

Poetic Terrorism and the Politics of Spoken Word

by Kedrick James

Late teens, early 1980s, and first gorging on poetry because it was the only thing that made sense, I became deeply enthused by hearing poems, as much as by reading them: to experience poetry as immanent, in synaesthetic plenty, all writing, reading, listening, speaking, watching, touching, tasting and smelling of poetry was involved. Poets whose work was about all the things language could do, and all the ways of doing it, really appealed to me. Among Canadian poets, I was not left wanting. Amazing work had already been achieved in the experimental spirit of the sixties and seventies: sound, visual, concrete and performance poetry; experimental theatre; choral and improvised forms; dub; and small press activism had all contributed to a robust literary environment. Best of all, we had great mentors and lots of critical work published to base our work on, to push the envelope toward an ever-more imaginative and unbridled poetic passion. One followed the work of bpNichol, Steve McCaffery, Lillian Allen, bill bissett, Roy Kiyooka and so many more, set free to consider far-reaching visions of poetry's future. It was this openness to experimentation, this breadth of imagination, that made Canadian poetry a wonderful ride that cost very little money and took you a long way.

Spoken word eviscerated what remained of this experimental Canadian poetics and of the concomitant 1980s revolutions in independent publishing and performance poetry. By the 1990s, televised media were finally catching up with the poets, and it became possible for poets (much more so than for poetry) to be featured on the news. The predominant concern of the media, and of the poets as well, was that somehow, by trickery or magic, poetry was actually attracting audiences. It seemed as if poetry might finally be ready to occupy a role in the entertainment industry, not just the cubby-hole of the lifetime book club. Compelled to see the broader face of an art form supposedly sequestered away and privatized by Marxist academics, increasing numbers of poets lined up to perform at the usual bars, bookstores, coffee houses and art galleries. Spoken word was new and vital, a freeing of the public to speak with conviction across difference and alienation, a rending of the media veil. The thrill of exposure: poetry of experiment and edification had given way to poetry of enterprise and entertainment.

But just how much was hype? Was it magic or chicanery? Let's face it: calling spoken word new is a blatant oxymoron, unless we treat spoken word as a recently invented genre of artistic practice. Invented for what, by whom? Spoken word rebelled against poetry, poetry of the old, cold, controlled. In what ways is spoken word not

poetry? New is not enough to distinguish it. Trumping the modernist curse of Pound's "make it new," spoken word gave us "make it news": *be news and newsworthy*, the mantra. Spoken word, from the get-go, was about spin. Enter the "now aesthetic," the latest and greatest thing, the attention net. Now aesthetic is here, embodied, sensational—come-and-get-it aesthetic. The "look, mom, no book" performance praxis. Now aesthetic plays in the market place of people paying attention—the fame button—consumer politics, D.I.Y. culture, sensational testimonies. Everyone's doing it. What gets talked about? Spoken word. And who's paying attention? Audience, just enough, never enough. How much is being paid? Events, festivals, documentaries, features and spots, ad revenue, recording contracts, career and professional planning, public worship at the altar of success. The buzz, the biz, the boss, the best. Who's competing? Jihad, Johnny Depp, Honda, Nike, Dell, Bell, car bomb Baghdad and the channel changer.

Spoken word takes over suddenly. It enters popular culture in the mid 1990s on the coattails of *MTV Unplugged*, as emperor Poetry's new clothes, with the allure of live audiences and being in the raw moment of verbal prowess. "Them's fightin' wurdz." *RAW is WAR* poetry. *Survivor* poetry. *COPS* poetry on the streets, grit in its teeth. I started working the buses as a guerrilla poet, spreading the word for the morning commuter crowd. I recall Neil Eustache yelling into a microphone, "you suck," and whispering, "ga-sso-liiine," over and over the Gorge in George, Washington for Lollapalooza's Reverend Mudd Spoken Word stage; versifying street youth taking over the pedants' podium, rocking the Railway Club or the Ritz; AWOL Love Vibe carving up Vancouver's sky train with double-time poly-vocal diatribes; Clifton Joseph blowing tweeters, eardrums and minds in the Metro Public Library; Alice Tepexcuintle swaying crowds with the oolalooloo chant of the sturgeon poem, sleeper hit of ages, sing-song time bomb. Spoken word has a lean and competitive edge. This edge is profoundly realized in slam poetry, spoken word's prodigal daughter. Through slam, spoken word reaches out, touches a broad cultural and social nerve, becomes symbolic of 1990s in-your-face zeitgeist: survival of the fittest rhetoric, the fastest phrase, shining rhyme, winners and whiners. It was weaned on capitalism.

Spoken word also arrives on the coattails of hip hop's growing sub-urban market share, testifying to disillusionment, word gangsters fighting the plight of African Americans with a mic and two turntables, but it takes the rap, leaves the rest. Rap's subaltern credibility adds enough appeal to turn slam and/or emcee competitions into motion picture blockbusters. Spoken word draws on everything from folkies like Leonard Cohen to performance artists like Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Laurie Anderson. The influence of punk is also considerable, both because mid-life punkers such as Henry Rollins, Jello Biafra and Excene Cervenka had lent it authenticity (often a death knell), and because punk represented the voice of disgruntled, rebellious white kids. At its most extreme, cultish G.G. Allin had set a broad range of possible behaviours to be appropriated under the spoken word label: poetic terrorism. Nothing really compares to such extreme poetic antics: it was the last resort, punching the audience, eating your own shit, shock for shock and value for value in a pre-packaged, hermetically sealed culture of fear mongering, propaganda and sanctioned hate. Spoken

word to the rescue, whether you want to be or not, angry rebuttal to a shrinking world and growing, international police state, the last light before the millennial darkness of the security councils sets in.

So it is fascinating to read about spoken word and to have it treated by genre analysis, but also deceptive, and somehow hollow (Beach). As soon as spoken word goes silently into a book, it seems to lose its edge, becoming orderly, compromised, bag-on-its-head, Guantanamo worldview. Spoken word is uncomfortable in secure pages, needing the gestural pace of TV cut-up light/soundscape. As soon as it grows quiet, it stops growing, submits to no-can-do canons, becoming what it set out to avoid, a tradition, a legitimate condition, in collusion with the gun that kills Cobain. Many spoken-word artists growing up in the 1980s and 1990s wanted to be rock stars. And who can blame them? Spoken word is a release valve for a pressure spot in the attention economy. What's the catch? It's a buzzword, a catch-all term that really catches very little, lost in a media dream given way to media nightmare. But it should interest literary or cultural studies and social scientists who want to see the info-future's death throes up close.

So what is it? Spoken word lacks theorization, partly because it grew up in opposition to academic poetry and critical scholarship. "What is spoken word?" hardly ever gets asked, even by those purporting to analyse or give opinions on it. There has been much more news media investigation into spoken word than critical investigation by scholars, unusual for any poetry-related genre. Especially absent from discussion have been spoken-word artists. Spoken word polarizes the poetry community; its practitioners champion it as bringing poetry back to the people, while members of the Canadian literary establishment call it "sludge," a gimmick that is all "bells and whistles." Poets join one or the other camp, camps not only hegemonic and exclusive among themselves but also utterly dismissive of each other. Just how false is this distinction? Why not a synaesthetic poetry, a language of sensory energy, a poetry of all walks and talks. As genre, spoken word is treated as a given. Mainstream media throughout the 1990s referred to it as a poetic genre, even though it has easily as much in common with stand-up comedy, TV monologues, talk shows and ranting punk rock stars as with poetry. It also has a sprinkle of the *old world order* statesman or charismatic preacher. But what really distinguishes it, gives it its uniquely North American flavour, is media savvy.

If Adeena Karasick's recent video poem, *This is Your Final Nitrous*, is any indication of what may be coming for spoken word, then all hail the word. This politically charged, visually polydimensional and linguistically sensuous comment on both Burning Man and the state of politics in the United States is a spoken-word masterpiece. Image and sound literally integrate in this treatment of poem as spoken-word text. Infused with the semantic complexities of language poetry, rhythmic cadences à la Bill Bissett's visionary chants and Karasick's signature pop culture word play, the poem seduces with language and confronts with the burning world, the terror factory. While Karasick floats through psychedelic wastelands and animated Dubyas

become a pornographic cartoon of world domination, the poem keeps its music house in order, the inevitable pulse pushing us forward to an avoidable Armageddon.

But this is just one recent example. Spoken word has a material history, a socially informed history of recorded objects, documents and technologies. Spoken work must have some basis to map the terrains of its social practice, it cannot reinvent itself endlessly if it doesn't know *what it is*, as the jazzers used to say. If spoken word to date has augmented the corpus of poetry, then almost certainly this has been achieved through audiovisual/digital media and embodied meaning, not print. This should not be surprising. If there are typical spoken-word artists, they grow up in media saturated environments, with TVs, radios and stereos, with personal computers, CDs and now YouTube and iPods. Many have only fleeting acquaintance with bookish poetry. Change in textually mediated environments of young poets has had an impact on the practices that poets engage in, and, in order to understand spoken word and where it is headed as a cultural genre, one must comprehend this change and propel it toward the most pressing, critical causes.

Praise the tireless efforts of Hilary Peach (founder of the Poetry Gabriola Festival on Gabriola Island, BC), Heather Haley (architect of the Edgewise ElectroLit Centre and the Vancouver Videopoem Festival), Sheri-D Wilson and D Kimm (director of Montreal's Festival Voix d'Americques) for turning the now aesthetic into a lasting phenomenon without selling out to media magnates or muffling its say with imprint politics. Canadian spoken-word festivals have sprung up nationwide, serving the public purpose of providing word art live and direct; yet these are orderly affairs, poets in their places, taking turns, fulfilling the expectations of ticket holders. Spoken word, in its origins, overturned complacency with energetic challenge. Its audience was everyone who would not listen. It was poetry turned against the WMD (weapons of mass distraction). Spoken word cannot mark its coming of age with a retraction, a regression to the comfy chair. It needs to meet, head on, the greatest challenges of our day, a day defined by deafening technologies of misinformation and malfeasance. It owes us a different vision, a twenty-first-century Dada, surreality TV. We need no new celebrities or canons of culture. We need—as Canadians fighting useless wars, raping and pillaging the next generation's world, selling it cheap to political bosses, buying the lies of corporations and PR companies—a critical wake-up call, a siren of the airwaves.

Otherwise, spoken word will amount only to a well timed bit of spin, a defusing of disillusionment that left us empty of charge. Spoken-word artists must infiltrate the data stream, divert pipelines dumping toxic waste into the minds of the nation. Spoken word belongs on TV, radio, the Internet, cellphone ring tones and every new information toy. Canadian poets, especially those young enough to feel coherent and cosy among the chips and silicon, are in an ideal position to lead the charge. Canada leads many nations in uptake of new technologies, and with these come new literacies, new communication strategies. We have the wealth, the universality of education and the relative stability to be at the forefront of technological change. The book is a great old technology, but books are not changing the world as they once did. The technolo-

gies of the future are both frightening and fantastic. Taking control of them through poetic insurgence is imperative to prevent their wholesale abuse, the crippling of language and the bleeding of natural, spiritual, intellectual and linguistic resources.

Free the mind by linguistic overthrow, *coup de mot*, spoken-word army of language-loving media terrorists, armed with video poems, phone/mes and flash-fire animations or sporting backpack PA systems and batteries—battle-ready. Poetic terrorism ballasts mainstream ideological stunt/blunting of the masses. Reload Hakim Bey's *T.A.Z.* (1985), the art of poetic terrorism, transient poetry of streets and walls and buses, free poetry, insurgent word, fugitive publishing—outlaw verse, marauding the byways of public middle-class mindset, spoken-word ground swell to drown out monopoly of say. Guerrilla poetry on HD screens, buses and elevators, verse your way to work, the 88 ways of wisdom on the fly. The seismic super-size-me-information-diet destroyer; spoken bombs exploding in the cafeteria, words flying, personal walls collapsing, ideas strewn through the wreckage.

(2007)

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