

Chapter 9

***STRANGERS, PERSISTERS, AND KILLJOYS:* CONFRONTING GENDER INEQUALITY THROUGH PERFORMANCE POETRY**

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[This chapter focuses on the performance of poetry and the ways in which this expressive practice has been employed by women spoken wordsters not only to express and explore their oppositional and marginal identities, their strange(r)ness, but also to enact and actively advance cultures of equality. It explores US and UK women’s performance poetry and activism in the twenty-first century, on and beyond the stage, through the lens of Sara Ahmed’s conceptualization of willfulness (2014; 2017a) and its associations with the figure of the stranger (Simmel 1908/2016; Ahmed 2000; 2006; 2014) and the feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2010a; 2010b; 2017a; 2017b). These figures are instrumental to interrogate the gender malfunction inherent in the Western social system and reveal (hetero)normative structures as flawed. For performance poets, willfulness—insistence, persistence—becomes a source of empowerment: by being willful, they make things move, reorient, at the same time that, through their intersubjective and affective encounter with the audience, they generate a social imaginary of common understanding, open up future possibilities, and create more positive, egalitarian, and inclusive lifeworlds]

Since the upsurge of spoken word in the late 1980s, the performance of poetry—one of the varied manifestations of this expressive practice—has developed into ‘one of the most undiluted vehicles of artistic and activist (self)expression available to women’ (Olson 2007, xv), and has increasingly become a fertile ground for women performance poets to address gender issues as well as other embodied forms of inequality and discrimination.¹ For almost four decades now, US and UK spoken wordsters whose marginalized identity

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has been shaped by gender, sex, race, ethnicity, class and/or mental health, have decisively taken the mic in both conventional and unconventional venues and used their artistic practice to challenge society on all fronts, diagnosing inequalities, identifying deficiencies, and demanding hitherto denied agency and subjectivity. By performing (gender) equality they aim at accessing possibilities for bringing about transformation and social change. In what follows, I will explore US and UK women's performance poetry and activism in the twenty-first century, on and beyond the stage, through the lens of Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of willfulness (2014; 2017a) and its associations with the figure of the stranger (Simmel 1908/2016; Ahmed 2000; 2006; 2014) and the feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2010a; 2010b; 2017a; 2017b), with their potential to interrogate the gender malfunction inherent in the Western social system and reveal (hetero)normative structures as flawed.² The poets I will be dealing with here are all internationally well-known feminists of the spoken word scene in the US and the UK, women of various backgrounds and ages, who nevertheless share a commitment to *artivism*—art as activism—and are intent on critically using their poetry in performance as a source of transformational energy with which to challenge sexism while helping to build a freer, more diverse, tolerant, and equal society.

The first part of this essay focuses on the hybrid nature of performance poetry as a genre that can be both written on the page and performed on the stage, that is both personal and public, individual and collective, engaging the performance poet and the audience in an, affective, emotional encounter that may potentially reach out to, affect, or transform society. In their performances, the artists that are the subject of this analysis reveal that they are at odds with the dominant sociocultural and heteronormative system, which they critically examine and find wanting. Their strange(r)ness can be read as willfulness because they insist on remaining different: they will not adapt to the norm nor go with the flow; they are killjoys, persisting in their critiques through repetition, in the hope that repetition, insistence, will eventually bring about change. In this way, as Sara Ahmed asserts, 'Perhaps willfulness can be an electric current, passing through each of us, switching us on. Willfulness can be a spark. We can be lit by it. It is an electric thought' (2014, 168). Drawing on Georg Simmel's and Sara Ahmed's theorizations of the stranger,

² I am indebted to Andrea Rodríguez Álvarez, whose approach to willfulness and strange(r)ness in her study of Scottish women's urban crime fiction partly inspired my own reading of spoken word artists and their poetry.

I will examine this figure in connection with the willful subject, the feminist killjoy, and the performance poets' poe(li)tics of persistence that aims at creating, and dealing artistically with, disturbance as a horizon of possibility. The last section will engage willful gender strangers as they deal with their queer sexuality in a binary, essentialist, and heteronormative culture. On and beyond the stage, they create 'dissensual spaces' (Durán Almarza 2015) through their aesthetic practices, which function as strategic tools of resistance and dissent that may affectively and effectively mobilize the audience to dissent too, and thus to willfully and collectively enact cultures of equality.

1. Performance Poetry, the Utopian Performative, and the Audience

Although best appreciated in live performance (Somers-Willett 2012, 18), whether in competitive—i.e., slam—commercial or artistic format, performance poetry is verse that lives both on the page and the stage, and in audiovisual media as well. The visual/oral performance becomes a highly signifying component that complements and enhances the word, conveying nuances that the page cannot, and creating an 'extended semantic repertoire in which poetry fulfils more of its potentialities' (Middleton 1998, 295). Performances become physical, fully sensory experiences aiming at the 'total image complex' (in Bernstein 1998, 5), with the aural and the visual amplifying the effects of the poem as a performative, plural event (9): vocal dynamics, physical dynamics, appearance, dialects, formats, gestures, hoots and hollers from the audience, and even setting, are some of the performative aspects of a poem (Somers-Willett 2012, 16). Together, they provide the audience with a multisensorial experience that will ultimately shift the poem's meaning and effect. Performance poets use words with a performative potential in order to deliver not only meaning but also action, to make happen in the act of voicing and performing.

Conventionally, the poets speak in the first person and draw on personal and political themes, the most common being the expression of their marginalized identities (Somers-Willett 2012, 7). Despite focusing on the self-conscious performance of identity, however, in this poetic practice the personal usually intersects with the public, the individual with the collective, through the immediate, interactive, and physical relationship between author and audience, making both the aesthetic or lyric and the

political essential constituents of the poetic performative act. Spoken word is therefore more than just words, rhythms, and expressive body language: it is a doubly instrumental genre that enables performance poets to analyze the reality that surrounds them and reveal the flaws of the social system they live in, while also providing them with the possibility of a personal encounter with the audience, an ‘intersubjective network’ (Middleton 1998, 291), bringing its members into the performers’ world, allowing words, experiences, and gestures to transcend borders and emotionally resonate with their public.

In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2007, xvii), Kwame Anthony Appiah advocates that ‘we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association’. As a public practice, the performance of poetry may well serve as a starting point in that conversation, where spectators are interpellated into a critical conversation and then moved into ‘the theoretical and experiential realm of affect’, so that they are not only witnesses or passive consumers, but active participants (Dolan 2005, 97) through their physical as well as emotional connection. In a type of Levinasian encounter with the other, during the performance of the poem the audience are witness to ‘a nakedness and stripping away of expression as such; that is, extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself’ (Levinas 1998, 145). A challenging concept for feminist theorizing, vulnerability to Erinn Cuniff Gilson is ‘of special value because of how it captures and expresses the complexities, tensions, and ambiguities of experiences of gender, sexuality, and power in contemporary life’ (2016, 73). Oftentimes considered in negative terms, I argue that vulnerability—resulting from gender, sexual, and/or mental strange(r)ness and alienation—may become a positive vulner-ability in the dynamic, transformative process of the performance, a powerful condition for potential that enables women who suffer any kind of oppression—be it physical, psychological, or emotional—to regain their agency while they attempt to establish allegiances and convert their audience into allies. Through this affective intra-communication, performance poets hope to change the way spectators, or rather, spect-actors, view and experience identity/gender politics, ultimately contributing to the reshaping of their world views and, as a result, to the reimagining of altered social communities. This reorientation of the audience, which can be read from the perspective of emotion and encounter, entails a repositioning, a ‘witness’, a concurrence of wills or social willing (Ahmed 2014, 48) that may lead to the collective enactment of cultures of equality and ultimately to a common world-changing project.

Somers-Willett contends that slam poetry—and by extension other types of performance poetry as well—‘is largely dedicated to the ideals of democracy, equality, and diversity’, ideals that surface frequently both at the poetic event and ‘as some aspect of the poetry itself, inviting (and at times demanding) a shared sense of liberalism and tolerance among those in attendance’ (2012, 20). Likewise, in her studies on performance, Jill Dolan (2001; 2005) affirms that—theatrical—performance offers an important venue for grassroots activity and for the rehearsal of democracy (2005, 91) through the establishment of a public, dialogic communication between author and audience. For Dolan, this public practice can be a tool for making the world better, offering us ‘consistent glimpses of utopia’, be in itself a utopian gesture where audiences are compelled to see people perform live ‘hoping perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theatre, from its macro to its micro arrangement’ (2001, 456). Dolan believes that performance can articulate a more just and equitable common future, in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture. The affective codes generated in performance give rise to what she calls ‘the utopian performative’, or a way in which utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively through performance.

In line with Dolan, performance theorist Monica Prendergast (2011) claims that spectatorial participation and agency are key to activism. It is the intersubjective network between poet and audience, the feeling of *communitas* (Turner 1974, 1982; Prendergast 2011; Koppelman 2016), of empathetic intelligence, that incites people to profound responses that shake their consciousness, creating a social imaginary and a poetic world-making that arise from the articulation of desires for a better world (Prendergast 2011, 63). Performance poets would ultimately be ‘utopographers’ (Prendergast 2011) who map utopias, who create sociality and engagement through performance in the belief that performance not only ‘allows opposition and marginal identities to be expressed and explored’ (Marvin Carlson, cited in Dolan 2001, 461), but may also be an effective means to extend the aesthetic into the social and political. Such artistic and activist—*artist*—practices foment contestation, resistance and dissent, at the same time that they generate an intersubjective understanding that also facilitates the audience’s engagement, so that through a complex affective exchange between author and audience, together they can envision, and potentially contribute to creating, a more equitable society.

Spoken wordsters Turiya Autry and Walidah Inarisha assert that performance poets try ‘to write a new world with their tongues’ (2007, 338). The tongue is the organ of rebellion that these warriors of the word use to identify multiple inequalities, raise consciousness, and encourage collective responsibility. Their words prompt alternative readings and ultimately ally with the ‘willful ears’ (Ahmed 2014, 137) of their audience such that they can ‘hear each other in each other’ (2014, 169) and ‘hear what is not being heard’ (Ahmed 2017a, 203). Through voice, gesture, and ears the poetic performance opens up the possibility of collective transformation and sociopolitical mobilization in order to advance cultures of equality. The multiplying effects of the performance also stem from the fact that most performers—like those dealt with here—take their activism outside and beyond the stage: many of the most acclaimed women poets at the mic accompany their art with social and political engagement that foregrounds the urgency and legitimacy of their claims.

2. Willfulness, Strange(r)ness, and the Poe(li)tics of Persistence

Performance poetry attests to the intersections between emotions and the encounter with others—audience—both of which are fundamental in the construction of the willful subject. Sara Ahmed conceptualizes willfulness as ‘a style of politics’ (2014, 161), ‘a political art’ in the struggle to exist or to transform an existence, and sees willing ‘as a project form, as how subjects aim to bring certain things about’ (2014, 19). In her theorization, the will has a queer potential, since, in fact, both are related to the possibility of deviation. She bases her arguments on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s elaboration on the etymological history of the word ‘queer’ (*twerk*) and its Indo-European origins, where it signified to turn or twist, as well as its relation to the word ‘thwart’, to transverse, perverse or cross (2014, 11). Ahmed affirms that it is no accident that this word came to describe sexual objects, ‘those who do not follow the straight line’, who deviate from the right course (11). Thus, to queer the will is ‘to show how the will has already been given a queer potential’, a potential that is often narrated as a problem or threat. Willfulness is to Ahmed the conversion point, or how a potential is converted into a threat: that subjects might not follow the right path (11).

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), she argues that queer politics involves moments of ‘generative disorientation’, which she interprets as moments of radical possibility rather than despair or desperation: although episodes of disorientation can be unsettling and ‘shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable’ (2006, 157), they can also be thought of as vital bodily experiences, as a purposeful process within self-development that eventually evolves toward a constructive reorientation and productive and revolutionary action. In this way, rather than a problem, disorientation may turn out to be a solution, in the sense that it can reorient, ‘redirect us and open up new worlds’ (2006, 19). Hence, reorientation entails a different kind of orientation: a moving away, a willful trespassing of norms, a re-inhabiting of spaces and opening up of futures that may become a source of empowerment through prompting alternative readings of the self and the world. These generative moments of disorientation-reorientation enhance the embodiment of willful acts, are translated into acts of disobedience, of insistence—‘a form of political labor’, ‘a political grammar’ (Ahmed 2014, 149)—and persistence, of failure to willingly fit the norm and comply with the dominant system.

Alix Olson, the editor of *Word Warriors*, the first US all-women spoken word anthology (2013), and winner of the National Slam Poetry competition in 1998 with her team from the Nuyorican Poets’ Cafe, recounts such a moment of generative disorientation after her participation at a spoken word event in Portugal, the Faladura International Poetry Festival, where she was one of the handful of women artists and the only openly queer one amidst a good number of male national poet laureates. At the end of the shows, they would speak to her about her ‘feminist art’, which they declared did not resonate with them for what these poets considered to be a number of powerful reasons, ranging from their—clearly misinformed—belief in the lack of sexism in their country to the idea that poetry should be universal, subtle and not confrontational or direct, all of which led them to try and persuade Olson to change the nature of her poetic work, make it more subtle. On the plane back to the US, and while pondering this patronizing piece of advice, she first felt disoriented, overcome by a mixture of emotions that at first made her doubt her artistic merit. However, this disorientation eventually evolved towards a generative re-orientation, since the incident actually motivated and inspired her to write one of her best-known pieces, significantly entitled ‘Subtle Sister’, a poem that details ‘the anger of living

within global sexism, the frustration of working inside a male-dominated poetic world and its correlative naïve response to feminist art. It was a pissed-off diatribe, a call to resistance . . . It was not, and defiantly not so, subtle' (2007a, 168). The germ of this poem can also be read as a snap experience in Sara Ahmed's terms: when all the frustration and rage can become 'a tipping point. It is only when you seem to lose it, when you shout, swear, spill, that you have their attention' (2017b). According to Ahmed, feminism can be what happens in these moments (2017b). Snaps like Olson's can be construed as feminist outbursts in the face of injustice, biases, microaggressions and inequality. 'Subtle Sister' is such an outburst: it is a call to take action and break the rules of the patriarchy that have kept women subdued and silent, and to willfully oppose the impositions of a misogynist system.

The poem ends with a reference to the differences underlying both Olson's and her male peers' understanding of the concept 'subtle', to which she gives a gender twist: whereas they ask her to, as a woman and a poet, be less angry, more subtle, she replies back with potent rhetorical questions that refute the alleged evenness in male and female experiences, as women are still the target of multiple—and indeed angry—forms of male sexual aggression and violence which she unsubtly brings to the fore: 'subtle like a penis pounding its target? / subtle like your hissing from across the street? / subtle like the binding of my sisters' feet? / subtle like her belly raped with his semen, / draped in his fuck, funny, / doesn't seem even' (171). Thus, Olson's snap moment after her international encounter at the Faladura strengthened her conviction of 'the dire need to poet forcibly' (2007a, 168); it also motivated her to name her independent production company 'Subtle Sister Productions'. She thinks of it 'as a personal tribute to [her] encounters in Portugal' and is ultimately grateful to those poets for their inadvertent contribution to that particular stage of her personal feminist evolution. As an activist, she has continued to tour the US and abroad, performing at folk festivals, pride marches, national protests and rallies, high schools, colleges, and prisons. Through Subtle Sister Productions she also teaches spoken word poetry workshops for all kinds of groups—from LGBTQ+ national organizations to feminist leadership camps for high school students—who learn to appreciate art as activism and forge a deeper connection between all domains of political struggle.

Olson reacted boldly against her male poet peers' notions of what (feminist) poetry should be like and that willful act of defiance eventually pushed her spoken word career and professional life forward in many productive areas. She thus proved Ahmed's contention that willfulness involves persistence 'in the face of having been brought down', and that simple persistence can be an act of disobedience (2014, 2). Likewise, Megan Beech,³ one of the most powerful voices of spoken word and of young feminism today in the UK, brings together these concepts in 'Nevertheless, She Persisted' (2017), where this expression—adopted as a slogan by the feminist movement, especially in the US—illustrates the perfect interaction between willful acts, persistence, and disobedience. The 'She' in the title stands for US Senator Elizabeth Warren, who was voted to silence by the United States Senate in 2017 when she persistently objected to the confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions as US Attorney General. Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell made the following remark in defense of the silencing during his comments following the vote: 'She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted'. Beech uses these same words in her poem as an indictment of the pervasive silencing of women. The pronoun 'she' extends in her piece to encompass the poet herself and, with her, a whole genealogy of women—*ansisters*, as Beech calls them in an ingenious wordplay—who, now as well as in the past and all over the world, have struggled and managed to lift bans and defy quietness with 'every sentence they have finished, defiant and distinguished, / undiminished' (2017, 43). Like them, Elizabeth Warren's willfulness made her persist in her decision to speak out loud, disobey McConnell's command, and stand up for her ideas despite the warnings she received to keep silent. Beech construes these warnings, 'the sound of silencing', as an ongoing practice of oppression used by men 'in the house, in the senate, in the streets, in the President's tweets' that only reveals 'the festering fear of letting women speak' (42). The poet feels inspired by the Senator's defiant act and, with another suggestive wordplay, expresses her determination to will a collective change against the repression of women's lives and the suppression of their voices: 'So let our symphony sing free and let them hear our demands. / For I stand with my *persisters*, my *ansisters*, *resisters*, the glass ceiling

³ Megan Beech was the winner of the Poetry Society SLAMBassadors national youth slam 2011, and the Poetry Rivals UK under 18s slam 2011. She was featured in *The Guardian's* lists of inspiring young feminists in 2014 and must-read books of the year 2014, as well as in the *Evening Standard's* list of ten twenty-first-century feminist icons. She made a film with the BBC for the iPlayer series *Women Who Spit*. Her work has been featured in publications including the *New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *Huffington Post*, *Grazia* magazine, and the *Evening Standard*, which heralded her as "a modern-day feminist icon".

chisellers, the outspoken ministers, the victors / invictus. / . . . I stand with women in their millions whose lives we rewrite or deny / or let live unlistened . . . I stand persistent, sisterly, insistently' (43).

Like their *ansisters*, female performance poets have been subject to various forms of silencing while trying to do their work: for many years, most organizers and hosts of spoken word events were male, and, as a consequence, the presence of women in slam competitions, for example, was almost non-existent.⁴ Furthermore, as genderqueer poet and activist Andrea Gibson reveals in 'Shaking It Off', an essay included in the *Word Warriors* anthology, male performers used to justify this limited number of women by saying that the competition of the slam was intimidating and, much like what the Portuguese poets had expressed to Alix Olson, 'that spoken word was loud and women don't like to be loud' (2007, 216). In contrast to this remark, the women in the audience would approach Gibson to thank them not only for the topics that they was addressing on the stage but 'for just simply speaking' (216).⁵ They also recalls how one male poet said to them after one of their performances: 'I don't mean to be rude, but do you ever write about anything other than the struggles of women?' (216), a remark that reinforced Gibson's view that the slam space 'still mirrored US culture, a patriarchy that silenced women' (216). Shortly after, and as an active and deliberate response to that question, the poet joined Vox Feminista, a multimedia performance collective of women political activists bent on bringing about social change through cultural revolution, who urged them to become increasingly fearless in raising their feminist voice. Vox Feminista—which was awarded the Westword Mastermind Award for Literary Arts in 2007—blends entertainment with education 'to inspire and awaken our audience to take action toward global justice'.⁶

As seen above, emotions and encounter intersect in the work and life experiences of spoken word artists. Yet, emotions of despair, anger, shame, and pain, rather than being negative can be positive when used to prompt activism, confront injustices, and foster

⁴ This limitation of women's participation in competitions led to the creation in 2008 of the Women of the World Poetry Slam (WOWPS), a yearly performance poetry tournament in which only female assigned or identified individuals (i.e., poets who live their lives as women) are allowed to compete. Andrea Gibson was the WOWPS champion in the first festival, held in Detroit, Michigan.

⁵ Since Gibson rejects gender binarism, I will use 'they', and the corresponding 'their' and 'them', to avoid gender specific forms; these are also the forms used in their website: <https://www.andreagibson.org/>.

⁶ https://www.facebook.com/pg/voxfeminista/about/?ref=page_internal

cultures of equality through performance. These performance poets agree on the need to be vocal about misogyny on the mic, just as they strive to create much desired spaces that welcome and host female poets wanting to perform their work on stage. That was the motivation behind the creation of Sister Spit, a lesbian-feminist spoken word and performance art collective based in San Francisco, a city where Sini Anderson, one of the co-founders, found that the spoken word scene was just as male dominated as the one that she had left back in Chicago. In order to put an end to the underrepresentation of women as well as their lack of impact that she perceived, she established a partnership with Michelle Tea, a queer talented local writer, and together they formed Sister Spit, described in an article in *The Independent Weekly* magazine (June 27, 2001) as a ‘literary celebration of outspoken and courageous feminists’. And an impact they made: their first show was packed to capacity and since then queer girls have either hit the stage for the first time or returned to it before an enthusiastic audience (Anderson 2007, 279). The group took to the road with their *Ramblin’ Roadshow*, performing across the United States before its dissolution in 2006. In many ways the tour itself was an act of defiance of a group of people who ‘had heard the word *No* too much. No to being queer, to wanting to be artists, to thinking anyone would want to listen to our attitudinal manifestos’ (Tea 2007, 16). In their successful performances in unconventional venues across the country they had their ambitions validated, a definite proof ‘that if you want something bad you can make it happen *through sheer will*, ingenuity, and community support’ (20; emphasis added). Tea revived the tour in April 2007 with *Sister Spit: The Next Generation*, which included some of the original members of the collective and has since evolved to reflect changes in the gender identity and sexual orientation of the touring artists.

Vox Feminista, Sister Spit and Subtle Sister Production are indeed exemplary of insistent, persistent, and willful acts carried out by audacious dissenters who have become estranged from a society grounded in unfair and defective gender paradigms.

3. Willful Killjoys: Ruining the (Sexist) Atmosphere

In my analysis, spoken word artists can be said to embody the condition of the stranger, as defined by German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel (1908), for whom s/he

is an element of the group itself but is not strongly attached to it.⁷ Simmel bases his examination of this figure on the opposition between distance and proximity, which he argues can be both geographical and social. Thus, in his view, the stranger embodies a synthesis of closeness and remoteness: s/he is paradoxically near and far at the same time, ‘as in any relationship founded on generally human commonality’. According to Simmel, between closeness and distance there arises a specific tension when ‘the awareness of what is common to all pulls into focus that which is not shared’. Ultimately, these performance poets epitomize the notion of ‘familiar strangers’, which Ahmed, drawing on Simmel’s theorization, describes as those who are ‘in their very proximity, *already recognized as not belonging*, as being out of place’ (Ahmed 2000, 21; emphasis in the original), suggesting that rather than strangers being those we do not recognize, some bodies are inherently recognized as strangers (in their non-normativity, marginality, strange(r)ness).

To Simmel, the stranger’s paradoxical position of nearness and distance endows this figure with a specific attitude of objectivity, which he interprets as freedom, for the objective individual is freer practically and theoretically, and thus constrained by no commitments that could prejudice their perception, understanding, or judgment; neither is s/he bound in their action ‘by habit, piety, and precedent’. In his argumentation, the stranger is, then, an objective—although not necessarily detached—analyst with an active mind ‘operating to its fullest capacity according to its own laws’. From their strange(r)ness, US and UK performance poets objectively dissect the world around them and find it lacking. It is in their ‘consciousness of being not’ part of that society and sociocultural system that they ‘recognize [themselves] as the stranger’ (Ahmed 2010b, 589). It is precisely by becoming a stranger, Ahmed contends, that willful acts of this kind become instrumental in diagnosing inequalities and effectively interrogating the normativity of the system. Through a focus on the marginal and the ‘strange’, spoken word activists explore normative structures that are revealed as flawed. In their poetic performances, these wordsters identify multiple forms of inequity at the same time that they voice their disconformity with a patriarchal, heteronormative system that marginalizes and estranges those who do not fit in, those who willfully refuse to adjust.

⁷ Simmel’s essay was part of his *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, published in 1908 in Berlin. All the quotations from Simmel’s work in this chapter refer to Ramona Mosse’s English translation, accessed at <https://thebaffler.com/ancestors/stranger>.

In her theorization on the concept of happiness (2010a, 2010b, 2014), Ahmed brings together the stranger, emotions, and willfulness in the figure of the feminist killjoy. In ‘Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Unhappiness’ (2010b), she elaborates on the genealogy of the word *wretched*, which she states comes ‘from wretch, referring to a stranger, exile, or banished person’; the wretch is likewise one who is ‘a miserable, unhappy, or unfortunate person’ (573) who has been banished not only from a place but also from happiness, or one who enters the history of happiness only as a troublemaker, a stranger, a dissenter, a killer of joy (573). According to Ahmed, ‘the sorrow of the stranger might give us a different angle on happiness, not because it teaches us what it is like to be a stranger but because it might estrange us from the very happiness of the familiar’ (573). In this line of thought, the feminist recognizes herself as the stranger, in the consciousness of being already estranged from happiness, of being *not* and *not with*. Thus, in Ahmed’s argumentation, the feminist is a stranger or affect(ively) alien; and she is doubly so since, on the one hand, she is affected in the wrong way by the right things (583) and, on the other, she affects other people in the wrong way: she is a killjoy and, as such, gets in the way of and kills other people’s enjoyment by bringing up or talking about unhappy topics, such as sexism, functioning therefore as ‘an unwanted reminder of histories that are disturbing, that disturb the atmosphere’ (584). This negative affect that the feminist-stranger is attributed with goes hand in hand with the charge of willfulness, and consequently ‘the willful subject shares an affective horizon with the feminist killjoy as those who “ruin the atmosphere”’ (2014, 152).

The title of Megan Beech’s second collection of poems, *You Sad Feminist* (2017), pointedly underscores Ahmed’s association of the feminist and sadness, and therefore, the feminist’s embodiment of the characteristics of the killjoy, the affect alien. The three words of the title together, ‘you-sad-feminist’, merge into a single one that is launched as an insult, a reproach, an emphatic descriptive expression meant to offend the mouthy, snappy woman who ‘ruins the atmosphere’ and kills the joy of others by revealing the causes of female unhappiness. In ‘Women of the World’, ‘Deeds in Words’, ‘Baby’s Face’, and ‘Broader Broadcasting Corporation’, to name a few, Beech speaks about injustice, power, and inequality in a heteropatriarchal culture and how that brings unhappiness to women.

In ‘99 Problems’, from *When I Grow Up I Want To Be Mary Beard* (2013), Beech critically plays on Ice-T’s ‘99 Problems’, which in turn inspired American rapper Jay Z’s 2004 single of the same title, where the latter enumerates the many problems that he has to face in a racist American society, among which, as he acknowledges in the chorus hook, ‘a bitch ain’t one’.⁸ If in the story of his song Jay Z showcases problems that affect him as an artist and as a black man, such as dealing with rap critics, racial profiling from a police officer, and an aggressor, Beech counters in hers with the many issues that have always been entrenched in a sexist culture—such as that depicted and performed in hip-hop, with its pervasive portrayal of women as whores or bitches—and are still a source of sadness, anger, and distress for the feminist killjoy of the twenty-first century: from the ‘misogynistic vocabulary’ and ‘overbearing toxic doctrines of masculinity as sovereign’ to pervasive gender inequality in allegedly democratic, egalitarian societies. The poet also laments the recurrent scenes of hypersexualization and objectification of the female physique, even of teens, in the media, where these images, alongside unimportant issues, such as the ‘unconvincing size [of] our Kate [Middleton] and her baby bump’, take up much more space than that devoted to dealing with the pervasive gender violence that besets women all over the world and which inexplicably does not seem to be part of the general concern. According to Beech, another significant problem is the difficulty of summoning names of women in the public eye that can serve as positive examples that young girls have available to aim for in their lives, other than being a ‘mother, / footballer’s wife or lover, insignificant other’; or the underrepresentation of women in (national) political institutions, as the UK Parliament, where, at the time of writing the poem, ‘less than twenty five percent / of MPs’ were women. Beech finishes this piece by urging to be given ‘more Mary Beards, / more Germaine and Bonnie Greers’ (40-41), wise women with successful intellectual careers who are respected by their peers, willful feminists and killjoys themselves who, like Beech, have refused to remain silent and inhabit the norm.

In ‘Does This Taste Like Rohypnol to You?’ (2017), Beech manifests her unwillingness to go with the flow after she reads a ‘poem’ in her halls of residence on Valentine’s Day:

⁸ “Got 99 problems and a bitch ain’t one” is a refrain repeated in several stanzas in Ice-T’s song, where the Ice-T persona is a pimp and where the word ‘bitch’ recurs in almost every single line; apparently, Ice-T was heavily influenced by Iceberg Slim, a real-life pimp (between 1937-1961) and author of *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967) (<https://genius.com/Ice-t-99-problems-lyrics#about>).

‘Roses are red, violets are blue, / Does this taste like Rohypnol to you?’. The altered popular rhyme makes fun of this potent odorless, colorless tranquilizer, included in the category of date-rape drugs, that produces the immediate loss of consciousness as well as amnesia in the person who consumes it, so that after the sexual assault she cannot remember what happened to her until later or maybe even ever. When Beech complains about these lines, the student manager, a female in her thirties, replies that ‘It is just a joke’, a ‘joke’ that the poet does not share or understand. She also cannot grasp why her peers normalize rape by means of a careless use of words related to sexual assault, with expressions such as ‘last night was a little bit rapey’ or ‘someone on Facebook / just fraped me’ (2017, 21).⁹ Beech expresses her strange(r)ness by distancing herself from her environment, an affect alien emotionally alienated from what seems to be the general, though insensitive, reckless, and sexist, happiness of her peers: ‘And I’ll stand back, / stop shouting this poem the day I can truly say / there is no such thing as blurred lines or victim blame, / and my society, far from quietly, states, / “Do not rape,” not “Do not get raped”!’ (21). Beech’s words particularly resonate now with the powerful protest participative performance ‘A Rapist in Your Path’, created by the Chilean feminist collective LasTesis.¹⁰ Like LasTesis’ hymn, Beech’s poem also calls attention to society’s implied complicity in rape culture and victim shaming: by putting the blame on the victim, she is doubly victimized, first as the object of the rape and then as responsible for her own victimization, whereas no imperative obligation to stop rape and gender violence is demanded from those who actually commit such repugnant acts against women—with dire consequences for the latter’s physical and mental wellbeing—or from the authorities who should protect females’ integrity instead of further denigrating them.

The poet’s attitude is, as such, a tactic for survival and resistance in the face of a malfunctioning world, her willfulness not only a diagnosis but also a call: ‘Don’t adjust

⁹ According to the Free Dictionary, in Telecommunications ‘to frape’, from Facebook+rape, means to alter information in a person’s profile on a social networking website without his or her permission (<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/frape>).

¹⁰ ‘A Rapist in Your Path’ was performed for the first time on November 18, 2019. On November 25, as part of International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, this defiant feminist anthem was interpreted by 2,000 Chilean women, recorded on video, and shown on social media, immediately going viral. Since then, scores of countries all over the world have adopted, translated, and replicated the performance for their protests and local demands for a cease to femicides, rape, and sexual violence. The song puts the blame on the perpetrators, and not on the victims, who are usually held responsible by society and a patriarchal institutional system for the violence exerted upon them: ‘And the fault wasn’t mine, not where I was, not how I dressed’; ‘the rapist is you . . . it’s the cops / the judges / the state / the president. / The oppressive state is a rapist’. *Time* included this feminist collective as one of the 100 most influential people of 2020.

to an unjust world!’ (Ahmed 2014, 157). And thus, Beech refuses to be well adjusted or keep quiet for the sake of comfort, is intent on ruining the atmosphere and killing the joy of familiar happiness, for, as Ahmed contends, ‘There can be joy in killing joy. And killing joy we must, and we do’ (2010b, 592). With these subversive acts, Beech and women like her challenge a rather general complacency within a sexist culture that they seek to destabilize, thus contributing to raising gender consciousness and, with their willful insistence, keeping us ‘proximate to scenes of violence’ (Ahmed 2014, 158).

Together, these performers of the word build upon a political and feminist framework, contributing with unabashed voices to a backbone of persistence, in order to promote, when not force, a change in gender paradigms. However, persistence, willfulness, and strange(r)ness are not often found without accompanying troubles and consequences. A refusal to adjust and the rejection of normative societal paradigms may imply either developing a mental illness or being diagnosed with one in spite of one’s sanity. In *You Sad Feminist*, Beech acknowledges having gone through a crippling anxiety and depressive illness, with associated agoraphobia that prevented her from leaving her room and made her avoid life outside, her ‘capacity for joy and all hope . . . extinguished’ (2017, 15). Likewise, US performance poet and activist Leah Harris recounts in ‘A Mad Poet’s Manifesto’ (2007a, 73-79) how she spent most of her adolescence in and out of psychiatric institutions, forced to take harmful psychiatric drugs that drove her from depression to an obsession with self-injury and suicide, which created ‘a vicious circle of hospitalizations and further despair and hopelessness’ (2007a, 74). She ultimately equates the psychiatric ward with the society outside its walls, both of them authoritarian places where dissent (*willing not*), the trespassing of normativity, is construed as a symptom of illness (strange(r)ness), where patients/women are ‘expected to comply with absolutely every rule without question or complaint’ (75). As a young woman, Harris learned to hide her true thoughts and feelings and, like the nameless narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s groundbreaking feminist short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892), was afraid to keep a journal—and therefore find an emotional outlet through words—because there was no safe place to hide it and she was always under surveillance.

Conversely, during her time as a mental patient, Harris became accustomed to words being used against her, words written on her chart by psychiatrists and mental health workers who made no effort to understand or empathize with her as a human being:

‘Words were weapons used to diagnose and to pathologize me without my consent’ (2007a, 75). At eighteen, upon leaving her final institution, she made a decision to reject their drugs and diagnoses and to strike out on her own, ‘a noncompliant crazy girl’ (75). Words, hers this time, eventually helped her heal her spirit and cope with her grief. Over the years, she moved beyond the exploration of the self in the hope that those words might connect with others, and thus began to perform her work publicly: ‘The exhilaration of that experience kept me going. I had found a healthy outlet for all the years of pent-up rage. My vehicle of expression would be spoken word: loud, angry, in-your-face, unapologetic spoken word transformed my rage into self-empowerment combining art and activism’ (76).

Like Harris, Andrea Gibson, in “the madness vase” (2012), rejects the advice of nutritionists, psychotherapists, yogis, pharmacists, and doctors who recommend drastic and ineffective treatments as a cure to their anxiety, and decides to willfully rely on writing instead: ‘The trauma said, “Don’t write these poems. / Nobody wants to hear you cry / about the grief inside your bones. / . . . / My bones said, “Write the poems”’ (17).¹¹ Gibson has acknowledged that they has felt shame about her illness. Similarly, Leah Harris remained underground about her past and her mental health history, ashamed of it and living out the legacy of self-stigma until she finally granted herself permission to talk back to the system that had oppressed her. In *You Sad Feminist*, Megan Beech also admits that she has had to battle against feelings of shame and the stigma of depressive illness, but in the preface to the book she declares that she has refused to let that stop her from sharing her experience of it. All three have ultimately resorted to writing and to the performance of poems as an escape valve for their grief and as a strategy to reach out to others who might be living through similarly traumatic, devastating experiences. Their poems are a kind of pedagogy that reimagines ‘solitary suffering as “accumulated history”’ (Ahmed 2017a, 202).

Leah Harris illustrates this idea in ‘Revenge of the crazy wimmin’ (2007b), where she feels that she has ‘channeled the fierce love, hope, and strength of all of the generations of women who had been locked away, murdered, raped, and driven insane for being different or defiant, or disillusioned with the status quo’ (77). The performance poem

¹¹ See performance at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtZp7MQE2ZM>.

focuses on a feminist genealogy in an accumulated *herstory* of female willful strangers, victims of the chronic inequality of a patriarchal system attempting to slow women down in their life journeys and lower the volume of their voices (80). From the Middle Ages, when they were burned at the stake for being unruly, and Victorian times, when they were diagnosed with ‘hysteria’, to the present, women have suffered the consequences of the labels imposed on them by a stifling male-dominated system that has controlled their bodies, undermined their spirits, and curtailed their rights under the pretext that it all was for their own good. Hence, according to Harris, what men call paranoia, women call reality, ‘when we name the forces all around / conspiring to keep us down / when we deny the diagnoses of our masters / when we refuse to be sick, defective, diseased, disordered, / disturbed / when we dare proclaim our humanity / when we accuse *them* of insanity’ (81; emphasis in the original). The poet claims that these women’s unruliness, ‘hysteria’, and willing not are just but evidence of the soundness of their judgment, their unabashed dissent a manifestation of their lucidity against an insane heteropatriarchal society intent on obliterating them.

Through an allegedly defective mental condition, these ultimate strangers objectively dissect the world around, proving to be more clear-minded and sane than those who, judging from their irrational, inhumane deeds, have for long subjugated women on the grounds of their willfulness and strange(r)ness, construed in both instances as a threat to the male status quo and the heteronormative system as a whole. Their performance poems are profound indictments of this system that renders women’s voices and lives irrelevant—feminist snaps that connect women over time and space in moments of mutual recognition, visibilizing a long history of accumulated gestures of willfulness, alienation, and disaffection.

4. Gender Strangers: Queering Sexuality

Artists have used their feminist performance poetry as an effective weapon to bring center stage and overtly denounce before an audience both the systematic and systemic oppression of women, alongside the myriad inequities that they still must confront in present-day society: from rampant sexism in all areas of experience, through the lack of positive role models, the marketing of gender stereotypes and damaging body image and

ideals, to the violence exerted by men, including sexual aggressions and rape, among others. All these instances of an unjust, powerful, and pervasive normative heteropatriarchal system, still at work and intersecting at the level of the physical, the emotional, the symbolic as well as the institutional, are examined from the vantage point of each artists' strange(r)ness, and therefore, in Simmel's perspective, of their greater objectivity.

With their emphases on diversity and their enactment of embodied aspects of racial, sexual, and gender identities, these performance poets actively discourage sexism, racism, and homophobia, while problematizing the binary logic and essentialism inherent in the normative, hegemonic culture. In 'Andrew' (2012) genderqueer Andrea Gibson illustrates their disconformity with this traditional binary gender system that boxes people in and labels them even before they are able to speak or decide who they want to become. From early on in her life, Gibson was already acutely aware of their gender, of the fact that they failed to conform to the cultural clear-cut norms of gender binarism, with only male and female categories, neither of which fit them.

In 'I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power Is Out' (2012), Gibson plays an intertextual homage to Walt Whitman's popular poem of the same title, in order to, like him, celebrate the body and sexuality, irrespective of the gender of one's object of love or desire. However, they acknowledges that the heteronormative system at work in society is ready to put down anyone challenging its laws: from early on in their life, they was forbidden to love girls, a command they learned the hard way: 'I had to unlearn their prison speak, / refusing to make wishes on the star / on the sheriff's chest' (2012, 103). The Law of the Father, embodied in the sheriff and his star, violently restrains the poet's will to love someone of their own sex. Seeking the understanding they does not find in the dominant culture, they talks to the stars in the sky instead: 'I said, "Tell me about the big bang." / The stars said, "It hurts to become"' (103). Gibson employs here the cosmology of the big bang as a metaphor for the great explosion that would eventually create a new gender-free universe where they would be able to become their own person, regardless of any kind of gender and sexual conditioning. In a Whitmanian manner, the end of the poem turns into a celebration of that hurt and pain of becoming: 'You are so full of rain. / There is so much that's growing. / Hallelujah to your weather veins. / Hallelujah to the ache. / Hallelujah to the full and to the fall, / to the pull and to the pain.

/ Hallelujah to the grace / in the body, / in every cell of us all' (105). These final verses, with the hallelujah anaphora in almost all of them, become a chant of praise to the possibilities of being, which encompass everything physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual, positive and negative, that the act of living fully and willfully entails.

In a move similar to Gibson's, transsexual writer, activist, and performer Julia Serano turns to a prayer of sorts, an open letter to God begging for forgiveness for her absolute failure to fit in. At the age of 12, biologically male Serano was aware of her strange(r)ness, as her body, like that of the stranger, was out of place, her gender at odds with the sex that she had been assigned at birth. Written and recorded in 2003 at the Berkeley Poetry Slam, "Sleeping sickness" reveals the confusion of having girl thoughts in a boy's head.¹² The performance poem distills confusion and self-hatred, and ultimately becomes an indictment against that god that Serano used to pray to who tortured the child and did not help her when she asked 'over and over again / to please either turn me into a girl / or else make these thoughts stop' (2007b, 380). However, a grown-up Serano brings the long prayer-monologue to an end and, with this gesture, makes the decision to stop keeping the secrets that have hurt her so much that she sometimes prays that she be cured of that sleeping sickness 'because the last few years / of living in absolute shame / and unbelievable pain / has made me fearless enough to finally say / amen' (381). The amen that she had never seemed to be able to say is now uttered to embrace her strange(r)ness by signaling her physical and social transitioning.

Gender strangers face numerous challenges on the stage, particularly if, like Serano, they have transitioned, since they have to grapple with different audience expectations and assumptions. If they mention that they are trans, they have to deal with all the stereotypes and misconceptions about transsexual women. This is the reason that led Serano to explore ways in which she could exploit these presumptions in order to challenge the audience. Performing spoken word has not only offered her a way to confront commonplace beliefs about femaleness and maleness but has also provided her with an opportunity to debunk many of the myths and prejudices that people harbor toward transsexual women. It likewise offers audiences the possibility to identify with her, with

¹² See performance at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ilk7-TF11g%29+r>

her perspective ‘if only for a brief moment’, a moment that, although rare, is vital, for it is then that ‘we can transcend borders and bring the audience into our world. It allows us the rare chance to exceed other people’s expectations’ (Serano 2007a, 377). In a similar vein, Thea Hillman declares that performance has allowed her to graphically address the medical condition of intersexuality and the social repercussions of having a different kind of body, genitals, and sexual development. Hillman has performed about intersex issues using her creative writing and performance as an activist tool to urge academics, doctors, activists, and parents to create ‘a world free of shame, secrecy, and nonconsensual intersex surgeries’ (2007, 228). She claims that not only are the audience entertained, but more importantly, they are drawn into her world via art, and thus are ‘viscerally educated’ (229).

These artists’ performances on the stage have challenged audiences’ stereotypical views of gender strangers by making the poets’ words resonate with them. Likewise, in their public speaking and shows at venues beyond the stage—at colleges and universities, international meetings, medical conventions, conferences, organization fundraisers, etc.—they have also brought much-needed visibility and attention to queer, inter- and transgender issues and perspectives.

5. Conclusions

Feminist performance artists have employed the spoken word genre as an instrument to interrogate not only the multiple manifestations of gender inequality in the genre itself, but also in society at large, as well as to contest the (hetero)normativity of the sociocultural system. Following Georg Simmel’s and Sara Ahmed’s theorizations of the stranger, this chapter has shown how in their paradoxical relation of nearness and remoteness to the group, these poets embody the figure of the familiar stranger, who, in their non-normativity is recognized as not belonging, as being out of place. However, their condition of strange(r)ness, freed from prejudices and biases, enables them to have a more objective perspective on the world around and therefore to identify and contest the entrenched sexism that dominates all areas of women’s life experiences. In pointing out moments of sexism, they become feminist killjoys, both estranged by happiness and killing other people’s fantasy of happiness. The poets embody the concept of the willful

subject, the one who fails ‘to comply with those whose authority is given’ (Ahmed 2014, 1), who seeks to bring what already exists into consciousness and hence transform it. In performing their willful acts of defiance and the trespassing of normativity, performance poets ultimately become *unwilling* strangers in patriarchal terms. Willfulness becomes for them a source of empowerment, despite the oftentimes negative consequences that refusal to adjust to or comply with the norm may imply. By being willful, performance poets are not only making things move, reorient, but through their affective encounter with the audience, they open up future possibilities, creating more positive, egalitarian, and inclusive lifeworlds.

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