

## Spanish Performance Poetry: The Old, the New and the Audience<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

Spanish contemporary poetry has gathered significant attention by critics and consumers of poetry alike in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the one hand, critics have voiced both concern and delight about the current state of Spanish lyric, and depending on their personal opinion on the matter poetry has been deemed to be perishing or to be experiencing great vitality. On the other hand, readers have been able to enjoy poetry in many varied shapes and forms: in the traditional format of the printed book –with well-established but also emerging publishing houses–, poetry online –particularly fruitful on Instagram and Twitter, with hundreds of thousands of followers–,<sup>2</sup> or poetry in performance –poetry recitals, poetry slams, jam poetry sessions, transmedia poetry–, to name but a few. What is obvious to anyone working and carrying out research on the field, however, is the fact that Spanish contemporary poetry is going through one of the most interesting periods of the last few decades, surrounded by a very complex context that encompasses a new millennium with multiple crises (economic, political and social) that could have dire consequences for poetry production, dissemination and reception.

One of the most noteworthy manifestations of poetry in Spain at present, both in terms of their popularity and the vitality that they enjoy, is witnessed in live performance poetry, also known as *spoken word* even in the Spanish context. The Anglophone expression of *spoken word* is used as an umbrella term to refer to performance poetry or *perfopoesía*, which is any poetic work that escapes the limits of a page, or, according to García Villarán's description, “la *escenificación del poema escrito*, entendiendo por escenificación el dar forma dramática al texto utilizando o siendo consciente de los elementos que intervienen cuando se recita con y para el público” (García Villarán, 7-20). These performances, it should be noted, usually take place in alternative venues, which remain outside the official or recognised prestigious circles.<sup>3</sup> Poetry recitals have always enjoyed esteem in the Iberian Peninsula (Amorós & Díez Borque) and Chris Perriam already stated that, at the end of the twentieth century, there seemed to be “an audience avid if not for poetry to read in print then certainly for poetry read out in performance and recital” (1999, 198-207). According to this academic, “Spain is especially rich in the fleeting or uncaptured sociocultural moment” (2010, 291-304), and the manifestation of poetry in live events is a perfect example of this, where one can find large audiences that attend events with astonishing regularity. The monthly poetry slams in big cities such as Barcelona and Madrid, for example, attract hundreds of people to their door, which poses a crucial paradox: the many,

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about poetry on the net, which is rapidly expanding, readers should consult the suggested sources (Bagué Quílez, 331-349; Gendolla, 167-177; Gregory 2013, 118-123; Mora 2000; Tortosa; Strickland, 217-221; Mandiberg; Gere).

<sup>3</sup> Prestigious or official circles refer to venues such as the Círculo de Bellas Artes de Madrid or the Ateneo de Madrid, in the case of the Spanish capital, or even the Instituto Cervantes, which are all sites that enjoy official institutional backing and recognition as prestigious cultural spaces.

almost endless, performance poetry events that take place each week and month in Spain have no echo in the critical world –where most publications and research projects focus on written poetry and well-established poets. This has also been the trend, although to a lesser extent, in other parts of the Western World. According to Julia Novak, the lack of attention performance poetry has received has to do not only with the preference of printed text over orality, but also with the nature of live poetry: this poetry deals with literary, musical (speech melody, rhythm) and theatrical (mimic, gesture) features, which “complicate its unambiguous allocation to traditional research disciplines and review categories” (Novak 2011, 11). In order to address the lack of critical attention received by performance poetry, this article will consider *perfopoesía* in Spain –focusing on poetry slams– and the role the audience plays in it, paying special attention to the old and the new in this form of verse. The traditional and the new features of poetry slams will be analysed to discuss the potential of performance poetry to alter the poetic landscape of the new millennium.

## 2. Performance Poetry: The Old and the New in Poetry Slams

Poetry recitals or poetry readings are arguably the most well-known form of perfopoesy, although at present poetry slams and jam poetry sessions are the events that seem to capture the public’s interest more easily and attract the highest audience numbers in Spain and around the Western World. The origins of poetry jam sessions are found in jazz jam sessions, particularly prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s in the United States, when musicians would gather to play together spontaneously. When applied to poetry, it becomes an informal performance open to anyone who wants to take part –and usually scheduled around the performance of an invited poet– and in which participants are regularly allowed to read a maximum of three poems, although this may vary according to the specific rules of the organisers (Cullell 2019, 33). A poetry slam, unlike a poetry jam session, is a ranked competition (Somers-Willett, 16-38), although they are also open and democratic in nature, welcoming anyone who wishes to sign up until the available 12 spaces are filled. In poetry slams there is a time limit of three minutes –and ten seconds of grace– per performance, and participants are not allowed props, costumes or external music. The scores are normally awarded by five judges selected at random from the audience –the selection of judges also varies according to the organisers, although one of the most recurrent methods is casting five little foam balls to the audience and whoever catches them becomes one of the judges. The judges write their scores in chalk blackboards or whiteboards after each performance, and display them to the audience at the same time to avoid being influenced by the other judges’ scores. Participants are eliminated in rounds until they reach a final, and the winner receives a small prize –sometimes a DVD, a t-shirt, a book or just a free drink. Poetry slams first appeared in Chicago in the 1980s, engineered by Marc Smith. The original venue was the *Get Me High Lounge*, until the event moved to the *Green Mill Jazz Club*. Since then, however, slams have spread all over the world, as has their popularity (Cullell 2019, 33). The creation of Poetry Slam, Inc. in 1997 –the official non-profit organisation that oversees the international coalition of poetry slams– proved the success and popularity of this poetry, and there are now several national and world poetry slam championships, arguably making poetry slams “the most successful poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” (Gregory 2008, 63-80).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The vast popularity of poetry slams in the Western world was confirmed with the production and broadcasting of *Slam* (1997) and *Slamnation* (1998), a film and a documentary directed by Marc Levin.

The live poetry boom has also been felt in Spain, and poetry slams have become a total phenomenon in 21st-century Iberia. Poetry Slam España, the organisation that manages the national network of slams and promotes the activities, events and initiatives that they organise, comprises at the moment 18 affiliated cities (Barcelona, Bilbao, Cantabria, Ciudad Real, Granada, Hospitalet, Jaén, Lleida, Llobregat, Madrid, Mallorca, Murcia, Oviedo, Santa Coloma de Gramanet, Toledo, Valencia, Vitoria and Zaragoza), although there are many others that hold poetry slams outside Poetry Slam España. Despite being competitive in its functioning, poetry slams have attempted to steer away from its contest status, trying to focus on the poetry that is created and presented in these events. In 1994, during the American poetry slam national championship celebrated in Asheville, the slammaster or MC, Alan Wolf, coined a now famous sentence: “The points are not the point; the point is poetry.” Wolf’s phrase, which quickly became a mantra for slammers around the globe, managed to condense the essence or the main aim of the poetry slam: what is important is not who wins but rather the poetry that flourishes in these events. Notwithstanding this, many publications have preferred to emphasise the combative or confrontational aspect of this verse. As examples we have *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* (Mex Glazner). Following on this trend, Tyler Hoffman (202) compares it to a sports event, particularly boxing or wrestling, and Holman considers it the Olympic Games of poetry (15-21), an event of great social relevance and impact. When looking at Spanish publications, newspapers and magazines, readers can easily appreciate a clear emphasis placed on the fight to acquire a prize, with openly confrontational vocabulary being used in the titles and subtitles of the works: *Combate a verso libre* (S.S.), *Batallas de rimas poéticas* (Arenas), *Batalla de versos a micrófono abierto* (Pérez), *El club poético de la lucha* (González Valero), or even *Duelo de poetas en los bares* (Fernández) or *Duelo de versos* (Gallardo). Although this might very well be a marketing strategy, making use of sensational and attention-grabbing stories, it nonetheless distorts the idea of a poetry slam for anyone that has not attended an event of this kind (Cullell 2018, 239-257). Werner Herzog, keeping clear of any competitive mention, prefers to describe poetry slams from the point of view of the audience, those standing in front of the poet waiting for them to start and share their cultural products:

Imagínese un escenario minúsculo y un micrófono. Al pie del escenario se agolpan jóvenes espectadores, sus chaquetas y bolsos. Detrás, en mesitas, con sus copas de agua tónica, cerveza o vino, el variopinto público en general charlando. Hace oscuro, un solo foco ciega en el escenario. El aire está cargado de expectación. Se siente[n] las ganas de reír y compartir. La camarera sirve las últimas copas. De repente el silencio. Es el momento: el primer poeta sube al escenario, comienza el *Slam* (Herzog, 9).<sup>5</sup>

Despite its popularity, no general consensus has yet been reached with regards to the genealogy of performance poetry, and this obviously also applies to poetry slams. Whilst some scholars consider slams a continuation or rewriting of past oral traditions (Boudreau, 1-15; Chivite Tortosa, 72-83; Mezquita & García Villarán; Iglesias Lodaes, 47-58; Manzano Franco, 85-105; Orviz, 54-56; Teuma; García Villarán, 7-20), others oppose the idea and are keen to see it as “a radical alternative to poetry as endorsed by

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HBO *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* (premiered in 2002) proved the ultimate success of this kind of performance poetry.

<sup>5</sup> Readers might also be interested in seeing the very sleek 3-minute video that Poetry Slam Madrid produced to explain and promote their poetry slam: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zr9Y2Y0M8as>>.

academic theory” (Casas and Gräbner, 12). Slams understood as a return to the past and not a new phenomenon, find in the competitive aspect of this poetry its strongest point, establishing the Golden Age *justas literarias* as the seed of the contemporary slams. As Damon claims, referring to the *justas poéticas* or the *certámenes literarios*, “while slams have inaugurated some folks into a recent understanding of poetry as a competitive sport [...] verbal competition has a respectable history in many oral traditions” (Damon, *apud* Martínez Cantón, 385-401). Dani Orviz, one of the most well-known slammers in Spain at the moment, describes slams as a possible “plagio de cosas que ya existían hace miles de años”, ya que “competiciones directas de poetas han existido desde que la poesía es poesía e incluso antes. ¿Recitales con el tiempo limitado? Lo mismo. ¿Poetas especializados en directo, que utilicen los recursos básicos de la voz y el cuerpo? Ídem del lienzo” (54-56).<sup>6</sup> The *justas* and *certámenes* enjoyed great popularity in the Iberian Peninsula during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and they were celebrated during religious festivities and royal family celebrations, also encompassing festivities of a more popular nature later on. These Golden Age events were victims of very negative criticism, most of it centred around the lack of proper literary value in the poem awarded a prize, which is actually one of the arguments that the detractors of poetry slams have been using, or the lack of innovation because of the forms and topics instructed to use.<sup>7</sup> Just at slams now, the *justas poéticas* were events that prompted very interesting social responses, but they also acted in different ways to bring together a community. According to Abascal Vicente, the *justas* were

todo un espectáculo que ha llamado la atención por la complejidad de la respuesta social que provocaba (varios días o semanas de fiesta con una gran participación), por el grado de elaboración artística de esa respuesta [...] y porque la poesía aparece por todas partes como ordenadora de esa composición. Pese a que los poemas que concursan son productos de la escritura, se han visto rasgos de oralidad en los textos por estar concebidos para una lectura en voz alta, y se ha visto, sobre todo, la oralidad espectacular del acto final en el que se resuelve el concurso, con la gente congregada en un escenario fastuoso (un local noble profusamente decorado), los jueces sentados en un lugar eminente y una única persona designada para hablar que hace una introducción chistosa, lee un discurso sobre el tema del certamen, lee los poemas seleccionados y la sentencia, a veces versificada, en medio de notas jocosas y encomiásticas, todo ello con pausas musicales que revisten el acto de solemnidad (Abascal Vicente, 249-375).

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<sup>6</sup> Many events have also visually built on these links to the past. See for example the Ávila Poetry Slam advert from December 2019 (<<https://www.facebook.com/poetryslamavilaNEW/photos/a.275247816682002/490833645123417/?type=3&theater>>) or the ‘Joglars S. XXI’ advert by Poetry Slam Barcelona from June 2019 (<<https://www.facebook.com/PoetrySlamBarcelona/videos/2348645145416877/>>), both of them displaying castles to be conquered by knights (the poets).

<sup>7</sup> One outstanding example of such criticism can be found in *El Quijote*, when it refers to the *justas literarias*: “y con todo el mal cariño que muestra tener a la poesía de romance, le tiene agora desvanecidos los pensamientos el hacer una glosa a cuatro versos que le han enviado de Salamanca, y pienso que son de justa literaria” (Cervantes Saavedra, 633). Back in present times, Harold Bloom has probably been the most outspoken critic with a negative view of poetry slams, vehemently proclaiming their depravity: “it’s all gone to hell. I can’t bear these accounts I read in the Times and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other. [...] This isn’t even silly; it is the death of art” (*apud* Barber, 370-402).

The parallels with poetry slams are copious, not just in the structure of the events (both had a master of ceremony), but also in the significance attributed to orality and to oral components when creating the poems that will be read in the *justas* and the slams. The oral-orientated elements obviously determine how the public receives the poem and perceptively tip the scales towards a specific sort of performance. With regards to poetry slams, the aforementioned performance skills have been greatly criticised because much slam poetry might depend on sheer acting ability rather than its actual poetic text or words (Kennedy, 70-77). As Julia Novak stated (2011, 19), orality and literacy are the opposed forms of cultural expression in the so-called Great Division (Ong), and despite such debate being abandoned decades ago, traces of the dichotomy between the oral and the printed word in poetry and critical work around it can still be found (Novak 2011, 18). With regards to slams, on the one hand, Novak identifies this continued division in the idea of the poem as a stable artefact, tangible, timeless, independent from the context surrounding it. On the other hand, audiences find the performative poem, understood as an ephemeral process, time-sensitive, one that depends on its execution and disappears immediately after its performance, and something that very often is seen just as a version of its original written form (19). It is bridging this divide in our understanding of performance poetry what seems to be the issue: “[n]uestra sociedad, tan apegada a la escritura, parece en muchos casos sentirse incómoda con las performances poéticas no grabadas, que no pueden reproducirse posteriormente” (Martínez Cantón, 385-401), a matter that also refers to the ways we read, listen and approach literature at the moment.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. The Audience

Performance poetry has changed not just the way in which readers and audiences approach and understand live verse, but also their role in the creation of this poetry. In such occurrences the presence of an audience or a public is essential –their presence is needed for the progression of the event, as they have the power to dictate its functioning, its success or its failure as a piece of *perfopoesía*. Novak attempts to summarise this experience stating that “live poetry is characterised by the direct encounter and physical co-presence of the poet-performer and the audience. Interestingly, the encounter occurs in a specific spatio-temporal situation, and it is this definite ‘situatedness’ that constitutes the performance’s essence as shared experience” (2011, 173). The shared experience that live poetry offers, as mentioned by Novak, is almost impossible to retain in videos or audios, and is best experienced in the actual live event. Whereas a written piece can remain in the shelves of a library for decades or even centuries awaiting for the moment to be discovered and read, performance poetry is marked by an essential simultaneity. Performance poetry

is marked by the simultaneity and collectivity of its production and reception. It depends on the common effort of poet and audience to make it happen in the here and now, and on the direct influence they have on each other by way of their physical presence. Audience members may be provoked to smile, sigh, or clap enthusiastically, by the poet as well as by each other. They may in turn provoke a poet to alter the tempo of his/her delivery. They may prompt him/her to change the order of his/her pieces, or to skip a line. They may drown out parts of a poem in loud laughter and request that other poems be repeated. A different

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<sup>8</sup> Due to the scope of this article, the issue of the contemporary reader cannot be approached. Readers interested in the topic should refer to *El lectoespectador* (Mora 2012) and *La lira de las masas: Internet y la crisis de la ciudad letrada. Una aproximación a la poesía de los nativos digitales* (Rodríguez-Gaona) for further readings.

audience means a different performance, as anyone who has seen the ‘same’ theatre performance or heard the ‘same’ poem twice on different occasions might testify (Novak 2011, 173).

Probably no other form of oral poetry performance requires a more active participation from the audience than a poetry slam. Without even mentioning the role of some of the members of the audience as judges of the poets performing on stage, the audience is not simply a spectator but rather a participant or even a co-author, a co-producer. A double dynamic is established in performance poetry, as audience members do not only react to the poet on the stage but also to each other’s presence. In his study on the semiotics of theatre and drama, Keir Elam named three necessary elements in order to achieve an homogenous communication between members of an audience: proper stimulation (a burst of laughter in the audience will prompt more laughter in the audience); reaffirmation (spectators corroborate their reaction looking at everyone else’s reaction); and integration (there must be unity amongst the audience) (Elam, 86). It can be argued, then, that the five chosen judges are there in name only, as the process encompasses the totality of the attendees, and their responses to the event will greatly depend on the responses of everybody else.

In the case of poetry slams in Spain, audiences are eager to listen to the poet on stage with whom they have a direct contact, and hundreds of attendees flock to the monthly events in cities like Madrid and Barcelona, crowding the bars and public spaces that poetry has infiltrated in the past decade. And poets obviously use this immediate connection for their own benefit: it is usual practice among slammers to start their performance with a *captatio benevolentiae*, and offer some contextualisation of the poem. Such is the case of *¡Vámonos!*, by Pablo Cortina. Cortina has performed this poem in many occasions –many of them available on videos in YouTube and other social platforms, which allow the reader to appreciate how a live poem changes depending on the dynamics of the audience and space, how they are able to shape the development of the performance–, and he regularly employs a *captatio benevolentiae* when he comes on stage. In many occasions he also asks the public to help with the poem, in the case of this particular composition shouting and chanting “monos, monos, monos, monos.” The aforementioned interaction between the poet and the audience, as well as the words chanted, set the tone of the poem, imitating a bunch of primates. The primates are the main metaphoric and symbolic characters in the poem and an essential element when reading and interpreting the word play, the semantics and the themes in the composition. Asking the public to recite with the poet is a prime example of the principles that Elam listed for a homogenous response in the audience: the collective “monos, monos, monos, monos”, unites the audience creating a collective that surpasses each individual. And this united audience that Cortina invokes at the start of his performance continues in the first person plural of the poem, the *nosotros* alluded in each line.

¡Vámonos!

¡Yo soy monórkico!

¡Qué nos gobierne un mono!  
Un plátano sería su cetro, un árbol  
sería su trono.

Que nos gobierne un mono.  
¡Vamos a la monorkía!

¡Vámonos! ¡Va, monos!

Fundemos un nuevo partido mono  
y llamémoslo Va, monos,  
llamémoslo  
¡Vámonos! ¡Va!  
¡Monos!  
¡Vámonos!

¡Vámonos por las ramas!  
¡Vámonos por el morro!  
¡Vámonos por donde nos venga en gana!

¡Remoloneemos entre lianas!  
¡Remonoloneemos!

Dejemos crecer la selva por debajo de los monos.  
¡Hay que ilegalizar Podemos!  
¡Podemos no, hay que dejar crecer todo!  
Que el tallo crezca, la flor de lys florezca, la enredadera enrede,  
que al suelo llegue de cuando en cuando un átomo de nada  
y se lo repartan entre todos.  
¡Hay que enredar!  
Que nadie vea qué todo es ese.  
No digas todo, di tó, como mucho,  
¡no aprendas a leer, no aprendas a pensar,  
no aprendas, quédate abajo, subnormal!  
Sub-lo normal.  
¡No subas, sé sub,  
no digas todo, di tó como mucho, sub,  
di  
tó.

¡Quédate ahí! ¡Mira qué mono tó!

Monorkía.  
Parlamonamento.  
Presidente del Gobiérmono.  
Tribunal Suprémono.

Demonocracia,  
desinformonoación,  
capitalísmonomonomonomonomonomó

Monosterios, monostros,  
monondial de fútbol, monondial de balonmono,  
pormonografía...

Monomentos conmemorativos de nuestra legitimidad  
monórkica...

¡Un mono ecuestre en la Puerta del Sol!  
 ¡Un mono ecuestre en la Plaza Mayor!  
 Un mono emérito campechámono,  
 un mono monolítico, monodélico, con estudios,  
 con barba y ojos azules,  
 sin barba y ojos azules,  
 un mono que contrae matrimonio con una princesimia asturiámona  
 y tienen la niña más mona del mundo  
 ¿Leo? ¡Nor! Yo soy monórkico, no leo.  
 ¡Que nos gobierne un mono!  
 ¡Vámonos! ¡Va, monos!

Que el himmono de España sea  
 ‘*Yo soy el rey del jazz a go-go,  
 el más mono rey del swing,  
 más alto ya no he de subir  
 y eso te hace sufrir*’

¡Subvencionémonos! ¡Retransmitámonos!  
 ¡Autoalabémonos, lucrémonos!  
 ¡Amémonos mientras los súbditos nos aclaman,  
 nos aman, nos amamantan!  
 [*mamo*]

‘*¡A tu salud, -súbdito-  
 dímelo a mí, -súbdito, di tó, di-  
 si el trono a mí,  
 me lo traerías tú!*’  
 (Cortina: 21-24)<sup>9</sup>

The pearls of laughter among the audience when Cortina as a sort of Master of Ceremony orders the public to stop –all of a sudden– their collective proclamation of “monos, monos, monos, monos” is also part of the stimulation (when the laughter of some of the members in the audience simply provokes more laughter) and the reaffirmation (one’s response is asserted by the others’ responses) that Elam referred to. In each of his performances, Pablo Cortina elicits and awaits for a reaction from the public throughout the piece, making obvious references to the social and political reality with which the public will identify –in *¡Vámonos!* the references to the royal family, or to the political party *Podemos*, among others. The lexic play and the use of neologisms conform some of the most amusing and hilarious moments in the poem, and so do the lines that paraphrase the song *Quiero ser como tú*, from *El Libro de la selva*, which create parallels with some of the characters in the poem and the story. Equally, the dramatic pauses that regularly pepper Cortina’s poetic performances –when he looks directly at the audience and patiently awaits a reaction– exemplify the symbiotic relationship between poet and public. Cortina, in a short essay included in *Contra los “Slammers”*: *12 partituras, un poema y un discurso*, states that the trust and the role that audience members are given in poetry slams are nothing but “una muestra de

<sup>9</sup> Since there is no way to experience a live poetry performance in an article, the written form of the poem is reproduced here. For a more accurate –although still lacking– understanding of it, readers can search online for the many recordings of the poem.



respeto por la audiencia” (85). The direct contact between spectators and the poet facilitates this collective ‘nosotros’ that emerges from the poem. The conjugations of the imperative in the first person plural in every stanza of the poem cleverly creates the *monos* that harmonises the rhythm and the fluidity of the poem in both its content and form. The move from the first person singular –the poet that jumps on the stage– to the first person plural –the audience that joins him to chant “monos, monos, monos, monos”– becomes the main element in the poem and ensures the integration of the audience from the very beginning, creating a community that embodies the one recreated in the poem and ruled by a monkey. Interestingly, Novak also understands the use of the first person plural as elemental in performance poetry, as “a sense of direct audience address will also depend on the poem’s deixis. Apostrophe –the use of the pronoun ‘you’– has a much greater effect in live poetry, where ‘you’ finds a real-life target and can be understood as implicating the present audience in the speech act” (Novak 2012, 375). In the process of eliminating an individual *yo poético*, Cortina is solving, at least in part, one of the most problematic elements in the relationship between author, actor and poetic voice in poetry performance. In a theatrical play, unlike the slam, the actor is representing a very specific role and there is a clear distance between the person on the stage and the character she or he is representing. In a poetry slam, however, this distinction does not exist or is incredibly nebulous as the spectators cannot differentiate between the poet who created the composition, the person reciting it, and the poetic voice that appears in the poem.

The relationship between the poet and the audience has been linked to the relationship established between athletes and the audience in some sports. For example, Tyler Hoffman highlights the similarities between poetry slams and wrestling events. For Hoffman, this correlation has to do precisely with the public:

Wrestlers elicit responses from the crowd and react to the yelled comments of fans seated nearby; fans are encouraged to support their heroes by cheering loudly when they are in a temporarily compromised position. On television one notices that the audience at these events is lighted as deeply as possible, indicating that they, too, are conceived of as performers in the ritual. In this way, *communitas* is enacted, with audience members brought closer together through their common understanding of the events transpiring in the ring. But if American professional wrestling is a ‘dramatic ritual... communicated through the use of instrumental symbols, composite symbols, and stereotypes whose meanings act to reinforce cultural myth and to reinforce in-equalities,’ the dramatic rite of the slam seeks to dismantle cultural myths of identity and to abolish (if temporarily) inequalities. In effect, it works to escape from its own status as commodity spectacle (Hoffman, 202-203).

According to Hoffman, it is the poet who incites, in the first place, a reaction among the audience. Once she or he achieves such reaction, the audience becomes part of the performance, not just as a judge –as would be the case in a slam– but also as a part of what guides the performance and removes differences and hierarchies between the poet and the public. There are very few other ways of engaging the audience more effective than the witnessing of an event where one participant will be crowned the winner, and where part of the audience has to choose the best performance. It is worth mentioning that the competitive nature and the judgment do impact quite positively on the literary quality of these performances –despite how unorthodox or rudimentary the selection process might be. This can somewhat counteract the severe criticism that this sort of poetry has attracted, as it has been argued that this poetry can be at times of poor quality

(Arenas, n.p.; Barber, 370-402; Berger, 59-64; Cullell 2015, 547; Ge, 50-51). The selection process in poetry slams is also double-edged as it has an impact on both the poet and the audience. According to Cortina, “el público participa, siente que su opinión también se escucha, sabe que lo que diga se llevará a efecto. Aprende, por tanto, a juzgar con más responsabilidad. Quiere saber más para la próxima vez. Lee más poesía, entre uno y otro slam” (81), so just like in wrestling events, the apparent competitive nature of the slam allows a *communitas* that unites participants, something that transcends the simple view of these events as something that ‘sells’ easily, that is simply very marketable because of the projection it has, to become almost a social movement with great potential for Spanish contemporary poetry (Cullell 2019). Hoffman also states that “slam lives a double life: even as it appeals to the masses through a slick commercialism, much of its poetry defines itself against commodification, and often in sharply satirical ways” (205). As explained above, in the performances of *¡Vámonos!* Cortina encourages the audience to take part in and engage with the poem from the very beginning, cultivating a rapport that will continue until the end of the recital, which creates a sense of community –and equality– amongst the attendants that also includes the poet himself: the public can laugh at him and decide whether he progresses to the final or not.

#### 4. Spaces and Topics

As mentioned at the beginning of the article, poetry slams take place in spaces of a social nature (usually cafes, bars, *bares-librería* or even public spaces like squares) and most of the time they are far removed from prestigious circles and official institutions, which afford a close atmosphere and foster an intimate rapport and exchange with the audience. The atmosphere that is achieved in such spaces actually creates a very specific dynamic that determines to some extent the relationship that the poet will be able to establish with the audience. Because of these spaces the audience also tends to be a mixed one: some attendants are genuinely interested in poetry, others just happen to see it as a plus to a night out with friends, and others just stumble upon it or are there to support friends or family members. The mixed and very heterogeneous nature of this public, then, amplifies the reach of poetry slam: it creates new followers –spectators that had never really considered poetry might become interested in it after attending a performance and discover a new passion–, and very significantly it also fosters the emergence of new ‘producers’ of poetry, allowing people to easily become, at least for a short while, a poet. In this milieu, and fully realising the social potential of this performed poetry (Rivera: 114-123), any member of the audience has the option of taking the stage, and each poet is variously a member of the audience and the one speaking before it (Zitomer, 47-58), thus emphasising the connection and dependency between audience and poets (Arenas, n.p.; Cortina, 80-85; Cullell 2015, 547-561; Laura 2012, n.p.; Quinto 2013, 193-206). Not surprisingly, then, since these performances enact an engagement between people and their social context, the topics displayed in this verse tend to be politically and socially engaged (Zitomer, 47-58), and such was the case in *¡Vámonos!*, where issues about political corruption or the monarchy were tackled. This sort of poetry calls for themes that relate to the interests, concerns and issues of their society: “slam seeks to integrate everyday life and art, slam themes and ‘plots’ deal with everyday issues – family, coming-of-age, and sociopolitical events. [They can] carry an urban vibe, portray a grittier view of life, are counter-mainstream, convey culture, and sport an activist position” (Boudreau, 1-15). This rings particularly true in the Spanish circuit of the moment, where many of the poetry performances deal with the current

economic crisis and public dissatisfaction with the government, giving historical, social and political issues great predominance (Gallardo 2015; Gutiérrez 2014; Laura 2012; Cullell 2019, 83-104). The poetic publications on the crisis so far –see, for instance, *Esto no rima (Antología de poesía indignada)* (Aparicio); *Poetas del 15M* (2011)– or *Las voces del 15-M* (2011) support the idea of a strong connection between cultural activities such as these ones and the economic, social and political crisis. These sessions, therefore, conform to an essential social function: “[t]he spoken-word venue becomes a forum in which participants assert and defend the legitimacy of their social and political views, and the audience is a critical component in the exchange of ideas; their responses to the messages they see and hear help to spark and sustain dialogue” (Ingalls, 99-117). Such an open forum allows poetic activity to surpass its traditional sphere of private personal readings and elitist recitals to reach a very public space. But more importantly, the exceptionally social nature of this poetry endorses a strong civic engagement and a public discourse where the value of poetry far surpasses that centered purely on its literary value. The poem *Más por menos* also by Pablo Cortina, about the price increase in Madrid public transport in 2012, is a perfect example of this:

### Más por menos

En París tienen un metro  
 que mide exactamente un metro.  
 Porque un metro mide un metro  
 cuando mide lo que mide  
 ese metro  
 de París.  
 Un metro justo.  
 Es de platino e iridio, como el kilo,  
 que pesa un kilo exacto, también,  
 por lo mismo.  
 Miden bien, los parisinos,  
 saben medir.  
 Los españoles, a veces,  
 cuando hablamos no medimos,  
 y por eso a una señora del Tea Party madrileño,  
 la llamamos Esperanza.  
 Y por eso la ponemos a medirnos el subsuelo  
 y ellos dicen que un metro  
 de repente  
 es metro y medio,  
 y que con dos euros ibas y volvías  
 y ahora vas y ahí te quedas,  
 que te falta medio metro pa la vuelta.  
 No medimos, es así.

En París, donde los niños,  
 sí.

Los políticos se ríen poniéndonos acertijos  
 como para demostrar que no sabemos medir,  
 que no sabemos sumar, que no sabemos,

ni mucho menos,  
multiplicar.  
Y ahí quería yo llegar:

Más por menos.

Más por menos en cada boca de metro,  
en cada andén, cada vagón.  
Más por menos, nos preguntan,  
y nosotros, madrileños, lo leemos,  
pero no lo respondemos.

Yo recuerdo que cuando era pequeño  
más por menos era menos.

Madrileños...  
¡Madrileños de Madrid! ¡Madrugadores activos!  
decidme en el alba, ¿a quién?  
¿A quién el metro han subido?

Un metro que no se ve porque viaja por debajo,  
el metro en que os apiñáis para viajar al trabajo,  
que es vuestro único país,  
porque no pisáis Madrid hasta que llega el sábado  
y ni siquiera, porque el sábado, cansados,  
os quisierais desterrar a la patria de dormir.

Y llega la líder-esa,  
sonriente, supertiesa,  
que se cae de un helicóptero con Rajoy y sale ilesa,  
y se pone un galardón y brinda con la botella  
cada vez que inaugura un agujero,  
pero nunca pisa el metro porque va por el subsuelo,  
y nosotros, madrileños subterráneos  
pagamos un metro y medio a medio metro  
bajo tierra.  
Mientras vas al trabajo ella baila sobre ti,  
porque tu techo es su suelo y,  
porque tú sueles estar bajo su suela ella suele sonreír.

Y ella salta, y silva y sueña  
y siembra  
y siega.  
Sube, saluda y siente el susurro de la brisa en sus orejas  
insensibles a los siervos de la gleba,  
a los que sostienen todo sin saber lo que sostienen  
más allá de una esperanza a la que tú  
se la pelas,  
que se sienta en una silla  
sola

de su casa SOLariega.  
 Así nos va, bajo ella  
 y su amiga la Botella.  
 Y ahora voy a decir yo lo que no dijeron ellas:

Más por menos significa que os cobramos más  
 por menos, que por menos  
 pagáis más.  
 Más por menos os cobramos  
 más por menos os jodemos  
 más por menos.  
 Y mientras sigáis siendo menos,  
 más menos que Nos, al menos,  
 lo que queramos de Vos,  
 ni más ni menos,  
 eso será lo que haremos.  
 (Cortina, 45-48)

The scathing poem is as derisive towards the politicians involved in the price increase in public transport in Madrid, as it is against the citizens who do not complain about it.<sup>10</sup> The poem starts with some ingenious wordplay around the term *metro*, which in Spanish means both meter and underground. The ambiguous use of word testifies to the ironic message that the poet is sending out to the public, which is reinforced by further wordplay around the same lexical field (“cuando hablamos no medimos”) and the inability of Spaniards to tailor or measure their words when they speak. The poem makes direct and indirect references to right-wing politicians that have had an impact on Madrid and Spain as a whole –Esperanza Aguirre, Ana Botella and Mariano Rajoy, all of them belonging to the Partido Popular– and to events that involved them –such as the comments made by Aguirre about her allegiance to some of the philosophies and ideas of the American Tea Party or the helicopter incident suffered by Aguirre and Rajoy. The line “Más por menos en cada boca de metro” carries with it a reminiscence of post-war social poetry and references to hunger, a clear civic commitment that turns nonetheless into a critique of the citizens of Madrid, who despite being aware of the controversy remain passive in the face of it (“y nosotros, madrileños, lo leemos, / pero no lo respondemos”). Cortina encourages the readers and the audience to engage with the problem –an extremely powerful move when the piece is performed in Madrid itself–, urging them to react (“Madrileños... / ¡Madrileños de Madrid! ¡Madrugadores activos!”). The neologism that Cortina creates with *lider-esa*, mirroring a pejorative feminist equivalent to leader, is the starting point in the division in society that Cortina identifies: the working-class citizens of Madrid (the “siervos de la gleba” that “sostienen todo sin saber lo que sostienen”) belong to the underground, below the surface, while those in power remain above ground and are presented as lofty and aloof (“porque tú sueles estar bajo su suela ella suele sonreír” –the word play also creates an interesting alliteration reminiscent of the sound of the underground and its doors, both literal and symbolic, closing. This then continues in the next stanza with Aguirre, rather than the underground, moving around). The poem, making use of a large dose of

<sup>10</sup> In 2012 Madrid saw the greatest increase in public transport costs in 10 years. Esperanza Aguirre, the then president of the Comunidad de Madrid, had promised to freeze underground, municipal trains and bus prices at the beginning of 2012. She then approved an increase of 11% in the underground and of 29% in the metrobus in April of the same year.

humour, is brought to a close by the words the poet says that the politicians did not dare to utter: “Más por menos os cobramos.” The *menos* from the title becomes here the insult *menos*, which is repeated multiple times in the stanza and easily overlooked or unnoticed by the audience members, who –if paying attention– have a chance to voice their discontent once the poem draws to a close.

As well as political and social issues, this poetry has also displayed more general concerns, such as how social media and society’s obsession with mobile phones can impact and distort our view of the world and the poetry that is being written. This was the topic of the poem *Tengo una pantalla* by slam finalist Dani Orviz during the June poetry slam in Barcelona.<sup>11</sup> The composition laughs at the addictive properties of screens in our lives, and how we engage with them, with a good dose of humour, just as *Más por menos* did. Humour is actually a vital part of performance poetry, as these poetic events have been linked to the carnivalesque or popular laughter as understood by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, mainly because they opposed the official culture, the serious manner or the *tono serio*, of more traditional types of poetry (Cullell 2018, 239-257). The hostility towards a *tono serio* is very much relevant here: this live poetry, according to Laura, “[e]s una forma más humana de ver la poesía, distinta a los Quevedos y Góngoras que conocemos de la literatura del colegio, y llena de gente fascinante” (n.p.), and it manages to erase hierarchies between poets and audience. In this sense, and according to García Rodríguez, we witness here an “entrecruzamiento festivo de voces y cuerpos hacia la instalación transitoria de un mundo invertido, donde los/as marginados/as *acceden al trono por un día*” (121-130) where the main aim is sharing a cultural product. The aesthetic traits of this poetry also establish great parallels with the ‘habla carnavalesca’, as we have seen in the poems by Pablo Cortina:

A contrapelo de lo grave y lo elevado, la carnavalización en el hablar instala – siempre transitoriamente– un tono pedestre, rústico, que sin embargo no elimina la posibilidad de determinado *vuelo poético*. Suele degradar lo abstracto. Reconoce la elegancia en el decir, pero también la desmitifica: la hace *respirar* y participar en el banquete. Un diálogo o encuentro carnavalizado, entonces, comulga con la vida mediante un rebajamiento que absorbe el mundo concreto al tiempo que lo renueva. Juega con el mundo. Lo adorna incluso, casi siempre de forma estrafalaria. Recomienda constantemente y no suscribe por supuesto grandes pretensiones espirituales (Mancuso, 126).

It is the encounter between the audience and the poet that marks a crucial difference here: the audience is requested to take part and participate in the performance, laughing, chanting, loudly agreeing or disagreeing with what is being said on the stage. The prosaic tone of the poems does not negate the lyricism of the lines, and the poet effortlessly creates a rhythm and different word plays that lead to a symbolic renewal of the ape world and the metre/underground in the compositions.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the competitive light under which poetry slams have been cast, slams are not fights or warlike spectacles. In fact, the use of warring or martial-like vocabulary when referring to these events might be associated with a desire to link them to the tradition of the *justas* or *certámenes literarios*, anchoring them to a specific genealogy that “enables it to be packaged and branded as a marketable product, removed from the stigma which is perceived to plague public perceptions of poetry” (Gregory 2008, 69).

<sup>11</sup> The performance can ironically be seen in Poetry Slam Barcelona social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook.

In this way, something that might be classed as new and far removed from more traditional verse can be presented as a fashionable return to the past that draws on its social nature. Equally, this is displayed as a movement designed to reach a wide public, but also as one that survives because of its public, much in line with early oral poetry and that in principle is satisfied to remain in its oral sphere (Cullell 2019, 105-131). The old and the new combine here to create a cultural product that makes the most of its literary tradition and the technological advances in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to promote the events, giving them great visibility and relevance and playing a crucial role in the marketisation of this cultural product.<sup>12</sup> In his fascinating article “5 facetas (entre muchas otras) del poetry slam: Un análisis bipolar y contradictorio”, Dani Orviz provides a summary of the perfect communion between the old and the new in poetry slams, highlighting the role of the audience in this coming together:

Una colorida fiesta de la palabra, una celebración del entusiasmo creativo primordial y una comunión directa entre la audiencia y unos poetas que, dentro de sus capacidades y a su manera, han logrado arrancarle a las instituciones y academias su definición de poesía como algo estático, intocable y alejado del público general, para devolverla a su condición de herramienta comunicativa y de expresión de una realidad cercana y palpable. Unos poetas que, día a día y a fuerza de subirse a las tablas, aprenden a pasos agigantados a ser mejores escribiendo y transmitiendo, a labrar su voz y a luchar por hacer poderoso su mensaje (Orviz, 54-56).

Anchoring slam poetry in the past provides a credible genealogy that allows it to argue for its continuation while actively updating the poetic form via the participation of the audience and approaching relevant political, historical and social issues. Slam poetry “puede ser y es todo lo antes expresado: una mierda del tamaño de un piano, y lo más maravilloso que le ha pasado últimamente a la poesía, y un burdo plagio de algo que ya existía hace miles de años, y algo nuevo, fresco y emocionante, y todas estas cosas a la vez y muchísimas cosas más” (Orviz, 56). At present, a moment in which Spanish poetry –particularly performance poetry– is enjoying great vitality, we should be using this visibility to promote Spanish poetry in general, exploring the potential this has to genuinely support and endorse peninsular poetry in all its forms, even outside its borders.<sup>13</sup> Proper critical and academic attention is essential to develop its potential and benefit the health and status of poetry more widely. In turn, this could provide a more comprehensive filter of quality in these events and allow this poetry to be seen as a cultural product worthy of public and academic attention, carrying on poetry into the new decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and ensuring the continuity of the genre.

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<sup>12</sup> The dissemination of this poetry is extremely wide-reaching, and the ways in which performance poetry events have been promoted in the last decade or so have become even more varied, evolving into modes of influence, guidance, inspiration and impact. According to José Luis Morante, “[e]l alcance global de los medios de comunicación revitaliza de forma continua el aire creativo del momento porque acerca las actividades de otros ámbitos lingüísticos y anima el sistema poético vigente con ampliaciones [...]. La página Web y el blog facilitan las necesidades de expresión y la difusión inmediata de la identidad del autor” (11-12). And of course organisers, poets and attendants also promote the events via their social media platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter), and are part of the marketisation of this cultural product.

<sup>13</sup> Poetry Slam España has been highly successful in international events. In 2012 Davi Orviz won the European Poetry Slam Championship, and Spain also won the group contest in the same competition in 2013. In 2017 Margalida Followthelida won bronze. Just in May this year, Dani Orviz was crowned winner of the 2020 World Cup of Poetry Slam.

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