

BIRGIT M. BAURIDL, *Betwixt, Between, or Beyond? Negotiating Transformations from the Liminal Sphere of Contemporary Black Performance Poetry* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), 326 pp.

Representing the “first study of contemporary black performance poetry from the viewpoint of transnational American Studies” (back cover), Birgit Bauridl’s *Betwixt, Between, or Beyond?* pursues two overall goals: first, the study intends to demonstrate “the significance of performance poetry for the American cultural landscape” by discussing it in the light of key issues, terms, and concepts arising from cultural studies, such as memory, identity, and the emergence of communities across national boundaries, including a transnational American Studies framework; second, it aims to illuminate the reciprocal advantages of employing ideas from performance studies and transnational American Studies to understand performance poetry (273). Bauridl’s approach of viewing performance poetry through the double-lens of performative studies and transnational American studies, on the one hand, and her use of performance poetry as a platform to negotiate various ideas and concepts relevant to performance poetry, on the other hand, give it due critical weight to performance poetry and also show her extensive and detailed knowledge of theories and performance poetry as well as their respective historical developments.

The first chapter, “Taking Notes: Roots, Perspectives, and Goals,” serves as a general introduction to her following chapters and covers a lot of ground. It touches upon diverse issues such as her definition of the term “contemporary performance poetry,” her quest for ‘material’ in rural and urban America and the difficulties of establishing a corpus of performance poetry, a short history of performance poetry (here: slam poetry) from its emergence in the 1980s to the present, and the ‘transnational turn’ in American Studies. Having established the necessity of looking at “contemporary black performance poetry from the vista point of the transnational” (49) and defining “the transnational” as a “category of analysis” (49), Bauridl moves on to discuss and adapt concepts from performance studies to the needs of performance poetry, especially the concept of liminality.

The second chapter, “Rehearsal: Fine-Tuning the Concept,” first provides the readers with an overview of the multifaceted ‘discipline’ of

performance studies, its emergence, the major figures and their theories, and important critical debates. It then presents a heterogeneous group of concepts that are relevant to her discussion of performance poetry, including Erika Fischer-Lichte’s concept of *Aufführung*, and the concepts of ritual, liminality, and social drama, which were primarily developed by Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. “Fine-tuning” these concepts to fit performance poetry in the subchapter entitled “Approaching Performance Poetry,” she argues, for instance, that performance poetry displays characteristics of the ritual and, most importantly, occurs in a liminal space and, in spatial and temporal terms, is “between” (99). It is this thesis that informs the subsequent analyses.

In chapter three, “Re-Connect! Performing a Trip Down Memory Lane,” Bauridl focuses on the concept of memory and asserts that “performance poetry as an art form becomes a site of memory for black/African American culture, more particularly, the oral tradition” (122). She illustrates her assertion with several examples that manifest direct or indirect references to the black oral tradition (e.g., the blues tradition, the call-and-response pattern, and the tradition of storytelling): Patricia Smith’s poem “Life Memories” collected in *Life According to Motown* (1991), for instance, plays with the typical AAB-Blues structure (“Saying I never want to leave my memories/Saying I never want to leave my memories/Saying I never want my memories to leave/me,” 139), and Daniel Beaty’s “The Bones They Breathe,” a multimedia performance about the Middle Passage, reconnects the past with the present, serving as a reminder of the terrible history of slavery (153). According to Bauridl, it is the liminal space of performance poetry that allows black poets to “perform memory” in order to affirm African American culture and simultaneously contest dominant national narratives.

Chapter four, entitled “Fragile Connections? Performing America(ns),” explores the ways in which the liminal space of performance poetry enables poets to negotiate, challenge, and transform (national) identities. After a brief overview of criticism on the constructedness of identity, Bauridl discusses selected works by poets with migratory backgrounds, such as Bassey Ikpi from Nigeria, Lynne Procope from Trinidad, and Staceyann Chin from Jamaica, whose poems often use autobiographical details to express an

identity that occupies a place inbetween two cultures (see, for example, Bauridl's analysis of Ikpi's poem "Homeward," 172). She then draws attention to contemporary black poets who identify with the core American ideas and ideals and also "critically engage with the US nation and with what is considered Americanness" (183). A striking example is Jessica Care Moore's poem "Black Statue of Liberty" in which the Statue of Liberty is appropriated to challenge the racism in the United States and, at the same time, emphasize the values of freedom and liberty ("I am the walking, talking, surviving, breathing, beautiful/Black Statue of Liberty," 177).

In chapter five, "Transconnect! Performing Transcendences," Bauridl contends that the performance poetry's liminal realm allows for the formation of a community beyond national borders that still retains the notion of the Other:

What is transethnic, transcultural, or transnational about this community is its construction, its structure, and range, yet not the identity of members; neither is it the goal to dissolve any particularities. The community as it is imagined does not annihilate cultural, ethnic, or national difference, but appeals to what Bhaba [sic] calls 'the human culture of mankind.' (248)

Black contemporary poets like Staceyann Chin are not bound to the United States but perform all over the world and use global social networks to promote their work. They also cross cultural, ethnic, and/or national borders when they "perform for the Other," that is, when they turn "the poetry itself into a collective voice for those who are silenced in many ways" (226). In "Counting the Dead," for instance, which was written on January 12, 2009, and deals with Israeli attacks on Gaza, Chin regards it as her duty to give visibility to the histories of the Other in order to guarantee that they are not for-

gotten or marginalized by dominant narratives (230): "bodies from everywhere ... in our collective memory ... Sudan/Rwanda/Palestine/Dachau/Jamaica ... and 850 dead/in memory" (231). Rather than blending all the individual voices together, Chin reminds her audience of the existence of these distinct voices across the globe.

This brief summary suffices to demonstrate the explanatory power of Bauridl's approach to black contemporary performance poetry. At the same time, her use of performance poetry as a platform to negotiate a wealth of concepts and ideas draws special attention to the gap between the performative quality of performance poetry (e. g., slam poetry), which is typically composed for or spontaneously created during an oral performance in front of a live audience, and the numerous concepts and theories used to frame and analyze the poems. Bauridl seems to be acutely aware of the gap, which lies at the core of her study, and pursues the astute strategy of setting up her study as a tripartite slam performance: The first three chapters ("0 Prelude: Consulting the Muse"; "1 Taking Notes"; and "2 Rehearsal") prepare the author and readers for the following three written "performances" ("3 Reconnect! Performing a Trip Down Memory Lane"; "4 Fragile Connections? Performing America(ns)"; and "5 Transconnect! Performing Transcendences"). Like a performance poet, whose poetry is informed by personal experiences, Bauridl also interweaves her text with autobiographical details and becomes herself an academic performer on a literary stage. But even though her well-researched "performances" are unable to close the gap, they provide readers with valuable insights into a previously neglected subject and invite them to discover the fascinating world of black contemporary performance poetry—online or live.

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