is, subjects construe a virtual reality out of their mirrored perception of the world. Accordingly, their symbolic universe is misrecognized as real, when, in fact, it is merely an image of the invisible real world.

Shattering the mirror through which the subjects see themselves and the world around them is not impossible, though. The political, economic and social ideologies limiting the subjects' field of vision can be exposed if and when they notice the tiny crack in the mirror, a crack that is always there, menacing the destruction of their perceived reality. This thesis posits that attending performance poetry events, by othered poets, can prod the spectators to get a close enough peek at that crack. Performance poetry is, in a few words, poetry performed to an audience; it marks a resurgence of oral poetry especially by marginalized individuals from originally oral cultures (Abrams and Harpham 271). Performance poetry is an interactive encounter between the poet and the audience, unlike traditional poetry readings, where an audience listens passively to a poet's recitation (Somers-Willet 20). The performative dynamics of the performance poetry event can thus foster an interaction between the