WHO WE ARE WHEN WE SAY WE ARE: THE POLITICS OF SLAM POETRY

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Women’s Studies

by
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Summer 2013
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

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Who We Are When We Say We Are: The Politics of Slam Poetry

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May 20, 2013
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Grandma Escoto and the Moon. Thank you for the light.
We have to create; it is the only thing louder than destruction. –Andrea Gibson
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Who We Are When We Say We Are: The Politics of Slam Poetry
by
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Master of Arts in Women’s Studies
San Diego State University, 2013

This study examines spoken word poetry and poetry slam competitions in regards to utopianism, identity politics, and actions of healing. My research methodologies include performance art theory and emotional theories—all through an intertwined feminist lens. This study will explore how possible intersecting identities function in the poetry slam world and how those intersecting identities create differences in definitions of “utopia.” Further, the role of “emotion” in the world of slam will also be examined, specifically from the perspective of interviewees/spoken word performers. The purpose of this study is to explore how identity influences success in competitive poetry and success in actions of healing for marginalized voices.

A total of six previous members of the San Diego Slam Team (ranging from 2008-2012) were interviewed for this research. All subjects involved in this study play a role in my analyses of how competitors in slam poetry employ their own emotions, experiences, and identities in the context of slam competition strategy. The “declaration of self” is also an important concept. A reclamation of stories—especially women’s stories—will help to give voice to marginalized experiences in slam poetry. It is my hope through these methods and methodologies that I will be able to shed light on how women (and other marginalized groups) use spoken word poetry as a vehicle for social change and self-healing.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my committee—Dr. Ahmed-Ghosh, Dr. Hua, and Peter Cirino—for the endless support and feedback. Thank you for believing in this project and thank you for believing in me. Specifically, thank you Dr. Ahmed-Ghosh and Dr. Hua for helping me “slow down” during this process and making me take care of myself, first. I will miss sitting in your offices the most. I would also like to thank Dr. Betsy Colwill for starting this journey with me. Though you were only my mentor for a year, the amount of love and support you provided me was boundless. I could not have gotten through my first year in this program without you. To the rest of the Women’s Studies department, my cohort, and especially to Teddi Brock, thank you for everything you’ve done for me these past two years. Each moment we shared did not go unnoticed.

A very special thank you to Jill Dolan, one of the main scholars who inspired the theoretical framework behind this thesis. Your academic work moved me in the same way poetry has—something I did not know I was searching for in the academy until I fell upon your words. Thank you for your passion and your important contributions to the production of knowledge. Most of all, thank you for helping me believe in this project again when I started to forget my purpose.

I would like to thank the Elevated! spoken word family of San Diego. Thank you for bringing me into your home and helping me grow as both a writer and performer. The work we do will never be finished—but I couldn’t have asked for a better set of people to move humanity with. Thank you to all the interviewees (and my dear dear friends) who participated in this study. This research would have been nothing without your willingness to share your stories. I am proud and humbled to know each and every one of you. A special thank you to all the young women I have worked with at King Chavez High and Juvenile Courts and Community Schools. Your stories and bravery inspired me to get my Masters and helped me believe in the power of writing again.

To my parents, Emerito and Bernadette Escoto, for the sacrifices you two have made to ensure my success. For the love, support, and fight for understanding. There is nothing I
will ever achieve in this life that did not first come from wanting to make you two proud. To my siblings, Maricon, Bianca, and Sean Escoto, for not caring at all about my academics and in turn, helping me take things less seriously. I love you three and I don’t thank you all enough for the laughs and support. To my Grandma Maring, who still speaks so loudly despite the quiet deafness can bring. I admire your strength, will, and determination to never be silenced. Thank you to the extended Escoto family—especially my cousins—for saving me from myself the times I was too naïve to slow down. There aren’t a lot of people lucky enough to have a family as untouchable as ours. A lot of the love we give was learned from our grandmother, Virginia Escoto, whom this thesis is dedicated to. Grandma, you taught us how to love unconditionally without any boundaries or demands. Our days have never been the same since you passed, but we know you never really left us. Kaluguran daka always.

Last and certainly not least, thank you to my Tiger for being my muse and my greatest love. Thank you for this moment, right now, that you are mine. For the moments we have shared and the moments we will have for as long as we are willed to. I couldn’t have finished the final steps of this project without your love and affection. Whatever we become—remember this: you will always be my favorite poem.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Marc Smith, a construction worker in Chicago, “…was looking for a way to breathe new life into the deadly dull poetry open mikes of the day. The series’ emphasis was on performance and laid the groundwork for a style of poetry and performance that would eventually spread across the world” (Smith, “Slam Papi”). In his attempt to “breathe new life” into poetry (after what he felt the academy had suffocated), Smith created the idea of slam poetry in 1984. His goal was to make poetry accessible again to the “common audience.” This accessibility came in the form of a poetry competition now called slam poetry—competitive spoken word poetry performance.

Since 1984, slam poetry has made a dent in the literary, creative, and performance worlds moving both nationally and internationally. On top of there being a national competition where cities compete against one another, there are also two national and world competitions: Individual World Poetry Slam (IWPS) and Women of the World Poetry Slam (WOWPS); IWPS is held every October and WOWPS is held every March. Poets perform their own original spoken word poems in these competitions to then “slam” with—namely, compete. Spoken word is a genre of poetry that is written with the intent to perform. In slam competitions, poets are judged based on both their writing and performance.

WHAT IS SLAM POETRY?

In a poetry slam, poets go head-to-head and perform poems three minutes at a time where they are judged by 5 random judges in the crowd. Judges are usually chosen based on their experiences with spoken word—the less experience, the more likely the judge will be chosen (this coincides with Smith’s intent to give accessibility of poetry back to non-academics). In short, “slam season” is from September to April at San Diego’s venue, Elevated!. Every month, a slam is held where up to 12 poets compete to get first place in order to obtain a slot at the “Grand Slam Championship” in late April or early May. During
the Championship, the top five poets of the “Grand Slam” are chosen as the San Diego Slam Team for that particular year and will represent San Diego at Nationals in August.

Before the slam starts, poets are assigned numbers and the numbers are drawn at random. Contingent upon the order of numbers drawn, the order of the competition is placed. Ideally, spoken word competitors want to be toward the middle or end of a slam due to something called “score creep.” “Score creep” is literally when scores begin to “creep” higher and higher as the competition continues when the judges (new to spoken word) begin to have a good sense of what they like to hear. Generally, poets who are first in the competition are seen as “guinea pigs.” In order to try and minimize score creep, a “Sacrifice Poet” performs to “shed blood” on the stage and to calibrate the judges. Poets have three minutes to perform a poem of their choice, with a ten second grace period. After the grace period is over, there is a half point deduction for every ten seconds that goes over.

After the first round, usually the top six or seven go into the second (the number varies contingent upon how many competitors there are and whether it is a “regular” slam or a “championship” slam). From there, placement decides who gets to compete at the championship and who is in semi-finals. Judges are able to score from a scale of 0-10 with decimal points—0 being the lowest. Out of the five scores given, the lowest and highest score are dropped and the remaining scores are added—giving a 30 a perfect score.

Every slam is different contingent upon the social location of the slam venue; however, there are a specific set of rules followed by all Slam Masters (the coach) in order to compete at a national level. To view the slam rules and regulations as stated by Poetry Slam Inc, please see the Appendix.

**RESEARCH FOCUS**

The significance of this study is to shed light on spoken word as a new vehicle for performing arts. Because spoken word is still viewed as “underground,” academics have yet to create the unique space spoken word demands in performance and in the arts. The study will focus on the following: how identity affects slam scores; strategy in competitive poetry; spoken word poetry as an avenue for healing; and looking at spoken word and slam poetry in regards to utopianism. Because the spoken word community can arguably represent a microcosm of the rest of Western society (because poets come from all different
backgrounds, experiences, and social locations), the data in this research also has the ability to provide social statements in the “larger social” context—meaning, what I uncover in this research can possibly apply outside of spoken word performance. Feminist ideologies and background are crucial for this study due to the scrutiny this research intends to do with how marginalized groups of people convey their stories and experiences through spoken word performance. Through performance of experience, people with marginalized backgrounds have the ability to heal by claiming their own stories—rather than allowing their stories to be told for them.

**LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND**

Just as Smith hoped for when he started the “slam movement,” I was drawn in by slam poetry. For me, it was not just the competitive aspect of it and how it was a “game,” it was more so watching crowds become so engaged with poetry. After years of slamming, however, and ranking 6th in the nation and 12th “woman in the world,” I started to notice how slam was also “taking something away” from poetry as much as it was giving poetry a voice. In my definition, the art of spoken word can be used for reciprocal healing between the performers and audience members, as well as the possibility to serve as a form of political activism and enact social change. Both private and public dialogue about slam poetry has involved how spoken word has become almost a vessel for marginalized voices to speak on their experiences. What the literature is missing, however, is an in-depth analysis of how intersecting identities of marginalized voices function in competitive poetry.

Critical race and identity theories will also be used as one of the frameworks in this thesis. This is due in part because racialized identities play a crucial role on how slam scores are either successfully given or poorly given. Slam scores are based on strategy; a lot of the strategy comes from who the poet is perceived on the outside and how the poet reveals her/ze/himself from the inside. In the Introduction to her edited book, *Working Through Whiteness*, Cynthia Levine-Rasky discusses what it means to “work through” whiteness. Working through whiteness means being able to process the privileges attached to whiteness without “accidentally” marginalizing other groups. Levine-Rasky writes about whites who are trying to “work through” their whiteness and are afraid that they will only reinforce marginalization of other groups. Tension is brought up many times in this essay, and Levine-
Rasky is pointing out that white people must take “personal risks” in order to work through their whiteness. She states:

A critical examination of whiteness asks that whites initiate the dismantling of inequitable and racist social relations, or divest them from the power they embody in social institutions, and help reformulate and replace our inequitable society with a truly democratic social order. (Levine-Rasky 2)

Levine-Rasky is ultimately talking about white people being able to give up their white privilege. Though it is mentioned in this article, Levine-Rasky does not effectively tackle the challenges that will come with asking white people of that. Levine-Rasky’s article directly relates to this research because Whiteness and the issue of “white guilt” plays a large role in slam poetry. Being a perceived and identified white judge changes how race is either performed or not performed.

Because this research will delve into issues of race outside of Whiteness, it is important to contextualize this study in critical race theories. In her article, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Audre Lorde writes that members of the oppressed group are the ones who must “stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (1). Lorde suggests there are “very real difference between us of race, age, and sex” and it is the “refusal to recognize those differences” that keeps groups separated from one another (1). In order to move toward social progression, individuals must acknowledge all aspects of their intersecting identities and how it influences or affects other groups. If there is no individual change or recognition, then there is little room for social mobilization toward justice. This “acknowledging” that Lorde writes about is prevalent in performance poetry. Even if a poet does not perform about her/ze/his identity directly, the performing body functions as a text—especially a racialized text. Due of this, audience members and judges read the bodies and attach it to what the poet is performing. In order to “progress” toward social change or openness to new ideas and experiences, it is crucial—just as Lorde states—for everyone in the slam space to recognize the importance of difference.

There is very little written about spoken word and slam poetry. *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word* by Marc Kelly Smith and Joe Kraynak define what spoken word is and what it isn’t. Smith and Kraynak assess
“performance situations,” “learning fundamentals,” and “acquiring tools” to better performance and reading of what “good” performance is. According to Smith and Kraynak, “…slam is poetry, performed, and competitive,” (5) as well as an experience and not a gimmick (6). For a further analysis on what slam poetry is, Smith and Kraynak state, “Slams are captivating poetry events that focus a live audience’s attention on the presentation of poetry that’s been composed, polished, and rehearsed for the purpose of being performed—very often in a competitive arena, but not always” (3). Overall, Take the Mic is a “how-to” book on performance, how to be an “effective” slam poet, the history of slam, and overall, how to live one’s life as a “successful” slam poet. This book does not cover the effects of identity in slam, nor does the book acknowledge the tensions and complexities of slam scoring.

There are some published works about spoken word and slam poetry where a feminist analysis can be found. In Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution, Alix Olson positions herself in the following context:

In addition to my poetry, I had also subconsciously brought along another item: a sharply attuned queer-feminist nose, one that had been buried in women’s and gender studies books for the past four years, and so one that quickly sniffed out the slam scene sexism like a newly radicalized crime dog. I noted not only the misogyny in too many of the poems, but also the heavy male domination onstage, even within that progressive poetic lexicon, the ‘artistic democracy’ known as slam. (x111)

With Olson’s positionality, she is not just a poet, but comes from a queer-feminist space which implies her analysis on the social relations and dynamics that are involved with slam poetry. However, what Olson seems to be only focusing on is sexism and gender in poetry slam. She does not position her social location or identity (though she passes as White) and excludes race, ability, religion, age, ethnicity, and other possible identity categories in her analysis.

Some ethnographic work has been done to study the effects of spoken word poetry, particularly geared towards the youth. In her book, Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms, Maisha T. Fisher conducted an ethnographic study of a “Power Writing” class conducted in a New York City high school. Fisher writes, “Guided especially by their ‘Power Writing’ teacher Joe, they learned to craft their feelings and reflections, their ways of talking back to an unfair world, through spoken word poetry” (ix). Fisher bared
witness to spoken word poetry workshops where there was reciprocal dialogue and feedback from students to instructors (aligning with feminist pedagogical practices). The “Power Writing” workshops were ran by Joseph Ubiles—or “Papa Joe”—“and his mission for the workshops was to “[try] to dream ourselves a world, and we are trying to record that in script of the English language. Your job always in here is to tell the truth” (Fisher 3). For Fisher, the aim of her book and ethnographic study is the following: “…to explore how a community of young writers with the guidance of attentive and interested adult (re)defined literacy and what it meant to be literate using the medium of spoken word poetry” (4). Through her research, Fisher found that young men and women in New York City have come to “find their voices” in a safe space given to them. Ultimately, Fisher’s research demonstrates how spoken word poetry used in classrooms can benefit students, rather than hinder them. This source speaks volumes to one of the main themes in this research: how spoken word and writing can be used as a form of healing and social activism. The “Power Writing” workshops successfully function in the same way spoken word and slam poetry can reach out to audience members. This ethnographic research was pivotal and demonstrating how poetry can be used as a form of self reflection.

Published works also already juxtapose slam poetry with identity politics. For example, in her essay, “Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity,” Susan B.A. Somers-Willet discusses identity and identity politics in performance poetry because they are first person and narratives (52). Authenticity is brought up in her article and Somers-Willet states, “If authenticity is […] the criterion for slam success, then convincing audience members of the authenticity of one’s identity is a major component of a poet’s success in slam” (“Slam Poetry” 53). To further her argument, Somers-Willet states, “If poetry slams are events where audiences often take a poet’s words at face value, and the identity a poet expresses in performance is taken as the performer’s identity in life, then many audience members are evaluating not only the writing and performance of a poem, but also the scripting and performance of identity” (“Slam Poetry” 53).

Somers-Willet also wrote the book The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America. In a book review found in the back of Somers-Willet’s book, founder of slam poetry Marc Smith states, “…especially welcome is the book's analysis of how commercial marketing forces succeeded in narrowing
public perception of slam to the factionalized politics of race and identity. The author's knowledge of American slam at the national level is solid and more authentic than many of the slammers who claim to be” (The Cultural Politics Somers-Willet). Somers-Willet narrows her focus on “race and identity” in regards to how performance is used as a tool to authenticate a performer’s identity. Further, Somers-Willet then challenges the authenticity performed by a slam poet due to how what is “authentic” is subjective in its social construction.

Though Somers-Willet touches upon some aspects of my proposed study, what is missing in the literature are the marginalized voices speaking on their experiences of slam poetry and their thoughts on identity (rather than theory speaking for them). Thus far, authors have either only focused on their own identities and how it plays out in slam poetry and have not included other identity categories in their research and/or analysis. Somers-Willet addresses identity and performance in her book; however, her study only focuses on the success of poets in slam due to their marginalized identities and not how spoken word poetry can be used as a tool to “find voice.” Further, there is no discussion on whether or not spoken word can still be used for “healing and enacting social change” if the poetry is competitive (though according to Fisher, healing is found in classrooms and workshops). What this research will aim to answer and discuss are all the “holes” of marginalization that are only theorized about and not put in an actual experience context. The lack of research and discourse on spoken word poetry in academic spaces proves the relevance of this feminist research as marginalized groups “finding voice” goes unrecognized.

**Research Methods and Methodologies**

The following methodologies will be used in this study: performance theory (including performing arts) and emotional theories (based out of Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and Sociology)—all through an intertwined feminist lens. Most of the performance theory will come from work by Jill Dolan, known for her contributions with performance and sexuality. Further, this research will be examined through a feminist “utopian performative” lens, as Dolan puts it. The feminist perspective in this research will stem from articulating the differences (and similarities) of how slam poetry is viewed amongst poets across the identity spectrum—and how their own intersectional identities may
or may not affect their performance. In order to transform emotion discourse into one that is feminist, for this study, I will use the theory to examine how the performance of emotion (and confronting emotion and vulnerability in slam) is different and/or similar amongst varying marginalized groups. My hope is to answer the following questions: Why are spoken word poets/slam poets predominately men, specifically in San Diego? Why do men predominately win slam competitions in San Diego? What are women’s feelings competing in a competition that is primarily men compared to other women? In regards to the action of performance and “emotional performative,” my feminist critique will seek to discover if men and women have opposing or conjoining ideas of competitive poetry in relation to their own experiences and intersecting identities. For this research, I have created the term “emotional performative” and define it as a performance consciously driven to bring forth and exert emotions to affect an audience. Though performance, in general, has the ability to move or sway audiences emotionally, the “emotional performative” will function in this study with regard to how the emotions in spoken word poetry are performed consciously, strategically, and repetitively. This repetition displays how emotions in an “emotional performative” functions as stored “emotional memory” to become nostalgic in during a spoken word performance. The nostalgia of those emotions, then, becomes the actual performance itself. Further, because spoken word poetry has the ability for individuals to “declare the self,” I will evaluate how spoken word poetry has helped to heal and shape the lives of women and other marginalized groups. Though a lot of the questions and inquiries are based around gender, this study will also focus on intersections of identities including race, class, sexuality, ability, religion, etc.

The proposed study will ask how possible intersecting identities function in the poetry slam world. Further, the study will examine how these intersecting identities create differences in definitions of a “utopia” in performance across identity spectrums. For the purposes of this research, the social location of this research will remain in San Diego only at “Elevated!”—the “certified venue” of San Diego. Being a “certified venue” means Elevated! is where the San Diego Slam Team is formed in order to compete at Nationals. The study will explore how possible intersecting identities of performers, audience, and judges affect the experience of, and responses to, slam poetry. It will explore, in particular, the role of “emotion” in the world of slam, specifically from the perspective of performers. My hope is
to gain a good sense of how men and women portray and process different emotions in their poetry to then project out into a performance—with an emphasis on identity intersections. The purpose of the study is to explore how identity influences success in competitive poetry. Further, the study aims to provide analysis on the “performative emotion” and how emotions function within spoken word performance.

The anticipated methods were as follows: observational data (ethnography and auto-ethnography), as well as interviews conducted with poetry performers/competitors; however, after attempting an auto-ethnographic approach, it was proved to be much more difficult than anticipated. As I watched slam competitions in San Diego, I found that it was hard to figure out how the audience members—particularly the judges—were positively or negatively impacted by the poetry without interviewing them. I attempted to interview them after the slams; however, because the competitions run until almost midnight, most judges were not willing to stay. I provided them with questions so they could email me their responses and again, little to no response. I also attempted a questionnaire as a trial run during one of the biggest slam events of the year called “Ink Slam” in West Hollywood, CA. With little help, it was difficult distributing all the questionnaires and getting them back during or after the competition (again, because of how late the competition ran). Above that, most of the audience members at this event were poets, themselves—which jaded the research. With all of this said, the only method used for this research are the interviews I conducted with past San Diego Slam Team members (2008-2012); however, not all previous SD Slam Team members were interviewed due to distance and lack of experience (only slamming for one year and not too involved with slam). I contacted all the members of the San Diego Slam Team from 2008-2012 via email, phone, or social medias like Facebook. The interviewees in this study all agreed and were local—except for one who typed out answers since she was currently on deployment in Abu Dhabi at the time. Specific slam team members did not live in San Diego and it proved difficult to coordinate times for interviews. All subjects involved in this study play a role in my analyses of how competitors in slam poetry employ their own emotions, experiences, and identities in the context of slam competition strategy. I conducted the interviews in person and the interview method was voluntary, which means all interviewees in this study are knowledgeable of their participation. To preserve their identities, all poets who participated in this study have pseudonyms.
It is also important to note the role of being an “insider” for this study. Because of my own experiences of being a part of the San Diego Slam Team, all of the interviewees are close friends and colleagues of mine. We all know each other on a personal level—beyond being poets—and so I knew I would not have any trouble of “opening them up.” A lot of times during the interview, interviewees would say “Do you remember when” or “You know what I am talking about” which made it hard to transcribe their answers into a response that was not presumptuous for the reader. Further, playing the role of an “insider” and personally knowing each interviewee allowed me to clarify the questions for them (if they asked for it) in a way that I knew they would better understand it—which may have led to specific answers that I may or may not have received if I did not know them on a personal level. I also think the friendships I have with these interviewees allowed them to allot more time for the interview since I know they cared very much about me and how important this research was to me. Despite busy schedules, I know a lot of my interviewees gave much care in their answers and for that, I appreciate them much more. The success of this research may not have been possible without their sincere passion for spoken word poetry and deep care for the arts.

The decision for my research methods to be more qualitative than quantitative was strategic. Because spoken word poetry—and poetry in general—is already subjective to an individual’s own life and experiences, it seemed fitting to also have those same voices speak on their experiences of their strategy in performance. The importance of qualitative research is for performers to process and speak on how their own identities may or may not be negotiated throughout slam poetry—as well as how the identity of others may affect their own. The “declaration of self” is also an important concept that will be touched upon in this study. A reclamation of stories—especially women’s stories (being the minority group in spoken word)—will help to give voice to their experiences in slam poetry. It is my hope—through feminist theory, performance (art) theory, and emotional theories—I will be able to shed light on how women (and other marginalized groups) use spoken word poetry as a vehicle for social change and self-healing.
BACKGROUND OF INTERVIEWEES

The following backgrounds of the interviewees who agreed to participate in this study are as follows (as written/spoken by them):

- Xavier Thompson: A heterosexual Black man who is the 2009 National Underground Poetry Slam Champion, the 2010 San Diego Grand Slam Champion, the 2010 Individual World Poetry Slam Champion and is starring in season 2 of TV One's "Verses and Flow."


- Charles Hall: A Christian, husband, father, Black, Multi-racial, heterosexual and currently in a PhD program in Cultural Studies at Claremont Graduate University. He is also an adjunct professor of Sociology at MiraCosta college. He has competed in the San Diego Slam team in 2008, 2009, and 2010 as well as premiered as a spoken word artist in the television show “Verses and Flow.”

- Angelica Roberts: An Afrocentric feminist, mother, wife, daughter, sister, aunt, (The Female Encompassing) artist, writer, poet. Two-time champion with Respect da Mic (2008) and Slam Charlotte (2009) as well as a member of the San Diego Slam Team (2011). In 2007, she ranked 5th during the Southern Fried competition and 9th in the Lake Eden Arts Festival (LEAF). In 2009, she was ranked 4th woman in the world after competing in the Women of the World Poetry Slam.

- Aesha Stevens: A queer Black woman who competed with the 2010 San Diego Slam Team and ranked 6th in the nation. That same year, the San Diego Slam Team also won the Western Regional Championship. Aesha has competed at the Women of the World Poetry Slam consecutively in 2010 and 2011. She was on deployment in Abu Dhabi during this study and is the only interviewee whose answers were received via email.

- Kit Wilson: A multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, Black, woman who is also a feminist and spiritualist. She was the 2010 San Diego IWPS representative, 2011 San Diego WOWPS Representative (ranking 29/72), and 2011 San Diego Slam Team member (ranking 28/75).

CHAPTER SUMMARIZATION

In my chapter entitled “Slam Poetry and Performing Emotion for Utopian Preservation,” I will provide an in-depth analysis of the function of a projected “utopia” in spoken word performance. I will draw on some thought on utopianism and feminism as
written by Angelika Bammer. I will mainly use performance theories written by Jill Dolan—especially on her thoughts on the “utopian performative.” This chapter will synchronize feminism and the theater to then link to spoken word poetry. Though a “utopia” is often seen as “ideal” and “perfect,” I will define how a “utopia” will function in this study and how I juxtapose it with spoken word performance.

My third chapter, “Identity Matters: The Strategy of Performing Emotions in Connection to the Self,” will have an overview of how identity politics and emotional theories can be seen in spoken word communities and in actual slam competitions. I will provide my own theories and analysis of how identity politics can be seen in the spoken word world and how my own analysis required a study to better understand the role of identity and emotion in spoken word. Within identity politics, the usage and projection of stereotypes is visible. This chapter will aim to reveal whether or not men and women use stereotypes of their gender identities for strategic purposes in slam. Further, how men and women both examine their own emotions to an experience to then perform it will also be crucial to feminizing the spoken word space. My concept of an “emotional performative” will also be highlighted in this chapter, as well as throughout the thesis as a whole.

My last chapter, “Declaration of Self and Reclaiming Our Past Selves for Present Healing” will aim to reveal how performances of emotion are in relation to the “past self” and how it is, then, used as a way for reciprocal healing between the self and the audience. Spoken word can and has been used as an artistic medium for political agenda. What I hope to uncover in this chapter is how spoken word can be healing for performers, particularly for women and people in other marginalized groups. Though slam poetry has the ability to “taint” the healing aspect of performed poetry (because it is competitive and ideas of power are involved), I will critique why women, in particular, still compete—even when they are one of the minority groups in spoken word poetry.
CHAPTER 2

SLAM POETRY AND PERFORMING EMOTION
FOR UTOPIAN PRESERVATION

In order to get a clear background on my direction of how I will connect utopianism with spoken word and slam poetry, I reference Angelika Bammer’s book, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s.*

**UTOPIANISM AND FEMINISM**

Bammer’s impulse in her book stemmed from two claims: “utopia was dead” and “utopia was imminent” (2). Bammer states both are simultaneously true and false (2) and “The feminist claim that utopia was imminent was based on the very fact ignored by the claim that utopia was dead: the vitality of feminist utopianism. At the same time, to claim that utopia was imminent was to ignore the very fact on which the ‘utopia is dead’ claim was based: the oppressive weight of material and ideological realities” (2). Bammer juxtaposes the women’s liberation movement and fight for equal rights as something that is “radically utopian” (2) and “at the very time that the dream of utopia was being pronounced dead, it was vibrantly alive in the emergent American and western European women’s movements” (1). Bammer chose to study the relationship between feminism and utopianism—as both are “two ways of seeing the world and responding to the need for change…” (2).

Bammer juxtaposes and shows the contradictions of two main claims of utopianism: it is both imminent and dead at the same time. The claim of utopianism being dead directly stems from the fact that a utopia is generally discussed as an “ideal and perfect world” that is unobtainable. The fantasy that is created and exists in the minds of people’s projected utopias is both intangible and possibly incomprehensible to anyone besides the individual projecting the utopian thought. Bammer, though, states the “fantasy” can still be a real thing—even if we cannot see it or touch it with our own bodies. This fantasy is what drives feminist utopianism as something that is actually imminent. Feminist utopianism challenges
the unobtainable nature of a utopia. Bammer’s states the following when introducing her book:

   My goal is to replace the idea of a ‘utopia’ as something fixed, a form to be fleshed out, with the idea of ‘the utopian’ as an approach toward, a movement beyond set limits into the realm of the not-yet-set. At the same time, I want to counter the notion of the utopian as unreal with the proposition that the utopian is powerfully real in the sense that hope and desire (and even fantasies) are real, never ‘merely’ fantasy. It is a force that moves and shapes history. (7)

   In this sense, the term “utopian” is used as something that has room for growth, change, and flexibility. “Utopianism” is used to describe traditional and conventional thought of utopias that are static and “already perfect.” Bammer claims the “utopian” is “powerfully real” even when it is a projected “fantasy” and an ideal. The thoughts, strive, and hope for a perfect world is real whether or not it is tangible.

   Conventional utopias embody an “inherent contradiction” (Bammer 2) since they are best understood to be “perfect” worlds that do not need to and will not change (Bammer 2). The dystopia comes in when it begins to affect those who are actually, indeed, in need for a “better world.” Here, we can view “conventional utopias” as those that are projected only through a privileged lens. Denying feminism into utopianism renders the discussion of “better worlds” invisible. In traditional utopian thought, the establishments of ideas are stagnant and unmoving; therefore, those who have been disempowered in a “utopian world” have not had the outlet or means of producing a world “perfect” for their standards. Bammer states, “In short, as soon as we abandon the conventional concept of a utopia, we find that the utopian is not dead at all, but very much alive in people’s longing for a more just and human world, their belief that such change is possible, and their willingness to act on the basis of that belief” (Bammer 3). Bammer’s statement contradicts the very essence of how a utopia is traditionally thought. If it is already perfect, why, then, should there be a discussion of change within that “perfect world?”

   For the theoretical purposes of this research, I align a “traditional utopia” as one that is White, Heteronormative, Patriarchal, and Classless. By defining a “traditional utopia” as such, this utopian that is “very much alive,” as Bammer states, can be found in the passion of spoken word performers and competitors. Many spoken word poets write and perform to their own marginalized identity and how social standards have affected their lives. Their poetry can both represent the need for a utopia and also destabilize utopianism for being
stagnant and having an unwillingness to change. In a hegemonic and oppressive system that does not adhere to the needs of oppressed groups—that is, groups outside of a white, male, hetero paradigm—spoken word poetry challenges the “perfect world” into an actual dystopia. Many members of a “traditional utopic” society do not belong in the “perfect thought” because they do not have the same access, goals, or dreams. What this proves is the fluidity of the concept of a utopia—and how a binary of utopia/dystopia is created and constantly switched back and forth depending on an individual’s experience. Spoken word poetry and competitive poetry demonstrates this fluidity and constant back and forth of the binary through a poet’s performance of their “perfect world” and whether or not the audience members and judges agree to the worth of that same world.

Looking at utopianism through a feminist lens allows for reconceptualization of the “perfect world.” Bammer states the following in regards to how marginalized groups are affected by utopianism:

To reconceptualize the utopian has significance, therefore, beyond the scope of feminist studies. It enables us to see the utopian impulse in the work of all those who have been designated Other from the perspective of a hegemonic culture and to reclaim the emancipator potential of that impulse in their name. To the extent that it is these Others who have often most sharply experienced the discrepancy between the dream of what society could be and the reality of what it actually is, it is their vision that is potentially the most radical. (3)

Spoken word poets who are designated as “Other” have this “utopian impulse” Bammer writes on. The connectivity of spoken word performers and audience members may possibly stem from both parties aiming toward similar utopias in their own lives. Even when projected utopias are dissimilar, the “emotional performative” still functions in the slam poetry space. When a performer strategically performs her/ze/his poems with a set of emotions to consciously “move” an audience, the very emotional connection an audience member or judge has to a poet can be understood as one that is utopic. Even if an audience member or judge’s emotions are negative ones—anger, resentment, frustration—a connection was still created. Though negative reactions can be understood as dystopic and may very well rupture a possible “utopic slam space,” I argue that any evocation of emotion is utopic because of the fact that we are all emotionally moving and caring together in one space. Challenging one another and listening to difference—reacting to difference—is still worth more than not being moved at all.
What Bammer’s previous statements call to question is how viable a utopia is if it does not fit the needs of all groups of people. Because spoken word poets are both vulnerable and sensitive to social inequalities, according to Bammer, “In this sense the estranged look of the Other is also potentially the most utopian. For it is they for whom Otherness, in concrete terms, means discrimination and disempowerment, who are likely to express the principle of hope with the greatest sense of urgency” (4). The “great sense of urgency” can be juxtaposed with spoken word poetry. In correlation to Bammer’s argument, spoken word poetry, indeed, has both the power to destabilize utopianism and recreate utopians.

This connection I create with feminist utopianism and spoken word poetry is paramount to both this research and to the theory in practice outside of this study. Spoken word poetry was created to be accessible for marginalized groups and those who were not of the “academic realm.” By almost creating a bridge for academia and spoken word poetry—to then align spoken word poetry with utopic thought—enhances, even more, the social prevalence of spoken word poetry and its ability to create change in marginalized communities. By taking a world that is “utopic” and redefining it into something that is obtainable, to therefore obtain it through an accessible art forms, speaks volumes to the social possibilities of justice and openness to difference.

**Utopian Performative in Spoken Word Poetry**

In her article, “Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative,’” Jill Dolan writes on how performance can “in itself, be a utopian gesture” (455). Dolan claims theater and the performance arts has a political agency to it that can create a view of cultural change. Dolan states, “But theatre can move us toward understanding the possibility of something better, can train our imaginations, inspire our dreams and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change” (“Utopia” 460). With performance arts, Dolan signifies there is a power behind it that projects a “utopian impulse” (“Utopia” 455). Dolan’s “[belief] in the politically progressive possibilities of romanticism in performance” parallels with my own beliefs on what the power of performance is capable of as far as human connectivity is concerned (“Utopia” 479). Through performance, I believe the emotional connection between the performer and the audience is what ultimately makes spoken word as successful,
moving, and healing as it is. Through these emotional connections through performance, audience members are able to connect and/or listen to political and social activism, as told by someone of a different perspective.

In her book, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, Dolan states the following: “This book investigates the potential of different kinds of performance to inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible, rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential” (2). The “moments” Dolan touches upon are what will make up the “utopians” discussed in this study to exemplify a “more radical humanism” (*Utopia in Performance* 2). A “more radical humanism” that Dolan suggests may very well be a humanism where we all emotionally connect with one another conscientiously and purposefully. Further, Dolan contends the following:

> Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (*Utopia in Performance* 5)

Due to the fact that “moments” amongst the spectator and the spectacle within performance is contingent upon individual experience, a “utopia,” in this sense, functions as a consistent redefinition amongst human interactions—as well as fluid. Feminist analysis comes into play here when the moments—the “utopians”—become defined based on experiences of gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, sexuality, etc. Different forms of “utopians” are experienced by different groups of people—especially those of marginalized groups. Utopias are usually essentialized; therefore, there is little room between the spectrum of dystopias and an “ideal” society. The danger in “utopias” of only remaining as an “unreachable” is where performance can come in to make utopias relevant to the human condition. An “emotional performative” grants this opportunity of utopian relevance for audience members and spoken word performers. More specifically, with spoken word and slam poetry, there is potential of what society can look like if we exist in those moments of “utopians.” What “society can look like,” means being able to listen to one another’s experience and embrace difference through reciprocation of emotions.
To further discuss the function of “utopians,” Dolan states, “The performatives under consideration in this book allow fleeting contact with a utopia not stabilized by its own finished perfection, not coercive in its contained, self-reliant, self-determined system, but a utopia always in process, always only partially grasped, as it disappears before us around the corners of narrative and social experience” (*Utopia in Performance* 6). In this sense, the “utopian” defined by Dolan is one that is accessible, rather than unreachable. A utopia that is “always in process,” allows room for feminist work because it is in moments of performance—moments of process—where there is room for social change and social awareness for inequalities. By listening to the experiences of others and connecting through an emotional medium (“emotional performative”), audience members are able to relate to difference through the emotion. Not only does this allow for performers to use their voice to convey and self-declare their experiences, but it allows a space for understanding “difference” amongst the audience member and performer.

Due to her feminist background and in agreement with Bammer, Dolan states her belief in how performance and politics are intertwined (*Utopia in Performance* 3). By using a feminist definition of a “utopia,” as explained by Dolan and Bammer, spoken word performance can convey realities accessible to all groups through emotion. In her chapter “Def Jam Poetry” of *Utopia in Performance*, Dolan writes about spoken word performance on the HBO TV Series “Def Jam Poetry” and states, “Seen from within the utopic gesture of a performance like Def Poetry Jam, our longing to realize a world rich in equality, social justice, and love, and without fear of terror, is made palpable and visible, felt as well as seen, and mutely and somatically understood as well as stated (*Utopia in Performance* 111). Whether or not a spoken word performer is coming from a space of privilege, oppression, or both, the emotion behind performing spoken word poetry makes their experience accessible to all groups of people in order to listen to difference. What these moments can ultimately mean for slam poetry and feminism alike is room for openness, acceptance, and progress toward social change.

**UTOPIAS AND DYSTOPIAS IN SLAM POETRY**

Due to its competitive nature, slam poetry can also function as a dystopia (when the scores are given to poets/performers). Here, I have you refer back to the introduction of this
study where I explained the consistent dystopic feeling until being able to be in a space of “utopia” again (which is gaining a perfect score). My implications here exemplify the very fact that a “utopia” is constantly changing, in motion, and is not fixed. I also imply that a dystopia can be made possible through a poet’s own self-reflection and criticization. Though an emotional moment is still created between the audience members and performers, scores of five individuals—five perspectives and experiences—is what mobilizes the “game” of spoken word poetry. Dolan writes on how the “utopian performative” can still be drawn by audience members even through a dystopian perspective: “Utopian performatives spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as never finished gestures toward a potentially better future” (Utopia in Performance 8). Even in moments of dystopia in spoken word performance (whether it is the content of the poem or the actual scores), Dolan suggests there are still moments of the “utopian performative.” The moment of “dystopia” I suggest are the times of no reaction at all to a poet’s performance. As stated earlier, even when a reaction is “emotionally negative,” the “emotional performative” is still successful. Dolan’s “utopian performative” directly links to the “emotional performative” and destabilizes the negativity behind someone’s emotion and making it positive—even if those emotions are uncomfortable and new. Dystopia, then, is only created when there is no emotional movement between the performer and audience member or judge.

The function of a dystopia can stem directly from the language used in poetry. In her book, Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative, Judith Butler claims, “Language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible” (5). Butler examines the agency behind language and the effects language can have on people and their experiences. Butler writes the following:

When we claim to have been injured by language, what kind of claim do we make? We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory. We claim that language acts, and acts against us, and the claim we make is a further instance of language, one which seeks to arrest the force of the prior instance. Thus, we exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force, caught up in a bind that no act of censorship can undo. (1)
Butler’s ideas on the effects of language can be directly applied to the language used in spoken word poetry and how it may function as a utopia or dystopia. As spoken word poets, our bodies become speech—representations and symbols to emotions that represent larger cultural themes and analysis. Butler claims, “The point is not to enumerate the political consequences of a theory of the performative, but rather to show how a theory of the performative is already at work in the exercise of political discourse (theory can work in implicit and fugitive ways)” (40). Butler is ultimately evaluating the power behind language. In a slam competition, competitors are subordinate to a judge’s power to do just that: judge. The judging calls to attention the need for scrutiny of who is in power in slam poetry and does bringing power, authority, and agency ruin the “healing” aspect of competitive poetry for the actual poets themselves (not the audience). Butler speaks on agency in language—agency that is important to understand in regards to having agency in self-healing and self-declaration; however, when the self-healing is exposed to outward judging, there is possibility for a dystopia in spoken word performance.

Creative writing creates a space for healing that some audiences could have possibly been searching for. Working toward universal peace and justice can create a type of “utopia” that people strive for. “Utopia” can parallel with “perfection,” in this specific instance, a “utopia” can be more toward creating the “ideal” moment between performer and audience member. On the opposite end, a “utopia” can also create an “ideal” way of performing a certain set of emotions—even when the emotions are connected to memories of negative or painful experiences. The danger in this, however, is recognizing that not everyone’s “utopias” are the same. What makes one person happy may make another person frustrated or oppress their identities. The reason why a “utopia” is hard to grasp is because there will be no mutual understanding among different groups of what a “utopia” looks like. Further, defining a “utopia” as a “perfect” space also suggests that everyone must be feeling, experiencing, or thinking the same thing; ultimately, a redefinition of “utopia” is needed.

Due to the fact that definitions of a “utopia” are contingent upon an individual’s experience, a judge’s “authority” over a performer’s experience and emotional performance varies. Spoken word poets decide to compete with their most vulnerable work and allow complete strangers—who usually do not have any experience with spoken word—to judge them on their experience. A judge’s score destabilizes the “utopia” of the performance and
questions whether or not poets continue to compete with their poetry to strive for “utopian scores.” A judge may also be what enhances the experience between a poet and audience members due to affirmations with high scores. Above that, utopianism creates feelings of social progression and since judges are scoring these utopianisms, anything beyond a perfect score allows for a poet’s utopia to become a dystopia. The “perfect” scores—though they do come—are still not consistent; therefore, the possibility of injuring a poet’s idea of a utopia in their performance is in the hands of judges.

Desire continues throughout the arts through ideologies of a performed “utopia.” In traditional theory, a “utopia” is unobtainable, fluid, and constantly changing; therefore, a “utopia” allows performance arts to be sustainable and allows the passion to remain ignited and never put out. Perhaps this may be what spoken word poets strive for when they compete—to see if in that particular competition, they can reach “utopia.”

**INTERVIEWEES’ EXPERIENCES WITH UTOPIA**

Interviewees were asked for their favorite moments while performing. Interestingly enough, all the women suggested a “utopian performative” experience as their favorite moment while the men who were interviewed said their favorite moment had to do with affirmations they received from audience members. The difference in responses from these two gender groups can directly correlate to how women and men both interact with their emotions—especially in an activity, like spoken word, that demands so much emotional attention. It may very well be possible that the male interviewees have felt a form of a “utopian performative;” however, their socialization of their gender may have had them receive the question in a different manner compared to the women. Kit Wilson’s answer to the question was the following: “My favorite moment while performing is when I get the feeling that the audience gets it. Like when I’m sharing something that’s important to me and I can look at people and I can see that they get it. Not even necessarily that they’re clapping or yelling, that they’re listening and they’re thinking and they get it” (Wilson). This “getting it” that Wilson repeats directly connects to Dolan’s account of the “utopian performative” between a performer and audience member. Brianna Johnson had a similar answer to Wilson’s when she answered, “My most favorite is when I’m ‘IN’ and everyone is ‘YEAH!’ and I feel like I am supposed to be in the poem and connecting with the audience
and even if that means they’re silent, but I know it’s a good kind of silence. I think that’s my favorite part” (Johnson).

Aesha Stevens stated that her favorite part is always the very beginning of her performance when she can see everyone is intently listening (Stevens). As for Angelica Roberts, when she answered this question during the interview, she displayed very “utopic” characteristics. Her face almost glazed over, she smiled wide, in answering the question she seemed happy and almost euphoric. Roberts answered the following:

My favorite moment […] is when I realized that I have blacked out and no one else is in the room. And when I come to I’m like ‘Wait a minute, I am performing’ and it’s a place where you’ve completely let go of Suzie looking at me over here and Johnny is on his phone not paying attention to me. It’s just like I am so in this line or in this stanza that I am not even here I am just what I am saying. My words are just here but I am not here. (Roberts)

This almost out of body experience that Roberts states as her favorite moment while performing spoken word demonstrates the emotional, euphoric, and utopic abilities of the art form. The responses of the men, Charles Hall and Xavier Thompson, were different from the women’s responses. Hall stated that his favorite moment is when he performs and the audience members know his poem, too, so they recite the poem out loud with them (Hall). Though there is an ego largely involved here, Hall’s favorite moment still speaks to how audience members can interact with performers of spoken word poetry. Xavier Thompson, similarly, answered saying his favorite moment is when audience members and fellow poets tell him he did a good job (Thompson). Though there is praise and self-gain involved with Thompson’s answer, all interviewees demonstrated their favorite moments in direct connection to audience members.

**POSSIBILITIES OF SOCIAL CHANGE WITH SPOKEN WORD AND UTOPIANS**

In her book *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*, Dolan writes “…I argue that it’s possible to use high theory to develop and extend new knowledge in the arts and humanities and at the same time (or later) translate it for readers and artists and critics to whom it might be useful in other, nonacademic contexts” (6). The translation that happens during spoken word poetry has the ability to transform into performed utopias. By audience members accepting these “utopian” and “emotional
performatives” in their own experiences as spectators, spoken word poetry creates means for human connectivity as both a self-reflexive process and a process that is shared. Attaching utopian though to spoken word performance answers the question: what can spoken word poetry do? The answer is one that is both in agreement and disagreement of utopianism—one’s “ideal world” is not consistent with another’s, but the chance of an “ideal world” is made possible through emotional connectivity in spoken word performance.

Dolan’s thoughts on utopia and performance adheres to the possibilities of social change and progression. In *Utopia in Performance*, Dolan states the following:

> I, too, believe in this particular, local, perhaps even utopian promise of theater, in which temporary communities assemble to look at social relations, to be provoked, moved, enraged, made proud by what human beings can do when they’re set in relation to one another. Performance offers us a practice that lets us rehearse new social arrangements, in ways that require visceral investments of bodies, of time, of personal and cultural history. (16)

This “utopian promise of theater” in relation to spoken word poetry is about redefining identities through slam. Not only is it about redefining, but it is about accepting and listening to the stories of others and being open to difference. A performance does not always have to be fictional and due to the “truths” performed in spoken word poetry, “new social arrangements” are made possible with a “utopian” and “emotional performative.”

In the process of redefining identities through slam come many challenges. In chapter 3, I will discuss the identity politics involved with slam poetry—especially in regards to scoring and strategy.
CHAPTER 3

IDENTITY MATTERS: THE STRATEGY OF PERFORMING EMOTIONS IN CONNECTION TO THE SELF

This chapter is an overview of how identity, cultural, and social politics can be seen in spoken word communities and in actual slam competitions. For this particular section, interviewees were asked questions about their own slam experiences, their opinions on identity and slam, as well as the effects (positive or negative) of women participating in slam. The following discourses shape the theoretical framework of this chapter: emotional theories, performance theory, and feminist analysis informed by Susan B.A. Somers-Willet’s book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*. Somers-Willet writes “What has perhaps been missing most markedly from criticism of slam poetry is serious consideration of the issues of identity and cultural politics that infuse its every aspect from the page to the stage, from composition to performance” (*The Cultural Politics* 14). Though Somers-Willet forms some of my analysis in this chapter, what she is missing from her book are personal accounts of slam poets as interviewees. The following interview accounts will either shape or complicate many arguments on identity politics and slam that Somers-Willet exemplifies in her book.

WHAT SLAM SCORES ARE BASED ON

Somers-Willet writes on the identity politics involved with slam poetry, as well as the “authentication” of a poet’s identity as it is performed. “Authentication” is best understood here as whether or not the judge or audience member can properly attach their own preconceived ideas of a performer’s identity and justify the poet’s words as “truth” to those identities. Just as every individual “performs” her/ze/his’s identity during everyday activities, events, etc, the performance of identity in slam poetry—then later, the scoring—speaks to the value of authenticating oneself as deemed appropriate for their socialized identities. Somers-Willet writes the following on the topic of authentication:
Because identity is an effect of performance in the world, just as it is at a poetry slam, what is authentic about identity is not the realness or truth it is often used to connote but the repetition and reception of certain behaviors and characteristics over time. That is, what is often deemed authentic by an audience is actually a norm of tried identity behavior. Poetry slams, as laboratories for identity expression and performance, present unique opportunities to witness this exchange between poet and audience in action. Slams prove cultural stages where poets perform identities and their audiences confirm or deny them as ‘authentic’ via scoring. (The Cultural Politics 8)

Poetry slam as a “laboratory for identity expression” complicates the art form. Because slam judges have the power to “authenticate” a poet’s experience with their scores, the chance of reinforcing stereotypes in slam is at a higher risk. “Authentication,” then, only works as a tool to perpetuate stereotypes of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc. If a poet’s expression of her/ze/his identity does not “match” the ideas of that particular identity to a judge, a poet’s score can suffer. Beyond authentication and the risk of perpetuating stereotypes, there are many more factors that may affect how a poet is scored during a slam. During my interviews, I asked my interviewees the following question: What do you think slam scores are based on? Charles Hall replied with the following answer:

I think scores are often based off of “Does this poet and this message fit my idea of what this message and this poet should fit?” It’s by no means a conscious process, I think scores tap into the unconscious. They tap into how we are socialized to believe things about the world. Right. Wrong. Values. What we want to believe, what we want contradicted in our own selves and our own society. (Hall)

Hall’s response both validates and challenges Somers-Willet’s claims on slam scores and authentication. Though the socialization of judges is important to consider, Hall believes that it is “by no means a conscious process.” What he means is that yes, judges are socialized to believe certain morals, ideas, and values about groups of people; however, Hall implies that not everyone is as conscious of their social constructs. Somers-Willet writes as if all judges are conscious about their own identities and how it affects or does not affects other groups sharing the same space. Hall suggests it is possible for the judges to base their scores solely on what a judge wants to believe or contradict—though a judge may not go any deeper as to why they believe it or contradict it.

Kit Wilson and Angelica Roberts provided similar answers when asked the same questions. Wilson stated, “I think [scores are] based on what the artist or the performer sounds like, what their content is, what they look like, how the audience reacts, and also
whoever is judging what their personal opinion is[…] or it could be based on ‘I don’t like this person’ or ‘I like this person’ or ‘this person is cute’” (Wilson). Similarly, Roberts answered, “I really feel like your initial score is, you know, before they hear your poem they judge the way you look” (Roberts). Somers-Willet writes on the exact answers Wilson and Roberts responded with when she writes the following:

…all slam poems becomes about the author’s performance of identity on some level because of the author’s mandated presence onstage. His or her speech, dress, gestures, voice, body, and so on all reflect in some way on the poem at hand, and these various aspects of embodiment convey nuances of cultural difference that the page cannot control. With the author’s embodiment, members of the audience are instantly privy to the physical and performative markers of identity that consciously or unconsciously inform their understanding of the poem through certain cultural lenses. (The Cultural Politics 18)

What Wilson, Roberts, and Somers-Willet imply is that identity—more specifically how an individual performs their identity—plays a large role in how poets are scored during slams. Not only is the performed identity of the poet important, but the identity of the judge is important as well since it formulates how they understand or do not understand the performer. What is deemed “authentic” to judges is subjectively based on her/ze/his’s own personal experiences which begs the question: is there real authenticity behind spoken word performance of identity? Somers-Willet suggests, “This is not to say that authenticity does not exist, only to say that authenticity exists as a performance in which a subject and his or her audience agree that an identity is successfully and convincingly portrayed” (The Cultural Politics 8). To further analyze the “success” of convincing judges of a performer’s identity through their spoken word poetry, the authenticity behind an “identity poem” is contingent upon how the judges have socially constructed their identities in their own lives. Whether the construction of an identity is conscious or not, a judge’s experience in relation to a poet’s experience deeply impacts the success of a poet in a slam.

Xavier Thompson and Brianna Johnson went a different route when they were asked what they felt slam scores were based on. Both Thompson and Johnson replied that it was emotional and human connectivity with judges that allow slam performers to obtain high scores. Thompson responded, “I think slam scores are based on what kind of emotions you can get the judges to connect to. It’s supposed to be like half performance half you know writing but it really isn’t. Basically people score you based on what you make them feel and
how much of it you make them feel” (Thompson). Parallel to what Thompson answered, Johnson replied, “Slam scores are based on the audience member’s ability to connect with the performer, based on how the judge feels that day, their values, their morals” (Johnson). In the introduction to their anthology *The Social Life of Emotions*, editors Larissa Tiedens and Colin Leach write, “Sharing an emotion with others may also alter the experience itself (see Manstead & Fischer, 2001; Parkinson, 1995)[…]Indeed shared emotion within a group may indicate a shared understanding of the world. This sharedness can serve to coordinate (and regulate) social interaction within the group or collective action against another” (5). Furthermore, Tiedens and Leach suggest, “Viewing emotion as socially shared and regulated by social pre- or pro-scriptions begins to suggest that felt and expressed emotion also provide social meaning. That is, people are likely to make a number of social inferences based on the presence or absence of particular emotions in their social settings” (6). Tiedens and Leach directly speak to the responses of Thompson and Johnson in regards to how emotional connectivity can both provide social meaning and create “shared understandings” between groups of people.

In spoken word poetry, the interpretation of identity is important; however, the interpretation of emotions can be just as important. Because people come from different backgrounds and experiences, how one defines “happiness,” “anger,” “sadness,” “heartbreak,” “love,” and many more emotions can vary by race, class, gender, social location, age, sexual orientation, ability, etc. Due to this, the emotional connection that happens between poets and audience members (therefore judges)—still—highly depends on identity. Thompson and Johnson go a different route in their responses and don’t speak on the actual effects of identity politics in slam; however, I argue the way people emotionally connect with one another is largely impacted by how we view ourselves and our own relationships. On the other hand, I do agree that emotional connectivity has the ability to destabilize stereotypes. Instances where a judge connects emotionally to a certain poet whom they did not think they would ever connect with strengthens the depth of spoken word poetry. The “emotional performative” here is then highlighted. Beyond identity politics and authentication, a reciprocity of understanding and relating can be made possible through emotional connections of poet and audience member.
In his article, "Empathy: Negotiating the Border Between Self and Other," Mark Davis writes, “Given the considerable evidence that mimicry produces parallel emotional states in observers, what is the effect of the resulting emotional synchrony between observer and target? The most socially important outcome seems to be greater feelings of rapport between the target and observer—variously operationalized as feeling “in step,” involved, or compatible with the other person.” (27). Davis’ statement further exemplifies Thompson and Johnson’s opinions on how emotions and connectivity play a large role on slam scores.

Somers-Willet states, “The accessibility of slam poetry is facilitated and perhaps demanded by the medium of performance, which is bounded by time, space, and—perhaps most important—an audience’s attention span” (The Cultural Politics 5). This “attention span” can either be elongated or fall short depending upon whether or not poets can remain “connected” to the judges and audience members. Many times in spoken word performance, “demanding the attention” of audience members is a strategy. To accurately “perform” an emotion to one’s own ability means running the risk of applying an emotion to a certain life experience that may or may not match an audience member’s. Beyond our identities, humans are emotional beings—but it is how these emotions are formed, defined, and perpetuated in our own lives that impacts audience members to spoken word performance.

In her book, The Cultural Politics of Emotions, Sara Ahmed suggests that even when two parties share an emotion, it does not necessarily mean that shared emotion is felt the same way. Ahmed states, “Shared feelings are at stake, and seem to surround us, like a thickness in the air, or an atmosphere. But these feelings not only heighten tension, they are also in tension. Emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don’t necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling” (10-11). This ”miscommunication” Ahmed writes on is prevalent in slam poetry. There are some emotions that may be performed similarly and may alter how a judge or audience member receives the poem. This is especially tricky when emotions blend in with each other and are in response to one another. For example, often times when a poem is “supposed” to be sad, the sadness can often be performed as “anger” instead because of pent up emotions or not being in complete control of one’s voice during performance. The miscommunication of displaying emotions is mistranslated through the poet’s performance—here, it is not about the authentication of identity and emotional connectivities; it is strictly
about performance. A poet may have written a poem with specific emotions behind each line; however, stage fright and nervousness is a real thing. The performance aspect of spoken word can take the emotion of a poem away and the only emotion conveyed may be anxiety and nervousness. In this sense, a poet’s content and identity may not mean as much if the performance is not “up to par” of audience member’s expectations.

Despite the possibilities of emotional miscommunication in spoken word performance, Tiedens and Leach quote French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s “radical claim [that] emotion is more than our attempt to make meaningful a preexisting world. In his view, by making meaning through emotion, we actually make the world itself. Thus, the world is constituted—comes into existence—through our emotion” (6). With that said, spoken word poets and audience members connecting through emotion creates a space that can be hard to find outside of a controlled open-mic or slam environment. In order to understand the world, to understand other people’s experiences, one must actively listen. In a space where spoken word poetry is performed, audience members attend to listen. With the listening comes the demand of connecting or disconnecting—still both including the process of emotions between individuals.

**WOMEN INTERACTION IN COMPETITIVE POETRY**

During an “emotional performative,” the chance of reciprocal healing between performance and audience member is heightened. The “emotional performative,” though, can also work between poets since they, too, are audience members—even if they are competing against one another. For this section, interviewees were asked if the competition aspect of slam poetry affects the way women interact with one another. The importance of this question stems from my own concerns of spoken word poetry no longer becoming an “avenue for healing” during competition—specifically for marginalized groups, like women. The Women of the World Poetry Slam is held every March and 72 women around the nation (and sometimes outside of the United States) compete with one another for bragging rights. The creation of the Women of the World Poetry Slam (2008) exemplifies the liberal and politically sensitive characteristics of PSI. Somers-Willet writes the following about the emergence of slam poetry:

> Although slam poetry is open to and includes people of all cultural orientations and persuasions, the focus is often on poets of color, working-class poets, women,
and other culturally marginalized groups. This focus reflects, I believe, a more general trend in contemporary American poetry toward recognizing and nurturing more authors of traditionally marginalized social groups (in some places almost exclusively). (The Cultural Politics 11)

All interviewees answered some form of “yes” in regards to whether or not the competitive aspect of slam affects the way women interact with one another. Roberts answered, “Yes…yes. Because there are so few women in the scene, we’re like clawing our way to the top, clawing our way to the spotlight, and I think we are already in a society that kind of bats us against each other. I feel like the poetry scene is dominated by men so we have to do it again in the poetry scene.” Here, Roberts juxtaposes the experiences women have in slam poetry with the experiences women share with one another outside of slam (the effects of gender socialization). Outside of the spoken word community, Western women are socialized to feel they must be in constant competition with one another. Often, beauty ideals and the male gaze (through a heteronormative lens) play a role on how women “talk down” or dismiss each other. This similar behavior can be found between women who compete against each other in slam because they, too, are competing—but for a judge’s approval. With that said, the woman who has the “best” story about rape, the “best” story about body image, the “best” story about domestic abuse and trauma, the “best” empowerment story, is rewarded. The irony here is that many of the women poets write their poems in order to heal from the hurt they undergo from being women in a patriarchal society; however, once in competition with one another, it is the “best” of this hurt that gets rewarded.

Johnson responded similarly with Roberts when she stated the following:

Absolutely, I think it affects the way everyone interacts with each other in competition, specifically women because we are so underrepresented in the poetry community and slam community so the competitive level for us is even higher than normal because not only are we poets competing against other poets but we’re women competing against other poets who are usually male. So I have to better than the boys but I have to be better with the girls first and then better with the boys. (Johnson)

Johnson’s response demonstrates and highlights the effects of patriarchy on women’s interaction with one another (inside and outside of slam poetry). This constant “need for competition” for women stems from the patriarchal and heteronormative notion that women
must also try and be better than one another to “get the man.” Those same characteristics are used in slam poetry for women.

Charles Hall answered that the competition in slam poetry “absolutely” makes women act differently toward each other. To comment on patriarchy, Hall answered the following:

Patriarchy has established the relationships of women to be and to compete for resources as dictated by men and male egos and slam poetry is a very male-ego centric environment to begin with. I’m in no position to understand or never even thought about why or what is at stake in how women treat each other and how those relationships changed. I can only say (1) I’ve witnessed it (2) I’ve seen the ugly side of it (3) I’ve seen how women have come together because of it. (Hall)

Though the competition does affect the way women interact with one another during slam, according to the interviewees, Hall answered that women still “came together.” Thompson had a similar answer to Hall’s when he answered that women definitely are “there to win” during slam competitions. On the other hand, Thompson answered, “I also feel like at times, as far as WOW, there is a significant population of women who don’t really care about the competition. Who are like, you know what, I’m here to just be around other women and fellowship with other poets that I don’t get a chance to see” (Thompson). At the end of Thompson’s answer, however, he stated, “So I believe that does exist but I feel there’s an even larger body of women who are like ‘I’m here to take home a trophy this year’” (Thompson). Thompson’s statement demonstrates the irony of spoken word poetry when it turns into a slam competition—what once started as a way of listening to one another and healing with words turned into how we can compete with our stories.

The competition aspect (a patriarchal characteristic) has the ability to cause women to feel like they are losing from other women first, before being grateful that women’s stories are being told. Though the sentiment behind creating the Women of the World Slam started to embrace the voices of women, the competition still very much impacts how women interact with one another during the actual slam. There is still possibility for women to connect with one another when listening to each other’s stories—especially between the woman poet and audience members. When it comes to women poets competing against one another, however, beating an opponent calls for strategy.
**USING IDENTITY AS STRATEGY FOR HIGHER SLAM SCORES**

In this section, interviewees were asked the following question: Does a performer’s identity of race, class, and gender play a strategic role in receiving high slam scores? Why or why not? A second question included identities of ability, religion, sexual orientation, sexuality, and age. In Somers-Willet’s book, she references Gayatri Spivak’s coined term “strategic essentialism.” Somers-Willet writes, “This use of strategic essentialism, if that is indeed what it is, yields an ambivalent position for poets: the readings provide an opportunity for the celebration of these identities while, on the other hand, confirming (and perhaps even advocating) their marginality from dominant culture” (*The Cultural Politics* 72). What Somers-Willet is implying is that poets will strategically capitalize on their identities (especially marginalized ones) during competition. Consequently, not only are judges scoring poets based on their perceived identities, but they are also scoring them based on the performance of a poet’s identity. The performance of a poet’s identity may exacerbate or challenge how a judge views a poet’s identity.

All interviewees presented an answer along the lines of the strategy involved with slam and identity being contingent upon what “type” of slam it is and the social location of the venue. For Wilson, she answered, “I think it depends a lot on the venue. I think that if you’re at a heavily based black event and you’re a black poet talking about ‘black things’ you’re likely to get a higher score than if you’re, say, like a white poet who is talking about ‘white things’ you may not get scored as well if the audience can’t relate to you” (Wilson). Wilson, along with all the other interviewees (who happen to be all Black), mentioned the dichotomy of whiteness and blackness at least once in their answers. Somers-Willet’s book’s focus is geared toward how the slam community is predominately black and how the “white start” of slam has shifted to minorities—especially black poets. Somers-Willet writes, “If predominately white audiences are judging the authenticity of a marginalized identity in addition to composition and performance, then the strong advocacy of black identity may be one of the factors that they further reward precisely because black identity is so often portrayed in American culture as the most marginalized compared to a central white identity” (83). The identity of judges is highlighted here due to the possibility of white judges not wanting to seem racist or prejudice if they give a low score to a black poet. Aesha Stevens
answered “Race, YES! White guilt. Poets of color LOVE appealing to the white guilt in the crowd. It never fails to win. Same thing with sexual orientation poems, I think because those are issues prevalent in the media the appeal is higher and therefore get scored higher” (Stevens). Here, Stevens suggests that identity, particular race and sexual orientation, can and do play a role in strategically receiving high scores in a slam competition.

Brianna Johnson responded similarly in regards to poets of color and white guilt. Johnson stated, “I think it has a lot to do (1) with guilt and ‘you’re different from me and you’re going through this and I don’t know what that’s like and I’m just going to assume it’s really really bad so I’m going to score you higher because you did that or the exact opposite’” (Johnson). Further, Johnson shared her experiences during a slam in Berkeley, CA where she performed a poem about her feelings toward white women who only date black men. At this particular venue in Berkeley, Johnson said the crowd was “dead silent.” The “dead silence” adheres to the importance of social location and how identity is performed by the poet. Johnson stated that making dominant groups “face themselves” can either work to a poet’s advantage or disadvantage and “when it gets real, when it gets intense like that it’s either full throttle amazing or it’s just dead” (Johnson).

Somers-Willet writes that white culture indeed has a fascination with “black artists and expression” (The Cultural Politics 86). This “white pleasure” can be translated into “white guilt,” and Somers-Willet states, “Yet this sense of guilt, however vague or veiled, does not lessen the white pleasure attained from witnessing black performance or other performance of difference. Indeed, as one sees in the case of some slam performances, it may be heightened through a complex matrix of fascination with, alienation from, and desire for the ‘other’” (The Cultural Politics 86). Charles Hall, who identifies as a Black man, states otherwise. Hall answered, “Race can serve as a disadvantage because quite frankly people just don’t want to hear that shit anymore. Especially with race. I would argue that also holds true with women. People don’t want to hear that shit anymore” (Hall). Hall further stated that he believes the progression of slam poetry has taken a step toward stories that are “outside” of the “normative” oppression box. He believes the audience wants a “stimulation of the imagination” and that poems on the black experience have gotten to be “too familiar” in the slam scene.
Xavier Thompson shared his own strategies with his identity. Thompson stated, “When I do performances, I try not to do ‘angry black poems’ in front of white people because sometimes it scares them. So I feel like, at least for me, race and gender definitely play a role in how you’re presented and how the judges will score you” (Thompson). Somers-Willet speaks to the opposite of Thompson’s remark when she writes, “Rewarding such writing and performance can benefit white liberal audiences: reward displaces them from being the target of the black poet’s protest” (The Cultural Politics 84). In opposition with Thompson’s response, Somers-Willet suggests that “white liberal audiences” may actually applaud poems on the black experience. Whether this “applaud” comes from a guilty space or not, a poet’s identity can sometimes be revealing without words through just how they perform their identities with their bodies. Thompson commented that “black and white bodies” function differently in regards to slam. Whatever comes out of the poet’s mouth, judges look to see if those bodies “match” or “challenge” what they are saying. Specifically, Thompson stated the following:

How things are said and who they are said by makes you interpret things different. Like if you see a Caucasian woman and she’s on stage doing a poem about being upset about some things that men do, I think we take that very differently than when we see a black woman do the exact same thing because we already have this perception that black women are angry and that black women are loud. So when we see any of those characteristics, even in their smallest form, they already get exacerbated in our heads because we already have this preconceived notion that that’s who they are. (Thompson)

Somers-Willet agrees with Thompson’s response about how bodies can influence judges in their scoring. Somers-Willet states, “The author’s physical presence ensures that certain aspects of his or her identity are rendered visible as they are performed in and through the body, particularly race and gender but extending to class, sexuality, and even regionality. Embodied aspects of identity provide lenses through which an audience receives a poem, sometimes causing a dramatic shift in the poem’s meaning and effect…” (The Cultural Politics 70). Thompson also commented on how emotions are received differently between men and women (which may very well explain why men have higher standing in national competitions compared to the women). Because patriarchy attaches “unemotional” stereotypes on the bodies of men, seeing a male body perform emotionally on self-reflection challenges that standard. Due of this, Thompson stated, “We hide behind the fact that we are
men and it allows people to excuse it so having that self critique is like ‘Wow, he’s so insightful’ but when a woman does it it’s like ‘ohhh, here we go again’” (Thompson).

Thompson also mentioned that the appearance of age may also alter how a judge feels, especially if the poet is seemingly “young” and performs about “deep topics.”

The gender conflict of men vs. women in slam poetry is just as prevalent as race is. Hall stated, “Gender absolutely plays a strategic role. In telling my coach ‘We need to throw up a female right now’ that is a strategic advantage we have and we use that as an advantage” (Hall). In her book, Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance, Jill Dolan highlights Hall’s response on how women can be used strategically in slam:

According to materialist feminist performance theory, placing a woman in representation—the site for the production of meaning in theater—is always a political act. Female bodies inscribed in the representational frame offered by the proscenium arch, and the frame created simply by the act of gazing through gender and ideology, bear meanings with political implications. Rather than promoting positive or negative images of women—as sociological, liberal feminist criticism first proposed—the materialist feminist approach suggests a new poetics of performance embracing radical revisions of content and form, which might more fully express women’s various subjectiveness across race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference. (48)

This “political act” of placing women’s bodies as a spectacle in performance goes hand in hand with how women can use their identities in slam toward higher scores. Wilson stated, “If there is a woman and she is lesbian and she’s doing a poem about her lesbian lover and guys in the audience think that’s hot or whatever they may score that person higher. Whereas, if it’s a guy talking about his male lover, they may score him lower” (Wilson). In Wilson’s statement, we also see how patriarchal tendencies may sway how male judges feel about certain types of poems that women perform compared to men. Though women poets may strategically think of how they can use their identity to win slams, there is still something to be said about how the role of women has positively affected slam (more in Ch. 3). Somers-Willet writes, “For many slammers, poems that make an empowered declaration of marginalized identity and individuality are a staple of one’s slam repertoire” (The Cultural Politics 69). This “declaration of marginalized identity” is, according to the interviewees, absolutely used in slam—much more consciously rather than unconsciously.
DIFFERENCES IN EXPERIENCES IN SLAM POETRY

For this section, interviewees were asked the following question: Do you think that the experience of slam is similar for women and men in particular, and if so, how? The follow-up question included identities on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and ability. Somers-Willet states, “Even when a slam poem does not take identity as its subject matter, the slam poet is always, in performing the poem’s voice, enacting aspects of identity on stage” (The Cultural Politics 35). This “enacting” of one’s identity can cause differences in experience—especially in regards to how audience members and judges perceive their identities.

All interviewees agreed that the experience is different for everyone due to their social location, experiences, and background—specifically for men and women. Johnson answered the following:

People love when men get on stage and share their feelings that’s like “Oh my god, he did a poem and it was so beautiful I mean he talked about emotions” and blah blah blah. But women, we’re just known to always talk about our feelings so the fact that a woman is on stage is just like “Okay, whatever, that’s just what you guys do anyway” but because men have been socialized to not show their feelings and not really care about anything it’s a much bigger deal for a man to get on stage and share their feelings than a woman. (Johnson)

Johnson’s statement amplifies social gender roles in a patriarchal lens. Wilson responded similarly to Johnson but further added that women hold a certain pressure when on a slam team. Wilson stated, “There is this pressure: Okay, you’re the woman on the team or you’re the woman slamming and we need you to share women stories to talk about women things” (Wilson). Wilson’s statement goes hand-in-hand with how a woman’s identity can become “authenticated” in the process of “sharing a woman’s story.” The essentializing of women’s story as a strategy works hand in hand with the “authentication” of identities through stereotypes. Somers-Willet suggests, “If slam judges reward poets who are authentic in their performance of an identity, and if that authenticity is actually constructed through this process of reward, then the poetry slam itself is a representational practice that authenticates certain voices and identities” (The Cultural Politics 76). This authentication may allow different groups of poets—specifically women—to gain higher scores if they perform their identity “correctly.” On the other hand, some interviewees stated that men stepping “outside” of their patriarchal box can be rewarded just as much, if not more.
Spoken word poetry, then, possibly becomes a place where conventional gender constructs and ideologies are challenged and ruptured. Men become rewarded in being emotional beings as women are rewarded for being “emotional” in masculine ways (like aggression, anger, etc). The “authentication” that judges apply, then, to poets can also be challenged. When a gender performs a role outside of a preconceived stereotype or role, in slam poetry, this can be rewarded because it is actually unconventional and new. This newness can cause an “emotional performative” moment because it can then become a form of entertainment.

In regards to the different experiences of men and women in slam poetry, Thompson stated the following:

When men are vulnerable, it’s looked at like “Wow it took him a lot to be vulnerable on stage” because we understand a lot of the conditioning that males go through and the fact that we aren’t really allowed to talk about emotions. Slam and performing poetry is about talking about your emotions so I feel like we get extra points for the conditioning that we’ve had to shrug off to get on stage and be vulnerable. (Thompson)

Thompson’s statement speaks to how patriarchy functions largely in slam poetry. Even for women, Thompson stated that the more “aggressive” or “man-sounding” they are, the higher the points. Usually, if women perform a poem in a “soft” manner, their scores are not as high compared to women who perform audibly and with “power” in their voice. What this may suggest is that slam can also be seen as a sport due to its competitive nature—which labels it as masculine. In order for women to “succeed” in a masculine space, they must adhere to the roles in that dominant gender. Wilson speaks on this when she stated in her interview, “I think because slam is competitive in nature it’s seen as somewhat aggressive like a ‘man’s sport.’ I think for women, it’s different because not only are we sharing our stories but we have to be on the level of the guys. And then there’s also a pressure to tell women stories” (Wilson).

The experience of slam, according to my interviewees, also differs for other groups outside of gender. In regards to race, Hall stated, “Speaking from a black male body, my antennas are always raised when I see a white male poet” (Hall). Hall responded to my interview question in regards to how he feels being “Black” in spoken word poetry has become a cliché. Hall stated, “My body became cliché. My identity became cliché. So anything I said, no matter what I said, out of this body was a little bit cliché” (Hall). Johnson and Thompson disagreed with Hall; in fact, bother Johnson and Thompson feel that their
Black identities still play a pivotal role in how they are perceived in slams. Both Johnson and Thompson specifically talked about how they stray from doing “angry poems” so as to not exacerbate preconceived stereotypes on the Black community. Due to this, for Johnson, it has caused for her to have some self-reflection as far as who she is as a poet and who she is “outside” of being a poet. Johnson stated, “I identify as a Black woman and I know the stereotypes of an angry black woman. I didn’t want to just be that. So I made it a point to not be that but by not being that, then I’m not being myself. I’m not being true to who I am” (Johnson). Johnson’s statement is in conflict with Somers-Willet’s thoughts on the authentication of slam poets when they perform their identities. Somers-Willet states, “…a poet performing a poem about marginalized identity may gain the reward of authenticity not only for his or her writing and performance but also for the well-executed performance of a marginalized identity itself” (The Cultural Politics 77). Because Johnson is strategically “keeping out” parts of her identity, what Somers-Willet is missing in her analysis is how the “authentication” of poets may actually work against poets in competition—especially if what is “authentic” is a negative stereotype.

For Thompson, he wanted to use his performance to breakdown negative stereotypes of black men and “challenge people’s perceptions of what black masculinity is” (Thompson). Thompson stated the following in regards to Black masculinity:

I think my poetry adds a different perception of who black men are in our society because I feel like, you know, with T.V. and whatnot we get a very one dimensional perception of black masculinity. I feel like I offer the exact opposite of what that is. I’m kind of awkward, I’m corky a little bit, you know I make jokes, and I feel like I offer something that’s not what they expect from black males. (Thompson)

Thompson’s statement highlights how the experience of Black men in spoken word poetry and slam is contingent upon how they want to perpetuate or destabilize stereotypes on black masculinity.

Hall was the only interviewee who responded to ability and slam. Going back to bodies as sites of knowledge, Hall stated that seeing someone slam in a wheelchair already gives them points—not only because of their disability, but because of the perceived bravery and courage involved (especially if the disabled poet does a poem about being disabled). Hall stated “it’s hard for me to see them getting less than a 7” in regards to poets who are visibly disabled (Hall).
Somers-Willet writes, “…poetry slams are places of possibilities, insight, and connection. They are the places where the possibilities of identity are explored, and their study contributes understandings about the complex interactions and desires between poets and their audiences” (The Cultural Politics 9). The “complex interactions and desires” shared between poets and their audiences are due to the portrayal and effects of identity in slam poetry. How a poet is perceived, how a poet performs, and how a judge uses her/ze/his’s own identity play a crucial role on an individual’s success in slam poetry. What this says about slam poetry and identity is that difference between groups may either be celebrated or negatively looked at contingent upon social location and experience.

Beyond the identity politics involved with slam poetry is an underlying healing component with spoken word poetry. Slam poetry is the competitive version of spoken word performance; therefore, though the poetry is used in a “game,” the competition still does not take away from the fact that there are people sharing their stories. In chapter four, I will discuss the healing aspects of spoken word and slam poetry—beyond the competition.
CHAPTER 4

DECLARATION OF SELF AND RECLAIMING OUR PAST SELVES FOR PRESENT HEALING

Though the competitive nature of spoken word poetry potentially hinders the way people interact with one another, spoken word—still—has a healing component to it.

SPOKEN WORD AS A PERFORMANCE FOR HEALING

When former members of the San Diego Slam Team were interviewed, all interviewees agreed that spoken word poetry and performance has a healing component to it. Charles Hall states, “I think slam scores are based off of something metaphysical. I think there is a force inside of people that connects to the words or the body or the inflections of the poet” (Hall). When I asked him his opinions on the healing component to slam poetry, he stated, “The answer is absolutely yes” (Hall). Hall has worked with youth in juvenile halls and told a story in our interview of an experience with a young man he will never forget. Keeping the teenager anonymous, Hall told me the story of the young man who was drinking and driving with his best friend and got into a car accident—killing his best friend. The young man wrote a poem saying sorry to his best friend’s mother. Hall said he will never forget the end lines of the poem: I’m sorry/ not because I took away one of your sons/ but because me being in here I’ve taken away both of your sons (Hall). After Hall asked him how he felt, the teen said it was the first time where he actually felt that his best friend’s mother had forgiven him. Hall, after a nostalgic pause, stated “that moment, right there, that’s the moment for me” (Hall).

In her book, We Heal From Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldúa, and the Poetry of Witness, Cassie Steele writes about “the poetry of witnessing” (1). In connection to Charles Hall’s memory of the young man in juvenile hall, Steele writes the following:

To witness means to decide to participate—not only with the head but with the heart—in the experience of another, an experience so painful that it must be shared in order to be confronted. Those in positions of power in our society have a tremendous ability to bring others from pain to possibility. And the beginning lies in poetry, for poetry provides distinctive access to pain. (2)
With this statement, Hall becomes a “witness” to the young man’s experience through poetry. Because Hall is the one who is in a “position of power,” he decided, in this case, to use his power in order to strengthen the healing power behind poetry writing and sharing. Though the young man had to confront the pain and trauma of the experience of killing his best friend, by writing through the pain, he was able to accept the forgiveness of his best friend’s mother and in turn—begin to forgive himself for the accident. What Steele is conveying in her statement is that poetry “accessing” pain can actually be a positive thing. Aesha Stevens mentioned a familiar incident in her interview when she stated, “[Y]ou never know who you’re speaking to. I think my most blessed moment was when someone who frequents my blogs wrote to tell me I stopped her from cutting that night. It reminds you why you share and why you do this art” (Stevens).

On top of connecting with Hall’s experience in the juvenile halls and Stevens’s experience with a blogger, Steele writes in complete juxtaposition with feminist scholarship due to the power of memory and trauma and how trauma (caused by oppression) can influence the lives of women. Steele states Trauma Scholars see trauma that is “missed” and “not experienced” (2). Because trauma is “missed,” mediums like poetry allow the experience to come to light. Though this process can be very painful, Steele argues it may actually be quite healing when she states the following:

Traumatic memories are encoded not narratively but in images and feeling, both emotional and physical. Thus, the traumatic experience cannot be directly referred to but must be remembered, reconstructed, and worked through indirectly in an address with another. This is why poetry allows us to witness as survivors to having survived and to witness to others’ survival: poetry, like trauma, takes images, feelings, rhythms, sounds, and the physical sensations of the body as evidence. (3)

When Kit Wilson was interviewed, I asked her why she started writing. Her response correlated with Steele’s statement: “I just had a lot of things I was dealing with and that was my way of dealing with those things” (Wilson). Through this statement, Wilson is perpetuating Steele’s ideology of writing (and poetry) to healing from trauma or difficult circumstances in one’s life. When I asked Wilson if spoken word poetry had a healing component to it, her response was the following:

I think it does. I think it gives people a chance to say what they need to say in front of an audience. I find that a lot of spoken word artists are people who need to be heard. There’s always a story behind it where people get in front of the mic
because they have something they need to say and whether we understand it, or we get it, or we like it, I think it’s healing for them to know this is a place I can share my thoughts. (Wilson)

Steele can respond to Wilson’s statement when she writes, “What the poetry of witness enables, as this book demonstrates, is that we may begin to listen across our differences, that we might begin to reconstruct these skipped histories, claim them, and heal from them” (6). Both Wilson and Steele comment on how the action of expressing poetry or witnessing someone’s experience through writing can actually open minds to difference. “Claiming” one’s history means claiming one’s story—a story only told through those who have experienced it rather than told for them. In doing so, the healing component behind spoken word poetry is possible largely through personal narrative.

Gillie Bolton, whose research interests engage with writing as a form of therapy, also agrees with Wilson and Steele. In her essay, "Every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome: The therapeutic power of poetry writing,” Bolton writes, “The writing of poetry profoundly alters the writer because the process faces one with oneself. Poetry is an exploration of the deepest and most intimate experiences, thoughts, feelings, ideas: distilled, pared to succinctness, and made music to the ear by lyricism” (118). By a spoken word performer “facing oneself” to then enable audience members to face their own experiences and trauma allots a shared moment of healing and working through difference. According to Bolton, this “deep and intimate” experience through poetry reaches emotional connectivity. When one can apply and name certain emotions to traumatic life experience, an individual has the ability to begin facing how the trauma has affected her life. With this, comes the influence of poetry as an avenue for personal healing.

In the study of psychology, writing as a form of therapy called “scriptotherapy” is used in counseling settings as a way for patients and survivors to come to terms with the abuse they have experienced. In his essay, “Scriptotherapy: Therapeutic Writing as a Counseling Adjunct” Richard Riordan makes claims on how scriptotherapy—“the various forms of writing used for therapeutic purposes”—is an actual process where writing is an effective use for healing (263). Riordan states the following:

Verbally labeling and describing a trauma through writing allows an individual to cognitively process the event and gain a sense of control, thus reducing the work of inhibition. Properly framed, writing is thought to assuage obsessive internal
ruminations and continued negative emotions that can exacerbate health and psychological problems. (263)

Riordan statement about writing as a tool for therapy and personal growth demonstrates the healing of writing through a social science and medical lens. Marginalized groups—women, people of color, the LGBTQIAA community, the working class, and more—benefit from writing as a resource to extract any negative emotions that may hinder their optimistic outlook in life.

**Spoken Word Poetry as Storytelling, Emotions, and a Voice for Activism**

There was a common theme of voice when I conducted the interviews. When I interviewed Brianna Johnson and asked when and why she started writing she stated, “In the 3rd grade—in my home once my mom decided the conversation was over, it was over. And I never felt like I could say my peace or say what I had to say or ask questions or anything so I would write them down” (Johnson). When I asked Johnson about whether or not spoken word poetry had a healing component to it, she responded with, “It’s healing for everybody. It’s healing for the performer and for the audience member. The thing I loved about spoken word in the beginning, or in general, was someone can get on stage and say exactly how you feel” (Johnson). Johnson also stated, “When you walk into an open-mic, it’s such an intimate space. You’re able to really see what other people are going through and see ‘it’s not just me, I’m not the only one who deals with this’ and then with performing, it’s a release[…] I call it church” (Johnson).

Coinciding with Brianna Johnson’s thoughts, in the article, “Why Write Poetry,” poet Frances Payne Adler speaks on her experiences with poetry:

> Poetry, with its imagery and visual language, brings the reader inside the moment of the poem, inside someone's experience. It speaks to us through our senses, and breaks through our denial. So when I feel deeply about an injustice, a family without a home having to sleep in the park bushes, a man with colon cancer dying because he doesn't have health insurance, a Palestinian woman protesting the Occupation, teargassed to death, I write about it, attempt to get through. Poetry as a catalyst to action. (Schneberg and Adler 17)

Both Johnson and Adler demonstrate how poetry (specifically performance poetry in Johnson’s case) can not only “give voice” to who is writing/performing it, but also help “give voice” to those who have not found theirs yet. Poetry, more specifically spoken word poetry,
can also be seen as a form of activism as it raises awareness to social experiences—even through the personal narratives by extracting theory from experience. This activism is made possible through the emotional and human connectivity that spoken word poetry and performance provides.

In their article, "The Emotional Convergence Hypothesis: Implications for Individuals, Relationships, and Cultures," Cameron Anderson and Dacher Keltner write on emotions and human connectivity through emotions. In connection to what Johnson said about performers connecting with audience members, they state, “…when two people feel similar emotion, they are better able to understand each other. People who experience similar emotions more easily take each other’s perspective” (Anderson and Keltner 145). Further, Anderson and Keltner states, “…people feel closer to and are more comfortable with others who experience similar emotions. Emotional similarity increase cohesion and solidarity, whereas emotional dissimilarity increases discomfort and the likelihood of interpersonal conflict” (145). Anderson and Keltner contest how emotions similarly shared and felt can actually bring two people together. In the case of spoken word poetry and Johnson’s statement, the reciprocal healing between performer and audience member is created largely due in part by the emotional connection between the two parties.

In her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed states, “Emotions are intentional in the sense that they are ‘about’ something: they involve a direction or orientation towards an object (Parkinson 1995:8). The ‘aboutness’ of emotions means they involve a stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world” (7). This intentionality that Ahmed writes about can be compared to the intentional act of performing specific emotions in spoken word poetry in order to help convey the healing or activist message behind the poem. When Angelica Roberts was interviewed, she stated,

> When I’m competing, when I initially write poems, I try to write from a genuine emotion. If I really feel something, I like to write in that moment so that when it is time to compete, I can go back to that emotion without trying to recreate it in my head. It is something that I really felt and something I can easily tap into and that is what I tap into a slam because you want to move a crowd. You want to move an audience and you want it to appear as genuine as it did the first time you wrote it. So yeah, it’s more of a “I have to go there” like “I have to go to that dark place” or “that happy place” or “that place that I was when I wrote this poem. (Roberts)
In her book, *Emotion-Focused Therapy: Coaching Clients to Work Through Their Feelings*, Leslie Greenberg writes, “People not only are informed and moved by their emotions, but they also need to make sense of them and decide on how best to express them and what best to do in any emotion-evoking situation” (14). In connection to Roberts’s statement, by transforming her emotions into a performance, she translates her emotions into an act of reciprocal healing between the performer and the audience member. Wilson said a similar statement in her interview:

> With slam, it’s different because everything has to be perfect. So you have to say [the poem] perfectly, have it memorized, have the emotion, then you have to emotionally tap into the emotion you want to portray in the poem. And sometimes it’s going to a place within yourself that you don’t necessarily want to so I think, “Okay, I have to be sad in this poem –what makes me sad? How can I be sad? What’s the saddest thing I can think of? Or I have to be angry, what gets me angry? And it’s drawing on these emotions and past experiences that I don’t necessarily want to. (Wilson)

Though Wilson “does not necessarily want to” go to a dark place, the “calling” for reciprocal healing almost becomes stronger than that fear. Roberts can contest to this when she stated:

> Someone once told me that writing poetry is not “emotional vomit” and I feel like the more you write for slam, or in a spoken word type kind of genre, you are performing for people. And you have a span of time and you learn how to put what you feel and what you are going through in a way that connects to people and not just yourself. It not only heals you, it heals someone else. It can tell their story, it can give them hope, or motivate them—and all those things to me are components of healing. (Roberts)

Xavier Thompson agrees with Roberts and the other poets interviewed in regards to the healing behind spoken word poetry. On top of the concept of a “voice,” the importance of storytelling is also exemplified in this study. Thompson stated the following:

> There are times where I write about some things that I’m going through as an everyday kind of person. There are things that I experience in my life that I feel like need to be written about and being able to share that in front of an audience, to have somebody come up to and say “Wow, I felt exactly like that when I was 17” or “I’m going through a lot of these same things you’re talking about in your work” allows all of us to heal together. We get a chance to share our stories and other people get to hear them and connect to them and we all get to heal together. (Thompson)

In her book, *Tell It By Heart: Women and the Healing Power of Story*, Erica Meade writes on the importance of storytelling. Meade states, “The first healing power of story is its
ability to arouse strong emotions. We heal best when we’re powerfully engaged. When genuine emotions heat up and come to the surface, the psyche grows ripe for change, and new learning makes a deep impression” (243). This “deep impression” Meade touches upon is a characteristic of spoken word performance poetry. Thompson stated that he thinks people watch spoken word “mainly for the connectivity of it all because I feel like when we hear other people talk about some of the things we go through, it makes us feel normal. It helps us feel like we are connecting to something much larger than ourselves and we are not the only ones going through these things” (Thompson). In her book, *Interpreting the Personal: Expression and the Formation of Feelings*, Sue Campbell writes, “The complex proposal I have defended is this: we form our feelings through acts of expression and, in doing so, attempt to make clear to others, or even just to ourselves, the personal significance of some occasion or set of occasions of our lives” (131). By spoken word performers forming their emotions and translating them into oral poetic narratives, the potential for healing either from only the performer, only the audience member, or both is heightened.

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF WOMEN IN SLAM POETRY

In her article, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous writes on why it is important for women to write and create their own voice. The importance of women’s writing directly connects to the importance of women’s participation in spoken word and slam poetry. Cixous states the following:

I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (347)

Cixous’ statement of “woman putting herself in the text” is paramount in order for women to tell their own stories. If women do not write their stories (and for this study, participate in slam) a chance to speak against oppressive voices and systems are lost. Because women are a marginalized group in spoken word poetry, finding the positive aspects of their participation in slam poetry was important in my research. The power of women storytelling is found here and in the answers of the interviewees. The women interviewed, specifically, agreed there were positive effects to women’s participation in slam. Wilson listed the following about the positive effects of women’s participation in slam:
Hearing [women] voices, hearing those stories that we can’t get from a male perspective, seeing these brilliant women writers, seeing their different styles, hearing their different accents, and just pretty much representing. It’s also good to see someone who looks like you representing something that is important to you. (Wilson)

When both Roberts and Stevens were asked about the positive effects of women’s participation in slam, both interviewees agreed upon the “relatability” factor of performer to audience member. Roberts stated, “I feel like women dominate the audience […] when a woman gets up there, then you have more relatability to women’s issues. I feel like a male could do it but it’s just much more personal to hear a woman tell a woman’s story” (Roberts). The importance of relatability in storytelling can also be found in Stevens’ answer to the question. She stated, “We get a platform, a microphone and three minutes to talk about whatever we want. Regardless of the scores, someone may have needed to hear our message. I think that is so strong and so amazing about slam” (Stevens). Steele also writes to what Roberts and Stevens mention in their statements about women’s role with spoken word and slam poetry: “Poetry begins the process of healing by allowing survivors to give voice to the non-narrative memories, called by researchers ‘traumatic memories,’ of having survived” (Steele 4). By women in the audience hearing and seeing other women give voice to experiences they may have also undergone, the idea of an audience member also finding her own “voice” becomes possible.

In her article, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde writes on both the difficulties and necessities of women writing poetry. Lorde uses poetry as a voice for experience when she states, “I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile wordplay that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight” (“Poetry” 15). In this sense, Lorde is using poetry as a medium for women to share their experiences and bring light to their insight. When women allow themselves to speak on their own experiences, they are preventing systems of power (like patriarchy) to speak for them—which, in turn, only oppresses women even more. When the men were interviewed, both Thompson and Hall stated that women’s participation in slam was vital. Xavier Thompson stated the following:

I think the sharing of stories is probably the biggest thing that I feel like I’ve take away from watching women slam and compete just because […] when you mix in the competition factor, […] in a way that’s going to increase the probability of
connecting. It is probably my favorite aspect of watching women in competition. (Thompson)

Thompson stated that not only is the participation of women in competitive slam important for connectivity among performer and audience, but the competition factor also heightens this connectivity. Charles Hall, on the other hand, spoke more on what women offer to slam poetry. Hall stated the following in when I asked him about the positive effects of women in slam:

I think the obvious is probably still the most powerful which is different voices, different experience. Different bodies give us different ways of understanding life, existence, identities. I will argue that women have a different way of understanding the world than men…and so women participating in slam and spoken word poetry, for other women, it gives them a way of relating. (Hall)

Hall went on to say that women performing on stage allow men to see there is a “different way of seeing the world” (Hall). By men witnessing women’s testimonies, a chance for men to process their own forms of domination becomes possible. Hall also went past gender binaries with his thoughts on women’s participation in slam. He stated the following about queer bodies:

When you understand that I’ve heard a man and then I’ve heard a woman out of these male and female bodies, well, there’s a range. So now when we’re talking about queer communities, perhaps, and this is completely speculative, but just perhaps someone from a queer body can say “listen I see there’s a range, I’m not one or the other I am somewhere within that range but I fit somewhere and so my voice, too, can be on that stage. Maybe it hasn’t been on that stage because I don’t believe we have a powerful queer population, a strong population outside of the heteronormative binaries but women serve to open up that space. If women don’t open up that space, if females don’t open up that space then that space doesn’t open up outside of the gender binary. (Hall)

What Hall’s statement exemplifies is women not only opening up a space for their own voices and bodies to participation in spoken word and slam poetry, but voices and bodies of “others” that are also silenced. Because men dominate the spoken word scene, women responding more and more to slam by participating has the ability to allow other marginalized groups to feel they can, too. This theory may also work the same if it is vice versa. If any marginalized group sees there are other groups working, speaking, and performing against a dominant group, “breaking the silence” of those traumas becomes possible. Audre Lorde exemplifies this when she states, “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which
we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (“Poetry” 15). The “vital necessity” Lorde writes on exemplifies the importance of women’s participation in slam—whether or not the competition affects their interaction with one another. With women writing and performing their own stories, women are able to create a platform for themselves in a male-dominated “sport.” As women progress in slam poetry, and for the women who have already succeeded as champions, it is well understood that women achieve this through their own stories.

Beyond the competitive aspect of slam poetry, spoken word performance has the ability to raise consciousness of both audience members and poets alike. To find an art form that constitutes so much possibility for healing goes beyond the competition factor of slam and social implications behind it. Where there is room for social and personal growth, there is healing.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

There are many things I would have done differently in this research. My initial methodologies proved to be very challenging for a thesis; however, I think with more time, effort, and assistance, getting audience and judge feedback would have helped support my arguments in this study. Because I limited this study only to San Diego’s venue Elevated!, I also limited myself in the demographics of who I was interviewing. Spoken word performers in San Diego are predominately Black, predominately men, and around the same age group (early to late twenties). Though I received an even number of men and women voices, the intersectionality arguments in this study would have been stronger if I provided more interviewees with a different racial identity other than Black.

As I reached the end of this study, I did find, however, that most of my research questions were addressed and answered. Some of my questions are still very subjective in nature and the answer will always be changing. For example, “Why do men predominately win slam competitions in San Diego?” After conducting this research, there is no real answer except that it depends on the identity and feelings of the judges; however, I think there is something to be said about the evaluation of emotion in regards to men’s participation and success in slam poetry. This research revealed men’s thoughts on how spoken word poetry and slam does not only have to be a game; it can also be a form of healing.

This study also highlighted the impact of women’s participation in slam and women voices speaking on their experiences with slam poetry. Both the men and women of this study all spoke and related to both the “utopian” and “emotional performative” aspects of this research. Further, this study proves how much of an impact identity has on competitive poetry—but—also the impact of self-healing and reclamation of voice during that process. What this ultimately proves is spoken word poetry, beyond the slam aspect of it, indeed does enact social change through emotional connectivity—at least in San Diego.


**Research Significance**

Due to my “insider” role as a spoken word poet and competitor, I wanted to learn “something new” while doing this research. As a feminist critical thinker, I noticed a lot of tensions in the slam space and this research allowed me to investigate those tensions further. Choosing to do my academic research on spoken word poetry contradicts the very purpose of why spoken word poetry was created—for poetry to become more accessible to those outside of academia. I do, however, feel that bridging the gap between academia and spoken word is important; this is especially so due to what we, as a society, constitute as “truth.” By bringing spoken word poetry into the academic world, I have a chance to demonstrate how an art form, created for “common folk,” can also have a theoretical place in academia. “Truths” behind narratives and storytelling, then, become a new way of life understanding and critically thinking.

Attaching spoken word and slam poetry to utopian thought was important in suggesting that a utopia can actually become obtainable through an obtainable art form that provides social healing. It was important to also connect slam poetry with identity politics and how that is used as a strategy for slam scores to highlight the constant negotiation we have with our identities in our everyday lives. This constant negotiating we do with our identities—what we choose to perform in public or private—is strategically performed due in part by how others will perceive us or accept us. The research results I found in this study speak volumes to the negotiating of identities outside of spoken word poetry. Though the concept of social and personal healing was not highlighted in all the chapters, the healing aspect was the driving force behind the importance of this study.

**Future Research**

For future studies, I would like to examine the impact of performance in spoken word poetry and if highlighting performance could possibly redefine all my arguments in this study. I also would like to look into spoken word performer’s private vs. public lives and if their performance of their poetry is perpetuated even behind closed doors. Though judges are told they are scoring poets based on both writing and performance, it may be possible that putting on a great performance—to hide “poor poetry”—can still prove to win slams. This
research would also be stronger if there were voices across the country and world to speak on both the healing aspect of spoken word and the effects of competitive poetry.


Hall, Charles. Personal interview. 3 Nov. 2012.


Roberts, Angelica. Personal interview. 8 Nov. 2012.


Stevens, Aesha. Personal interview. 15 Nov. 2012.


Wilson, Kit. Personal interview. 15 Oct. 2012.
APPENDIX

SLAM RULES AND REGULATIONS
The following rules and regulations are used and enforced by Poetry Slam Incorporation (PSI) during the national and international competitions. Local competitions, like San Diego’s Elevated!, adhere to the same rules. These rules and regulations are extracted verbatim or paraphrased from Susan Somers-Willet’s appendix in The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America.

**POEMS & PERFORMANCE**

1) Poems can be on any subject and in any style.
2) Each poet must perform work that s/he has created.
3) No props.
4) No musical instruments or pre-recorded music.
5) No costumes. The protest committee may apply a two point deduction for violation of the costume rule.

*Sampling*

A poet is allowed to incorporate work’s from other people only if the poet is “ripping off another’s words;” however, “ripping off” someone else’s words is not allowed.

*The No Repeat Rule*

A poem may be only used once during the entire tournament.

*The Three-Minute Rule*

No performance should last longer than three minutes. Poets are allowed time to adjust the mic and situate themselves before doing a poem but the time starts once interaction with the audience begins. After three minutes, there is a 10-second grace period (up to and including 3:10:00). Starting at 3:10:01, a penalty is automatically deducted from each poet’s overall score according to the following schedule:

- 3:10 and under: no penalty
- 3:10:01-3:20: -0.5
- 3:20:0-3:30: -1.0
- 3:30:01-3:40: -1.5
3:40:0-3:50 -2.0
and so on [0.5 for every 10 seconds over 3:10]
(An additional 10 seconds is permitted in the finals without penalty.)
Judges are not told about the time penalty until after their scores are recorded.

*Influencing the Crowd before the Bout Begins*

Poets are allowed to casually interact with audience members, except for judges after they are chosen. Further, once inside the venue, competing poets are not allowed to act in a certain manner that would leave an impression on them for the audience. Doing so will result in a warning and then a two-point time penalty if repeated.

**JUDGING AND SCORING**

Once five judges are randomly selected from the audience, each judge will 1) be given a set of printed instructions on how to judge a poetry slam, 2) have a private, verbal crash course by the emcee or bout manager on the dos and don’ts of poetry slam judging (where they can ask questions), and 3) hear the standardized Official Emcee Spiel, which, among other things, will apprise the audience of their own responsibilities as well as remind the judges of theirs. Having heard, read, or otherwise experienced these three sets of instructions, a judge cannot be challenged over a score. Complaints, problems, and/or disagreements regarding the impartiality of the judges should be brought privately to the attention of the emcee or bout manager BEFORE the bout begins. Having heard and understood the complaint, the bout manager or emcee will then make a decision (also privately) that cannot be further challenged.

*Scoring*

The judges will give each poem a score from 0-10, with 10 being the highest or “perfect” score. They will be encouraged to use on decimal place in order to preclude the likelihood of a tie. Each poem will get five scores. The high and the low scores will be dropped and the remaining three scores will be added together. Team scores will be displayed or otherwise publicly available during the bout.
The Official National Poetry Slam Instructions for Judges

You have been enlisted in the service of poetry. This is supposed to be fun, and we don’t expect you to be an expert, but we can offer certain guidelines that might make this more fun for everyone involved, especially you.

- We use the word “poem” to include text and performance. Some say you should assign a certain number of points for a poem’s literary merit and a certain number of points for the poet’s performance. Others feel that you are experiencing the poem only through the performance, and it may be impossible to separate the two. You will give each poem only one score.

- Trust your gut; and give the better poem the better score.

- Be fair. We all have our personal prejudices, but try to suspend yours for the duration of the slam. On the other hand, it’s okay to have a prejudice that favors the true and the beautiful over the mundane and superficial, the original and enchanting over the boring and pedestrian.

- It’s hard not to be influenced by the audience, but remember that in a quiet poem, the audience has no way to communicate what they’re experiencing.

- The audience may boo you, that’s their prerogative; as long as the better poem gets the better score, you’re doing your job well.

- Be consistent with yourself. If you give the first poem a seven and the other judges give it a nine, that doesn’t mean you should give the second poem a nine—unless it’s a lot better than the first poem. In fact, if it’s not as good as the first poem, we count on you to give it a lower score.

- Although the high and the low scores will be thrown out, don’t ever make a joke out of your score thinking that it doesn’t really matter. A poem about geometry does not automatically deserve $\pi$ as a score. Nor does one about failing a breathalyzer test deserve a 0.08.

- Your scores may rise as the night progresses. That’s called “Score Creep.” As long as you stay consistent, you’re doing your job well.

The poets have worked hard to get here; treat them with respect. They are the show, not you (although there could be no show without you). All of us thank you for having the courage to put your opinions on the line.