Poetic Personas: Self & Society in Spoken Word Performance Culture

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

By

Naliyah K. Kaya
Bachelor of Arts
Hampton University, 2006

Director: Joseph A. Scimecca, Professor
Department of Sociology

Spring Semester 2010
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express gratitude to the many individuals who have invested in my academic and personal growth, as well as, those who have inspired and encouraged me along the way. Special thanks to my parents & family, thesis committee (Joseph Scimecca, Rutledge Dennis, & Tony Samara), Karen Rosenblum, Amy Best, the George Mason University Department of Sociology & the George Mason University Alumni Association (John C. & Louise P. Wood Graduate Scholarship), the spoken word community, Huldah Martin, Tasleem Qaasim, Diana Knauf, Ernest Johnson, Zina McGee, and Kevin Scriber II.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

POETIC PERSONAS: SELF & SOCIETY IN SPOKEN WORD PERFORMANCE CULTURE

Naliyah K. Kaya, M.A.

George Mason University, 2010

Thesis Director: Dr. Joseph A. Scimecca

This thesis examines recurring themes in spoken word performance poetry, artists' displays and narratives of self (public selves), and their descriptions of society. Specifically the research seeks to answer the following questions: *What themes emerge overall in spoken word performance poetry? How often do artists make self the topic in poems? What types of public selves are exhibited or described by performers and which social problems/topics are these selves connected to?* Data, with the exception of one open mic that took place in New York, were collected in the Washington Metropolitan Area during 2009 using the following methods: seven participant observations of open mics, three participant observations of two professional spoken word artists, two in-depth interviews and two diary entries. Criteria for inclusion in the study was based on the age of individuals, the requirements included being 18 years of age or older and participation in the spoken word community as performers at public events.

1. Introduction

Beginning in the mid-to late 20th century "spoken word," a type of perform-

ance poetry began to evolve and become increasingly popular (Walker & Kuykendall

2005). Bronwen Low (2006:97) defines spoken word as a movement and category "used

to describe forms of poetry and performance in which an artist recites (rather than sings)

poetry, often to musical accompaniment that might range from jazz ensemble to a bongo

drummer." However, the terms spoken word and performance poetry are also often used

interchangeably to refer to original poems that are performed under three minutes (which

is generally the amount of time artists are allotted on stage at open mics and poetry

slams), and usually in the form of free verse with a narrative. They are rarely published in

book form (with the exception of chapbooks) and overwhelmingly include social

commentary. To clarify Low's definition some artists, such as Georgia Me in her poem,

Ghetto Bell, intertwine song in their performances. It is also not uncommon for poems to

be performed without musical accompaniment. Clearly spoken word is open to an array

of interpretations and definitions as diverse as its artists and audiences.

The 21st century ushered in a resurgence of this art form. Numerous spoken

word cafes nationwide now join the renowned Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City

as performance spaces for artists. Low (2006:97) asserts that spoken word broke into the

mainstream as media, specifically television, began to popularize the art form stating,

"While spoken word had been confined principally to coffee houses and street corners, in the early 90's it went mass-market and –media as MTV and Much Music began to televise performance poetry, broadcasting clips of poets in-between music videos." In 2001 HBO launched season one of the series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry* also known as *Def Poetry Jam* or *Def Poetry*. The show highlighted popular spoken word artists across America. The format of the show was a replication of open mic poetry readings with a host, live audience, and performer(s) who took the stage, each attempting to wow the audience. The series would eventually debut on Broadway.

In 2008 the HBO seven part series *Russell Simmons Brave New Voices* aired. The show featured teenage poets and their mentors from seven states across the nation as they practiced for Youth Speaks' 2008 Brave New Voices International Youth Poetry Slam Finals in which over 500 teenage artists battled with their teams to come out on top. While open mic poetry readings generally offer support to artists, slams which began in Chicago's Green Mill Tavern, are competitions individually or with teams that "offer a more critical involvement of the poets and their poetry" and in which "The audience may respond how ever they see fit" (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:231). In his book *A Poetry Slam* the founder of slam competitions Marc Kelly Smith (2009:36) outlines the basic rules of a slam engagement:

> "Perform your own work.
> Perform in three minutes or less.
> No props or costumes.
> Scores range from 0.0 to 10.0 using one decimal place to avoid ties."

He also mentions that while these are the basic rules, they may vary slightly from event to event, and judges are usually pulled from the audience.

Figure 1. Nuyorican Poets Café- New York, NY

With the continued popularity of spoken word poetry open mics and slams one has to wonder what draws people to participate in such events. Spoken word open mics and poetry slams have expanded to suburban and rural communities. No longer confined to large metropolitan areas, they can be found in places like Michigan, Virginia, and even Hawaii. So just what is it that keeps participants fascinated with this medium of expression? Is it the sheer competition and excitement of slams, the amusing self-divulging and humorous nature of open mics or something deeper? Walker and Kuy-kendall (2005:232 & 246) argue the significance of performance poetry is that "…spoken-word poetry, as a movement, is communicating beyond the culture of the poet…Poetry has become a way for the eyes of a new generation to be opened to the troubles of their neighborhood, their country, and their world…together, cultures are learning to communicate effectively in one room." Effective communication requires listening intently and attempting to understand what is being communicated from the perspective of the speaker. Brandon Spun (2002:1) stresses this notion stating, "The spoken word is a revolutionary medium, not because of what is said, but because it requires listening. It is about the absolute attention that these voices and ideas demand."

Howard University English professor, activist, poet, and writer Tony Medina (Medina & Reyes Rivera 2001:xix-xx) defines the primary goal of the poet and poetry as one of humanization, asserting that "…Any poet worth his or her weight in syllables and words uses poetry for certain reasons, be it to define one's self, to defend one's self, or to describe one's environment with accuracy, communicating a clear understanding of what is going on in the world…." But is Medina's claim of humanization through poetry

4

actually occurring or simply an ideal? What are people talking about in their poetry? Perhaps the medium is filling a need people have to be heard, to have their words and stories validated or maybe it is simply about being able to craft and perform catchy one-liners and provocative poems well enough to captivate audiences. With these questions in mind I set out to understand how artists utilize the medium, specifically the ways in which they express and define their public selves.

This thesis examines recurring themes in spoken word performance poetry, artists' displays and narratives of self (public selves), and their descriptions of society. Specifically the research seeks to answer the following questions: *What themes emerge overall in spoken word performance poetry? How often do artists make self the topic in poems? What types of public selves are exhibited or described by performers and which social problems/topics are these selves connected to?* In this thesis public selves refers to artists' portrayal(s) of self in the poetry they perform at open mics and other poetry events.

2. Literature Review

In recent years much of the literature on spoken word has examined the art as it relates to literacy practices, specifically youth literacy in schools. A number of studies and literature have focused on this topic as it pertains to student disengagement from English/Language Arts curriculum in urban middle schools and high schools. In its simplest form literacy can be defined as the ability to read and write. However, many of the articles sought to expand this definition to include critical thinking and the ability to use words to rethink and change society (Fisher 2005b, Kinloch 2005). In an effort to engage students and promote literacy, some teachers have begun to note the significance of drawing upon out-of-school literacy activities that students take part in such as spoken word and aspects of hip-hop such as rap, which involves the writing, memorizing and performing of lyrics.

By integrating aspects of spoken word and hip-hop into classrooms teachers have sought to "bridge" literate and literary behaviors, which are often unacknowledged inside school settings, with mandated curriculum. The innovative classes and programs discussed throughout the articles, demonstrate a strong commitment to what Paulo Freire (1989) termed *co-intentional education*. Co-intentional education rejects the banking model of schooling in lieu of liberating teaching (problem-posing education), which actively engages students in critical thinking and problem solving. In this context it is

recognized that education must be in dialogue with the students, it cannot present its own curriculum apart from their participation. Therefore, students create their sense of self through dialogue, reflection and action. In this framework the goal of education is to produce individuals that are able to critically assess the structure of society and their place within it.

The literature presented four key sources of student disengagement from English/Language Arts curriculums: students' perceived lack of curriculum relevance, privileging of the dominant culture (European American culture in which being of European descent, male, heterosexual, of upper-middle to elite socioeconomic class, and a native English speaker are the standard) in curriculum, teachers' lack of understanding regarding cultural contexts and student backgrounds, and the limiting of self-expression and language in assignments.

In *Writing for Their Lives: The Non-School Literacy of California's Urban African American Youth* the authors found that many of the youth in their study were "unmotivated to engage in school-based literacy events because they do not see the relevance of the school curriculum to their lives or, based on prior experiences, they actually fear having to write in school" (Mahiri & Sablo 1996:164). However, the authors comment that though students in the study often voiced displeasure and annoyance with writing in school the "same students clearly valued the out-of-school writing of their peers…Thus, it is erroneous to conclude that writing, in and of itself, was unimportant or "uncool" to these students; rather, they resisted what they viewed as the unauthentic nature of many of their experiences with academic writing" (Mahiri & Sablo 1996:174).

Korina Jocson (2005 & 2006) makes mention of the *type* of literature often present in American classrooms, describing it as "elitist" and the creations of "dead white men." Thus, the texts and poetry students are taught to value often does not reflect their own lives. This can lead youth to think their cultures, ideas, and beliefs are not of importance within larger society and certainly not inside the educational realm.

Considering that in their voluntary out-of-school literacy practices youth often used their writing to "make sense of both their lives and social worlds" and that it "provided them with a partial refuge from the harsh realities of their everyday experiences," educators must realize that writing which engages students is often quite personal (Mahiri & Sablo 1996:174). In conducting their research Mahiri and Sablo (1996) had students refuse to show them their work, saying it was too personal to share, or would select only certain pieces they would allow them to view. Writing, it seems, was an important aspect of youth's identity construction process and a means of working through difficult life circumstances (e.g. violence, drugs, poverty). If students feel at odds with curriculums they do not see themselves present in and assessments that are culturally biased, they may choose to distance themselves, resulting in academic apathy.

While the objective of academic writing may be for students to learn a set of skills and to be familiar with a particular type of literature that should help them succeed in the workforce or academia, youth often view their writing as highly personal, stemming directly from life experiences and as a means of working through problems and constructing identities. Therefore teachers need to be aware of the differing goals between school curriculum and the aims of their students when it comes to writing and

literacy practices. They must also be conscious of the type of literature presented to students and that they may view it as being in direct opposition to their lives and experiences and/or as insignificant because it does not speak directly to their situations. Thus, culturally relevant text should also be presented to youth alongside the canonical texts in order to engage students and provide them with a well-rounded literary knowledge base.

Another source of youth disengagement may lie in complicated relationships between teachers and students of differing backgrounds. Morrell & Duncan-Andrade (2002:88) problematize the high enrollments of "ethnic minority children" with few "ethnic minority teachers," arguing that as "classrooms across the country become increasingly diverse, determining how to connect in significant ways across multiple lines of difference may be the greatest challenge facing teachers today." It is essential that teachers understand the backgrounds of the youth they teach as well as the cultural, religious, and socioeconomic contexts from which they view the world. All educators, but particularly European Americans, must be aware of who and what their teaching methods privilege. They need to question whose knowledge and literature their course deems important by looking at what they include and do not include in supplementary aspects of the curriculum. They must also consider what kinds of assignments and responses they consider legitimate and why. Students who already feel misunderstood and judged by the dominant culture may be quick to view the classroom as another part of society from which they are excluded, ultimately resulting in a withdrawal from

engaging in a classroom where they do not feel validated in voicing their ideas or opinions.

In *Poetry, Literacy, and Creativity: Fostering Effective Learning Strategies in an Urban Classroom* Kinloch (2005) discusses the detriment of ignoring the meaningful and animated writing capabilities of students by limiting their self-expression to standard academic writing and values. In such settings students can become frustrated, feeling that their styles of writing and ideas are not appreciated nor respected and become introverted and disconnected from assignments. She also notes the benefits of allowing English as a second language students to write in their "Mother Tongue," in which they are able to "make sense of the world in the language they know" and access "particular communicative exchanges" and "switchable codes" that "establish a sense of belonging, reinforce lived experiences, and allow students to appreciate linguistic variances" (Kinloch 2005:102-103). While it is important for students to have the ability to understand and write in the dominant language, educators should note the detriment of cutting students off from modes of writing that allow them to utilize and expand their current knowledge base. Youth may become disillusioned with and apathetic toward writing, possibly stunting their literacy skills.

It is out of the aforementioned points and sources of academic detachment, that teachers began to search for meaningful ways to gain the attention of their students. Taking note of youths' often extensive engagements with literacy enhancing activities outside of school, educators began to look for ways to bridge out-of-school literacy practices with school literacy practices. This often resulted in supplementation of the

curriculum or extracurricular programs, with mediums and styles that were of interest to students (e.g. free verse spoken word poetry, rap lyrics, and hip-hop culture).

One way in which educators have sought to redefine literacy and combat youth disengagement is through extracurricular literacy courses and programs, which integrate and utilize youths' engagements with literacy outside of the classroom. Maisha Fisher (2005b:117) defines such programs as "Participatory Literacy Communities (PLCs) or "chosen" literacy spaces," which, "provide a forum grounded in the philosophy that "everyone has something important to say" while fostering a culture of listening." She also argues in her earlier work (Fisher 2003) that PLCs "are considered educational institutions by their participants" (2005b:117). Fisher contends that one of the most important features in the success of before and after school literacy programs is that they are *chosen spaces*. In *From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts,* she describes two extracurricular writing communities in New York public high schools, the "Power Writers" and "Runaway Slaves of the 21st Century" where "literacy is strategic, purposeful, and always linked to meaning" (Fisher 2005b:116). Fisher (2005b:116) argues that, "Teachers, in a very serious way, work to liberate language and prepare students to be in control of words; they do this by allowing students to be co-constructors of their learning community." This aim is often accomplished by having students both share their work and constructively critique the work of their classmates. Joe, the teacher of the Power Writers, utilized a strategy he called "read and feed" in which students share an original piece of work and receive feedback from a minimum of two to three classmates as well as

an instructor.

In addition to extracurricular programs, some educators have sought to deal with youth disengagement by supplementing curriculums as well as integrating students' out-of-school literacy practices into them. Taking notice that students in their urban California English high school classrooms were greatly influenced by Hip-hop music, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade decided to integrate it into their classrooms through a poetry unit. To provide students with a "lens with which to examine other literary works and also to encourage the students to reevaluate the manner in which they view elements of their popular culture," the teachers placed hip-hop music as a post-industrial art form alongside other eras and poems (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade 2002:90). The students were given a group presentation assignment in which a canonical poem and hip-hop text were to be analyzed making connections between the two. The students also had to come up with interpretations of each text that took into account the time period during which they were composed. In this way students learned to view art as a product and expression of its time. Students also composed "anthologies" of ten poems that required them to utilize specific poetry forms such as ballads, sonnets, and elegies and to write about social problems, love, death, a familiar place, an aspect of life they celebrate, as well as two topics in forms of their choice. By using their own experiences and worldviews to compose the anthologies, students saw how their lives connected to schoolwork. Thus, while it is important and necessary to incorporate students' lives into their education, it is still crucial that they understand there is a structure in all forms of communication. Just as they know and employ the vocabulary, rules and exceptions, which govern their out-of-

12

school writing, they must also be able to read and write for the educational establishment according to its structures.

Another strategy for engaging meaningful student interactions is described by Valeria Kinloch in *Poetry, Literacy, and Creativity: Fostering Effective Learning Strategies in an Urban Classroom.* Kinloch (2005:98) argues that *democratic engagements* defined as "the classroom exchanges in which students express their feelings and ideas through oral and written mediums," can serve to promote literacy. She claims that through such democratic exchanges, students become aware of differences and are required to engage multiple opposing and intricate discourses through discussion and critique. Utilizing this strategy in workshops she ran with sixth grade students, she gave them assignments such as writing about their own relationship to writing in the format, style, and language of their choice. Through such open ended writing topics, students began to feel that their knowledge, cultures, and opinions were valued and eagerly participated. In their writing, students shared and discussed their own experiences and identities while tackling emotional issues and fears (e.g., terror and war). Kinloch (2005:107) asserts that "if the function of democracy in education is to communicate human experiences in terms of freedom, association, and liberty, than my students and I were using creative pedagogical strategies and sophisticated performance moves in the classroom to educate one another."

Teachers and researchers often defined success as students' involvement in extracurricular writing programs, increased participation in the classroom, and the ability to make parallels between canonical and popular culture content. Fisher (2005b) found in

many of her interviews with students that they mentioned their involvement in extracurricular writing programs as motivation for attending school. She argues that such spaces go beyond providing literacy learning and "are socializing units to help students build a greater autonomy in school and out-of-school contexts" (Fisher 2005b:127). She buttresses her claim with examples from Joe's Power Writing class, of students' continued attendance after graduating, use of the class as a support system for college preparation, as well as, one student's choice to stay on campus for the after school program, though she did not have a required class during the last period of the school day. Kinoch (2005) describes students in her workshops who began as quiet and shy turning into active and excited participants. Through democratic engagements they began taking ownership and pride in their writing. One girl in particular, who had previously remained silent in her classes, began not only to write frequently, but to also share her work. The student's increased confidence in presenting her ideas spilled over into other classes where she also began volunteering to read her work. Morrell & Duncan-Andrade (2002:91) found that "students were not only engaged and able to use this expertise and positionality as subjects of the post-industrial world to make powerful connections to canonical texts, they were also able to have fun learning about a culture and genre of music with which they had great familiarity."

Relationship building, based on respect through recognition and understanding of students' use of language, was a significant contributing factor in increased student participation. Fisher (2005b:129) claims that literacy in writing communities is contingent upon "relationships between peers and adults with mutual admiration and

14

respect" which assist in revealing, "words, styles, and trajectories" to students, which

they can "access while building their own literate identities." She discusses how Joe

connects to and encourages his Power Writer students in the following excerpt:

> At this stage in Dee's development as a writer, Joe was less concerned with issues
> of grammar and profanity in her work because he wanted to call attention to the
> fact that she was finally beginning to "sing." With that foundation, he began to
> build a relationship based on respect and honor with Dee and the other students
> present. (Fisher 2005b:123)

By accepting where students were at and their style(s) of language, Joe was

acknowledging and legitimating the ways in which students communicated in their

everyday lives and thus their experiences and forms of expression. Joe had the following

to say regarding language:

> Language is a very lush gumbo. American English is a gumbo. And if we
> interpret gumbo as a very exotic and spicy stew with ingredients from the entire
> possibility it had then we have to accept that… there is an English that is quote
> unquote standard which allows information to be transmitted but that does not
> deny the fact that there is information being transmitted all the time in other
> Englishes. (Fisher 2005b:123)

Instead of rejecting the "Englishes" of his students, Joe used their language to draw

comparisons with and teach "standard" English. Fisher (2005b:128) notes the importance

of Joe's methods saying, "While acknowledging the literacies students engage in

everyday outside of school, these writing communities also provide opportunities for

students to learn and master the "standard" while understanding the standard does not

belong to any one class or ethnic group, but in fact, belongs to them as well."

Kinoch (2005:111-112) contends that writing *must* incorporate the choices

and voices of students and that "We, conscious educators, should invest in their economy

of expressive writing, multiple identities, and emerging literacies and knowledges if we are to learn from them as they learn from us." Fisher (2005b:128) asserts that for youth in the Power Writers and Runaway Slaves of the 21ˢᵗ Century, "reading publicly not only exposed students to other writers and poets, but it also showed them how they were part of a larger network of wordsmiths." The commitment and engagement of the teachers with the subjects they taught reinforced the importance of such a network to students; many educators were avid writers and readers outside of school and would share their own work with students (Fisher 2005b, Kinloch 2005). Such exchanges also provided unique opportunities for intergenerational perspectives to be shared and gained between students and teachers. Morrel and Duncan-Andrade's students also benefited from the intergenerational perspectives they gained by comparing and contrasting canonical and post modern texts.

It is Kinloch (2005) who appears to most fully outline a specific method for combating youth disengagement and the promotion of literacy inside classrooms. Kinloch (2005:107) specifies the following components as essential in developing critical intelligences during her workshops with middle school students:

1. Agreeing to be listeners, thinkers, readers, and writers;
2. Embracing the idea that we are all writers participating in a learning process;
3. Working in small, focused writing/reading groups before convening as a large group;
4. Respecting the thought processes of others by taking notes and offering critical responses;
5. Drawing on prior knowledge and home practices to interrogate the usefulness of creative writing and standardized, or "academic," writing;
6. Reading and responding to poems, essays, short stories, and commentaries of current events;
7. Volunteering to be lead experts on a particular literary theme or concept;

16

8. Refusing to have identities and writing styles defined in limiting categories that do not celebrate language and the democratic orchestration of multiple voices.

She argues that it was through these practices that they learned to expand and share thoughts in a space, which "supported the walk, talk, and literate acts of each of us" (Kinloch 2005:108).

At the core of successful extracurricular programs there was a well thought out design strategy. Fisher (2005b) attributes some of the success of the Power Writers and Runaway Slaves of the 21st Century to the "open mic format rooted in community-based spoken word venues." In this sense educators, much like open mic hosts, guide their "audience" (students) and set the "stage" (classroom) by laying ground rules and creating an impartial atmosphere. Respect being central to most open mic venues, was also an integral part of successful writing groups within schools. While observing open mic poetry communities in California, Fisher (2003:370) noted that, " 'Respect' or 'Respect the mic' was a warning to poets to avoid unnecessary vulgarity and for the audience to listen attentively." Respect played out in much the same way inside classrooms "…where students were encouraged to maintain a nonjudgmental attitude toward their peers" (Fisher 2005b:128). By adopting formats and rules students were familiar with outside of school, teachers were able to create areas of neutrality in which youth felt secure, inside classroom settings.

It is important to note the limitations within these studies. California was overrepresented with only three studies taking place in other states (Texas, New York, and one unnamed location). The research was also restricted to "urban" schools. All

research was primarily done using mixed ethnographic methods (interviews, field notes, video taping, content analysis of student work) and thus quite subjective. The studies were mainly of individual classrooms, programs, or strategies, without any large-scale data collection or defined method for measurement of success. Focusing mainly on success as measured through increased class participation and critical thinking, the studies do not indicate if students' abilities to read and write Standard English improved. Future research is needed in order to generalize many of these findings. It would be interesting to see if the techniques used by educators in these "urban" environments are equally applicable/effective in suburban and rural settings. Regardless of the atmosphere Fisher (2005b) warns that educators must be careful not to diminish cultures, such as hip-hop, to nothing more than literacy devices. She states that:

> …there is still a need to examine how out-of-school literacy practices such as spoken word poetry and "hip hop pedagogy" can be viewed as more than tools teachers and students use in classroom contexts… The enduring question for English/Language Arts teachers, teacher educators, and literacy researchers then is how to critically examine these participatory literacy communities or alternative/supplementary learning spaces, especially if we see them as a culture more than a strategy. (Fisher 2005b:117)

However, a more overarching question of structure still remains to be dealt with: how can the educational system incorporate additional writing styles into mandated curriculum? Educators must also question why there is such a disconnect between "academic writing" and "voluntary writing," perhaps it has to do with curriculum being based off of the ideals of the dominate culture. In this case the answer is not to abolish the current curriculum, but to reconfigure it into an inclusive and culturally representative

one. Given that curriculum varies greatly by region and socio-economic status there is no easy solution that will apply across the board.

It is essential to recognize that in many ways the attributes of spoken word and hip-hop culture not only aid students in relating to the dominant culture, but are actually qualities preferred in the dominant culture. Characteristics such as respect, public speaking, the ability to write and communicate effectively, perseverance, and betterment of self can be viewed as universally desirable. The only difference being that it is easier for students in particular environments to relate to spoken word culture, which can then be incorporated into schooling to help them apply some of the same attributes to school based literacy activities.

Ties to African and African American cultures through oral and literate traditions are also areas in which spoken word literature has focused. In *Manifestations of Nommo in Def Poetry* Felicia Walker and Viece Kuykendall argue that elements of nommo, a characteristic of African orature, are effective in the poems featured on the HBO television series *Def Poetry Jam*. They state that, "Through *Def Poetry*, the artists' purpose is to make others aware of what is functional in their world or the world of others whose perspective possibly would not have been heard otherwise. To call it to being is how the concept of nommo is used" (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:239). The elements of nommo examined by the authors include: rhythm "how well a speaker regulates his or her flow of words with correct pauses and intensifications," soundin' out "a speaker's creative manipulation of volume and musical quality in the delivery of the message," repetition "the repeating of a phrase or words for intensification with the justification that

the more a phrase is repeated, the more an audience becomes involved," call and response "the interaction of the speaker with the audience," and mythication "language suggesting that the message is sanctioned by some suprarational force to demonstrate the righteousness of the cause" (Asante, 1987 & Walker & Kuykendall 2005:238). Findings suggested that rhythm aided in capturing and maintaining audience attention. Soundin' out was frequently invoked within *Def Poetry*, most often exhibited through braggadocio, "which involves bragging about self and the material possessions… these possessions may be tangible or intangible" (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:240). The authors found that *Def* artists, primarily African Americans *Def* poets, bragged about their ability to care for their children well, their sexual experiences and owning specific cars. They authors state:

> Braggadocio is relevant because of the history of braggadocio in African American orality, from the beginnings of storytelling and folklore and later to rap music. African Americans identify with braggadocio, and, aside from the Asian poet, Beau Sia, African American *Def* poets used it more often than poets of other ethnic origin. (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:241)

Walker & Kuykendall found repetition most often occurred when artists spoke about social, love, and/or money issues. The authors discovered that repetition allowed the audience to identify with the poets' situation, illustrated and emphasized points, and served as an attention grabber. With regard to call and response they noted the interactive nature of performance poetry stating:

> Poets enter into Def Poetry expecting audience interaction and response. Any poet with any poem can be interrupted with sounds of "hmph" or "alright." Laughter, applause, and standing ovations during the poem are appropriate and welcomed by the poet. The poems are delivered expecting interruptions after speaking certain words or lines. (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:242)

Thus, call and response was found to be quite common amongst the artists in various forms. Mythification is noted in two of the *Def Poets* poems.

While not specifically one of the five elements examine, the authors maintain that themes of identity are often present in the works of *Def* poets. They also assert that when on stage, artists turned into individuals who "stood for a cause, had a sense of humor, or wanted to open the minds of others" and that *how* the artists told their stories was of utmost significance (Walker & Kuykendall 2005:245). I would argue that these claims could be generalized to the spoken word community as a whole. Walker and Kuykendall conclude by stating that not all of the elements are present in the same poem, however it is not rare that more than one element be found in a single poem. They also make clear that while the five elements of nommo do appear in *Def Poetry* and *Def Poets*, they most consistently appear with the African American poets, however the elements are common within the works of poets of other ethnicities and cultures.

In *Open Mics and Open Minds: Spoken Word Poetry in African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities* Maisha Fisher examines the revival of spoken word and poetry venues and their salience as places for literacy practice and cultural identity development within the Black community. She defines them as African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities (ADPLCs). Her ethnographic study describes two open mic settings which she says "recall the feeling and communal centrality of jazz clubs and literary circles of the Harlem Renaissance" (Fisher 2003:362). She argues that the ADPLCs are mainly supported and created by people of African ancestry who are active participants in literacy-based events that take place outside of work and school

21

situations. Of particular interest in Fisher's study are the cultural practices, which lie beneath the organization and arrangement of the open mic events as well as the inspirations and motivations of participants.

Fisher found that members of the two ADPLCs blended oral and written traditions rather than choosing between forms of literacies. Fisher (2003:362) noted this "blending of oral and written traditions" in the work they produced. For example, two of the poets created a book titled *Summo Nommo: Words from the Ghetto/Ancestral Wisdom of Poetry and Prose*, which she argued was a robust illustration of the balance between the written and spoken word. She defines nommo as "a West African concept" that "refers to the sacred word or the magic power of the word" and like Walker and Kuykendall finds that it is currently used regularly amongst African American poets and writers (Fisher 2003:362). Fisher (2003:362) contends that the literacy practices in the ADPLCs she observed were "inextricably linked to a process of education that involves personal identity, affiliation with a local community, and an awareness of a global community..." and that spoken word venues in ADPLCs "…have become sites of teaching, learning, community-building, and networking," as well as "forums where people can contribute their viewpoints, disseminate information that is useful to the Black community, and discuss local, national, and global issues." She emphasizes the importance of each and every individual participating at events; venue owners, organizers, writers/expressionists, and members of the audience all took part in the open mic experience. Therefore each person had the chance to teach, making learning a

circular as well as multigenerational thing. She concludes by stating that community members of ADPLCs are:

> …committed to establishing a Black cultural literacy or knowledge base where the legacies of Black leaders, writers, and artists are preserved. In spoken word poetry open mic events, people of African descent have a space where they are not limited to generalizations and stereotypes that have negatively impacted their self-image, as well as the images other people have imposed on them. In these spaces their possibilities of identity are abundant. Finally, in ADPLCs, people of African descent have the opportunity to learn about one another's lives globally and educate each other about their differences and similarities while forging new relationships. These alternative knowledge spaces have returned to the value systems described by Holt in his reexamination of education in some traditional West African communities where literacy learning and education provided people with "a sense of one's place in that history" and one's "purpose". (Fisher 2003:362)

In *Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity* Susan B. A. Somers-Willett examines the ways in which perceived authenticity of marginalized identity is viewed as part of the criteria necessary to be a successful slam poet. She specifically explores the "political ramifications and possibilities of this phenomenon" when it takes place between African American slam poets and audiences who are predominately White and middle-class. While she asserts that many times audiences are White and middle-class, which she suggests may be due to events taking place in upscale cafes and coffee houses; I have not found this to be true with regards to open mics. Almost all open mics I have attended were in the communities in which the performers lived and tended to reflect their racial and socio economic statuses. Generally they have taken place in large metropolitan areas and Whites have not been the majority as audience members or performers. Though Somers-Willett's study focuses on slam poets and national competitions with mainly White audiences, some of her findings are still

quite applicable to spoken word open mic communities (many slam poets also perform at

open mics). Her study found that the majority of slam poetry is composed in first person

utilizing a narrative style and that methods such as "homophonic word play, repetition,

singing, call and response, and rhyme" were regularly used in slam performances

(Somers-Willett 2005:52). She also discovered that varying performative modes of

address are accepted and used by slam poets, however the majority of the work

performed at slams fell "under the categories of comedy, parody, or drama," and the tone

of pieces was often "protective and passionate" with numerous poets treating "the slam

stage as a political soapbox" (Somers-Willett 2005:52). Somers-Willett (2005:52) argues

that due to the first-person narrative mode of many slam poems, audiences are

encouraged "to perceive the performance as a confessional moment, one of the most

defining characteristics of slam poetry is a poet's performance of identity and identity

politics." The theme of authenticity emerged as part of the criteria upon which these

narrative ridden slam poems are evaluated against. Somers-Willett (2005:54 & 56)

contends that when employed to describe identity, "authenticity":

> …is often meant to suggest instances in which subjectivity and identity are generated beyond or without cultural constraints. That is, one's "authentic self" s original, unique, true, existing before and outside of discourse. For a performance of an identity poem to be deemed authentic is to assume there is an original or essential self which one perfectly emulates in performance… Challenging this concept of the authentic self, theorists have recently argued for understanding the self as a social and cultural construction, i.e., as the product of discourse. For all intents and purposes, identity in this framework is best thought of as a fluid product of both conscious and unconscious performances…With this view in mind, we must treat the authentic also as a social practice, as something which has no original beyond its own repetition and acceptance over time….

Somers-Willett found that what she deemed as marginalized identities (class, gender, race, and sexual) were viewed as the most authentic by slam audiences. Thus, these identities were rewarded when performed. Therefore Somers-Willet (2005:56-57) contends that:

> …poetry slams can *generate* the very identities which poets and audiences expect to hear. As authenticating practices, the systems of reward established by slams embody complex systems of desire and power. Poetry slams are themselves generative sites of social practice from which these identities are performatively cited, recapitulated, and questioned. They prove sites of negotiation between poet and audience where the performance of an identity is judged for its success or failure (its authenticity or inauthenticity) in the world. Such judgments about identity happen every day as one performs his or her identity in any given social situation; the unique aspect of the poetry slam is that identity is judged openly and publicly through competitive scoring.

She determined that the marginalized identity most commonly rewarded at poetry slams (at the national level) was Black identity and that the majority of attention surrounding the art of slam has been on its African American performers. She states:

> …the mainstream media has often focused solely on the genre's ties to the traditionally black artform of hip-hop. Other recent medial projects, such as the feature-length film *Slam* and the current HBO series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, have presented slam poets to mainstream audiences alongside hip-hop artists and against the backdrop of black urban culture. (Somers-Willett 2005:58)

She speculates that the success of Black identity poems in the slam world, in instances where audiences are predominately White and middle-class, may be a way "of showing support for antiracist attitudes, confirming a white audience's own positions as liberal, rebellious, hip and against the status quo" (Somers-Willett 2005:59). She elaborates saying:

Rewarding such writing and performance can benefit a white liberal audience: reward displaces them from being the target of the black poet's protest. That is, in appreciating the work of African American poets who proclaim racial identity, audience members might assuage the "white guild" associated with such an expression. This is not to say that black slam poets are rewarded solely to assuage white guilt. Such art may in part be appreciated and rewarded for the cultural positions of power that it confirms and denies, or it may serve as an affirmation of the need for cultural redress. Rewarding these poets also helps proclaim a slam audience's liberal political identity: to support black voices and black identities is to try to distance oneself, effectually or ineffectually, from other whites who hold racist attitudes. (Somers-Willett 2005:63)

She also mentions White culture's historical "fascination with black artists and black expression" which dates back to slavery (Somers-Willett 2005:64).

While none of the literature focuses specifically on the presentation of artists' social selves and their ties to social activism, though Somers-Willett's article comes closest by focusing on identities, much of it does touch on these topics and shed light on the overarching themes in and uses of spoken word. The elements of encouragement and support for fellow artists, creative uses of language, delivery of strategic messages through ones' work, identity construction and performance, sharing of intergenerational perspectives, a commitment to being socially conscious (e.g. aware of current events both locally and worldwide, possessing a critical understanding of history, being well-read), ties to African and African American cultures, and writing the self out of trouble (e.g. writing as a form of self help or escape from the difficulties one is facing) discussed in the articles are all present in the larger spoken word community.

3. Theory

Symbolic-interactionism is a derivative of American Pragmatism, with its

sociological and intellectual legacy rooted in the works of Max Weber, George Herbert

Mead and Herbert Blumer, to name a few. For Weber the ways in which human ideas

mold society was significant, and in comprehending any aspect of a society one must

engage in the process of *verstehen* and acquire a deep understanding of the culture from

the perspectives of its citizens (Weber [1930] 1992). Coming from a social psychology

perspective, Mead's contribution to sociology is often associated with his examination of

social experience as the force which shapes personalities and assists in the creation of the

self. Mead is also credited with laying the foundations for the symbolic interactionist

approach (Blumer 1962).

However, neither Weber nor Mead would utilize the term symbolic-

interactionism in their lifetime; it was Mead's interpreter and student Blumer who would

coin the name for this micro-level theory. In *Symbolic Interactionsim: Perspective and*

Method (1962:2), Blumer sets out to define "a reasoned statement of the methodological

approach" and to develop his own version of the method. He begins by identifying the

basic premises of symbolic interactionism stating:

> The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the
> meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the
> human being may note in his world-physical objects, such as trees or chair; other

human beings, such as a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, as a school or a government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities of others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters." (Blumer 1962:2)

Blumer (1962:3) expands on the first premise stating that human behavior is explained by psychologists through factors such as "stimuli, attitudes, conscious or unconscious motives, various kinds of psychological inputs, perception and cognition, and various feature of personal organization," while sociologists look to "factors such as social position, status demands, social roles, cultural prescriptions, norms and values, social pressures, and group affiliation." He argues however, that symbolic interactionism's position "is that the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right… to bypass the meaning in favor of factors alleged to produce the behavior is seen as a grievous neglect of the role of meaning in the formation of behavior" (Blumer 1962:3). In clarifying the second premise Blumer (1962:4-5) states that symbolic interactionism views meaning:

> … as arising in the process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person. Thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact.

Blumer (1962:5) then details the process of interpretation mentioned in the third premise:

> This process has two distinct steps. First, the actor indicates to himself the things toward which he is acting; he has to point out to himself the things that have

meaning. The making of such indications is an internalized social process in that the actor is interacting with himself. This interaction with himself is something other than an interplay of psychological elements; it is an instance of the person engaging in a process of communication with himself. Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action. Accordingly, interpretation should not be regarded as a mere automatic application of established meanings but as a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action. It is necessary to see that meanings play their part in action through a process of self-interaction.

It is apparent through Blumer's outline of symbolic interactionism that the theory places great importance on the meanings people place on their everyday interactions and depicts society as the product of these interactions. Recognizing that his predecessor laid the groundwork for himself and others, Blumer (1962:9) pays homage to Mead, stating that his analysis of symbolic interactionism "as a presentation of gestures and a response to the meaning of those gestures" is of great significance. Equally important is Mead's concept of the social self.

Mead broke from earlier social psychologists who approached individual social experience from a psychological position (Coser 1977). He argues that the self does not exist at birth but is formed through social interaction; he states, "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process" (Mead [1934] 1967:135). Mead suggests that the language process (exchange of symbols) is necessary for the self to evolve; he argues that only human beings attach meaning to

words and actions and are able to conceive of people's hidden intentions (Mead [1934]

1967). Mead claims that in order for individuals to understand the intentions of others

they must be able to experientially get outside themselves, saying, "It is the characteristic

of the self as an object to itself that I want to bring out. This characteristic is represented

in the word "self," which is a reflexive, and indicates that which can be both subject and

object" (Mead [1934] 1967:136-137). Through imagining ourselves in the place of others

we can attempt to view situations as they do:

> The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from
> the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group,
> or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he
> belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or
> immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first
> becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his
> experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of
> other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of
> experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved. (Mead [1934]
> 1967:138)

Again, for Mead, it is through communication (the exchange of significant symbols) that

individuals are able to become objects to themselves and gain self-awareness (through the

responses of others). Development of self therefore rests upon ones' learning and ability

to take on the role of the other. He uses the term *generalized other* in reference to "the

organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self"

(Mead [1934] 1967:154). Mead ([1934] 1967:154-155) further explains:

> If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense, it is not
> sufficient for him merely to take the attitudes of other human individuals toward
> himself and toward one another within the human social process, and to bring that
> social process as a whole into his individual experience merely in these terms: he
> must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward
> himself and toward one another, take their attitudes toward the various phases or

30

aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organized society or social group, they are all engaged; and he must then, by generalizing these individual attitudes of that organized society or social group itself, as a whole, act toward different social projects which at any given time it is carrying out, or toward the various larger phases of the general social process which constitutes its life and of which these projects are specific manifestations.

According to Mead the generalized other wields social control over the behaviors and attitudes of humans, thus making certain a consistency in social life; however, humans can and do act impulsively (Adams & Sydie 2001). Mead views the self as consisting of both the "I" ("the creative, imaginative part of the self, which Mead believed is particularly evident in artists") and the "Me" ("the attitudes of others that the self is aware of, and to which the "I" responded") (Adams & Sydie 2001:325). The self therefore remains in a constant state of change in relation to our social experiences and responses.

Anthony Giddens speaks to self-identity in the post-traditional order in a similar fashion to which Mead speaks of the formation of self; he states that:

Self-identity, then, is not a set of traits or observable characteristics. It is a person's own reflexive understanding of their biography. Self-identity has continuity – that is, it cannot easily be completely changed at will – but that continuity is only a product of the person's reflexive beliefs about their own biography…The existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual 'supplies' about herself. A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self. (Giddens 1991:53-54)

31

Like Mead, Giddens views reflexivity as immensely important; one cannot maintain a

narrative without taking on the role of the other through becoming an object to

themselves. While the idea of constructed biographies is a modern notion, which Mead

did not speak to, he established a foundation for sociologists such as Giddens. For

Giddens it is not the actual events or behaviors present in ones' biography; it is how the

individual interprets those events and their ability to convince others to view them in a

similar fashion. Gauntlett (2008:108) explains that:

> The ability to maintain a satisfactory story, then, is paramount: to believe in
> oneself, and command the respect of others, we need a strong narrative which can
> explain everything that has happened and in which, ideally, we play a heroic role.
> This narrative, whilst usually build upon a set of real events, needs to be
> creatively and continuously maintained. Pride and self-esteem, Giddens says, are
> based on 'confidence in the integrity and value of the narrative of self identity…'
> *Shame*, meanwhile, stems from anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative on
> which self-identity is based – a fear that one's story isn't really good enough.

These narratives are thus communicated through impression management.

In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Erving Goffman (1959:2 & 6) details

the techniques through which individuals attempt to manage the impressions others have

of them asserting that:

> Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed
> within it. For example, the "true" or "real" attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the
> individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what
> appears to be involuntary expressive behavior… when an individual appears
> before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they
> come to have. Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating
> manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of
> impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is
> concerned to obtain. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity
> but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and
> consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition

of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. Sometimes the traditions of an individual's role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression.

Goffman (1959:255) concludes by saying that these techniques are used in everyday life to "expressively sustain a definition of the situation" or in the words of Giddens, a narrative of self-identity. Many spoken word artists regularly promote a narrative of selflessness through their art, which frequently speaks of social awareness and action.

Within the spoken word community there is often a moral component present, usually expressed as the responsibility of individuals to make society a better place. Such action could be defined as moral action, "intelligent, socially directed action in which one acts with the interest of others as well as one's self in mind" (Morris [1934] 1967:xxxiii). Mead's student Charles W. Morris ([1934] 1967:xxxiii) clarifies his reading of moral action saying, "The appeal is not from interest to reason, but from isolated interests to the interest in the social system of interests in which one's behavior is implicated" and contends that such moral action is Mead's and pragmatism's ethical theory. But how does an artist or individual improve society merely through their words? Mead would explain a poets' ability to create change in terms of impulses:

> Mead, in common with all pragmatists since James, held an interest theory of value: that is good which satisfies an interest or impulse… value is the character of an object in its capacity of satisfying an interest… Interests or impulses clash, however, and so arises the problem of the standard of value and the need for evaluation. The aesthetic object brings the emotionally toned impulses into a harmonious whole; the object capable of so stimulating and integrating the impulses has aesthetic character or value…The artist plays upon attitudes, arousing in himself, by the use of his medium, the emotional aspects of an attitude

33

which his work in varying degrees communicates to others by calling out in them his attitude. In so far as this is done, the aesthetic exaltation is the fusion of the "I" and the "me" made possible by the object. Mead believed… that his version of behavioristic psychology gives a fruitful basis for aesthetic theory. Aesthetic value is, as it were, a consummatory gift offered to the self by nature or by the artist; the task of the moral life is to create through reflective effort a similar integration of impulse at the level of interacting selves. (Morris [1934] 1967: xxxi-xxxii)

But must moral action be social action? Morris ([1934] 1967:xxxii-xxxiii) makes the case

that Mead is insistent that the motive for action (the moral act) is "the impulse itself as

directed to a social end;" Morris further states:

A social self has social impulses that demand expression as imperatively as any other impulses. For Mead, moral ends are social ends… the self as a social being, must be concerned within and without with a social harmony of impulses. The moral task, it follows, is to be observant of all the values resident in the particular situations of life, and to deal with these values reflectively in the endeavor to allow the maximum satisfaction and expansion-the maximum dynamic harmony-of the impulses concerned.

It is in this way that spoken words artists, utilizing their poetry as a platform for social

change, seek to conjure up emotions in their audiences that will cause them to act in such

a way that will increase harmony in society. Therefore the artist who uses their words

(symbols) to improve society could be said to be living a moral life as defined by Mead.

4. Methods

Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser developed the grounded theory approach in the early 1960s. The objective of this style of qualitative analysis is to allow theory to emerge from the data, "…without any particular commitment to specific kinds of data, lines of research, or theoretical interests…" (Strauss 1987:5). It is through the systematic collecting, coding, and memoing of data that theory and often research questions are generated. The grounded theory method rests upon the argument that at a variety of stages of generalization, theory is necessary for deep-seated understanding of social occurrences (Strauss 1987). Strauss and Glaser (1987:6) contend that this type of theory should be formed in close association with data, "with researchers fully aware of themselves as instruments for developing that grounded theory." Both American Pragmatism (particularly John Dewey, but also Charles Pierce and George H. Mead) and the University of Chicago Sociology tradition (from the 1920s until the mid-1950s) contributed to the advancement of the grounded theory approach (Strauss 1987). Specifically it was American Pragmatism's focus on action in problematic situations, as well as, its consideration of method within the framework of problem solving along with the Chicago School's extensive utilization of in-depth interviews and field observations as data-collecting methods, which influenced Glaser and Strauss in their creation of the grounded theory style of analysis (Strauss 1987). Strauss (1987) states that both traditions

believed change to be a continuous aspect of social life, but felt its particular directions must be accounted for; social interaction and processes were their focal points. He also notes that almost from its beginning Chicago Sociology "emphasized the necessity for grasping the actors' viewpoints for understanding interaction, process, and social change" (Strauss 1987:6). Within my own work these same commitments were made, through utilization of the grounded theory method in conjunction with symbolic-interactionist theory, in order to understand artists' perspectives and the ways in which their social selves are linked to larger social issues.

Criteria for inclusion in the study was based on the age of individuals, the requirements included being 18 years of age or older and participation in the spoken word community as performers at public events. Ethnographic methods were used to gather data through snowball sampling. Using grounded theory, open coding was done to generate themes and finalize research questions. Focused coding was then employed to answer the research questions. There were no direct benefits to participants. Data, with the exception of one open mic that took place in New York, were collected in the Washington Metropolitan Area during 2009 using the following methods: seven participant observations of open mics, three participant observations of two professional spoken word artists, two in-depth interviews and two diary entries. Greater emphasis was placed on participant observations, which allowed examination of the self/selves, themes, and social concerns artists portrayed and voiced in public performances. During interviews, artists may list the selves, themes, social concerns they write about, yet what

they actually depict and express in *public* performances may be very different. This study is concerned with what individuals of the spoken word community publically express.

The participant observations of open mics included four hosted by PoliticalPoets, one at a college campus, one hosted by a social/political awareness organization, and one at Poetology. The participant observations of the two professional spoken word artists' included one performance and one Q & A session by Amarina who is in her thirties and identifies as bi-racial, an activist, and lesbian and one workshop which included performances hosted by Lyrical Empress who identifies as Black and is also in her thirties. During participant observations, depending on which method was less intrusive in the setting, I took detailed notes in my poetry and school notebooks and/or utilized a mini audio recorder. During interviews the audio recorder was primarily used, eliminating the need for detailed notes, thus allowing for a more natural and conversational setting.

I began attending open mics at PoliticalPoets where I became acquainted with Josh, a poet working with a youth arts and activism program. I began to volunteer with the organization and was introduced to an 18-year-old African American artist and student, Rob, whom I had seen perform at a recent open mic. One day while we were eating lunch at a local cafe, a lively conversation about spoken word erupted. Realizing it was a perfect opportunity to gather data, I asked Rob if I could tape record our conversation. Aware of my research project, he agreed and an informal interview took place. The advantage of the setting and spontaneity of the interview is that it took place in a semi-natural setting and the interviewee was simply continuing our current discussion

about a topic that interests him. Therefore he did not have time to script answers to questions he may have expected. However, because the interview was not anticipated an interview protocol was not available; thus the discussion primarily led the interview, which meant the omission of some research questions.

I was able to acquire an in-depth interview with one of the participants at the open mic on the college campus, Sergio, a 19-year-old student, who racially identifies as White, majoring in Government and International Politics. The interview was tape-recorded; it consisted of a face sheet (appendix A) and was guided by an interview protocol of open-ended questions (appendix B). Special attention was paid to the way questions were framed, so as not to lead the interviewee. The tone of Sergio's interview was similar to Rob's; it was relaxed, much like a conversation, with us often laughing and nodding in understanding or agreement. Questions were purposely asked in an order, which fell in line with his answers making for a seamless social encounter void of any awkward or silent moments.

The diary entries were composed by aDSp, a 22-year-old male, who racially identifies as Black, currently majoring in marketing. ADSp and I met at a poetry workshop in 2008 and worked together in an artistic organization during the spring of 2009. During this time we had developed an artistic trust, sharing our writing and providing feedback to one another. In composing diary entries he was instructed to write about anything relating to his writings and music. For the first diary entry I gave him suggestions of ideas such as writing about why he writes or doesn't write at certain times and what he writes about and why. For the second entry I asked him to detail how he

chooses pieces to perform and why, as well as, where he chooses to perform. I was struck by the high rates of honesty and self-disclosure in his entries.

I feel it is essential, in seeking to align myself with humanist practices that I provide a sketch of my background, which undoubtedly affects the way in which I perceive and analyze information. I am a 25-year-old female who identifies as having a biracial and multiethnic heritage and have participated in spoken word communities in Washington, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. I have hosted open mics, taught creative writing at a prison, and been published in college literary journals. With my background embedded in the community I was observing, data collection was sometimes difficult as I sought to manage my roles as an observer and an artist. The greatest ethical issue I encountered was speaking to and writing about poets who were often not aware of my research. Even though the events and conversations took place in the company of other people, I began to question if I should use my field notes without their knowledge. On some level I felt a sense of disloyalty as an artist and worried that I might misinterpret something they said, paint them in an unfavorable light, or that they might simply feel betrayed if they were to find my writings. As a fellow poet I would never want to offend another's work; within the spoken word community respect is of great importance as are networks with other artists who often assist one another in various capacities. Therefore I have chosen to use pseudonyms for the individuals and organizations I observed and have omitted or changed the names of event venues. The two interviewees were asked to sign consent forms and were given the opportunity to choose their pseudonyms. Individuals shown in non-group or non-event photos gave express written consent for the photos to

be taken and used in my research. Finally, it is imperative to note that this study does not

include nor examine poetry slams and due to limited data, cannot be generalized to the

larger spoken word community.

5. Findings

Public Selves

Poets frequently referenced self in poems making it the sole or partial topic. Five categories of public selves became evident: the Passionate Self, The Survivor/Helper Self, the Reformer/Activist Self, the Challenger Self, and the Humorous Self. As the most commonly displayed public self, the Passionate Self explored emotionally charged situations and circumstances. Poems about love, sexuality, heartbreak, violence, hatred, vulnerability, anger, sadness, and fantasy were associated with the Passionate Self. Romantic relationships were the main topic addressed by the Passionate Self. The following is an excerpt from a poem performed by a young woman in which the Passionate Self is quite apparent. In the poem she describes her desires and fantasy of being involved with a friend of hers she likes who is a police officer:

> Excuse me Mr. Police officer, I hate to bother, but I need to turn myself in. I'm thinking of doing criminal things so I need to be handcuffed, patted down, booked in and written down, roughed up or roughed down because what I wanna do is considered premeditated… what I'm planning is calculated down to my red pumps in the kitchen whipping up your favorite dish… covering up my soon to be indecent exposure, tonight I'm breaking all laws, I've got concealed weapons, it's hidden but I'm not really good at hiding things, so I'm sure you'll find them. I'll make it up though 'cuz in the end I'm'a rob you of all your inhibitions, steal all your fantasies and turn them into reality… try to swallow all my deep morals… take the time to matriculate slow and I know that this is a bit much to take in… yeah you with that blue collar, I want you to read me my rights and give me directions to follow and when I don't I need for you to turn me around in one

41

swift move with my hands tied my hands behind my back, yeah I like that freaky stuff… I can't wait to be handcuffed…

The Survivor/Helper Self

The Survivor/Helper Self often discussed enduring difficulties and tragedies and/or their desire to help others experiencing certain situations. The Survivor/Helper Self spoke about death, murder, rape, molestation, violence, Hurricane Katrina, and diabetes. In "Somebody Prayed For Me," a young woman spoke about being displaced and surviving Hurricane Katrina saying:

> Somebody had to have prayed for me because I denied Katrina would ever be. Tearing down power lines making me think back in time. Of Emmett Till's face… as Katrina began, causing death to the Gulf Coast like foreign weapons of mass destruction. Somebody had to have prayed for me because I had been partying the night before. Age 19 thinking back once more, about life so far in New Orleans. Saving my last dance for next week's party, not noticing Katrina would displace me- away from home without food, shelter, or clothes. This could not be a part of my life. To wake up on the road feeing from a storm; I watch babies moan. Traffic crowd New Orleans interstates. I witnessed a man's face shattered in glass from his car hitting the back of an 18 wheeler. So, I know someone had to have prayed for my soul. Feeing from Katrina made me motherless, fatherless, without siblings. If you ever want to know how it feels to be displaced, come find me, and I'll tell my story of going without. For, I was once a New Orleans resident, a Black college student making use of the power of independence. Now, I am labeled a refugee. Regardless of my journey through seven or more states; I am still labeled by an ee. Yet, somebody must have prayed for me. I am alive.

The Reformer/Activist Self

The Reformer/Activist Self took on multiple forms including that of an educator, crusader, and advocate, in connection to social reform and/or societal change as a whole. They often invoked their own life experiences and utilized storytelling. The Reformer/ Activist Self spoke about war, child soldiers, HIV/AIDS, slavery, racism and colorism,

police brutality, gentrification, abstinence, teenage pregnancy, Hurricane Katrina, joblessness, murder, politics, feminism and Black on Black violence. In "Count With Me," a young woman protested a variety of social ills through a narrative about protecting her ten-year-old brother from them:

> Every now and then I have to remind my little brother to count with me. He is only ten and yet he can carry the weight of the world…He is indeed my protector, my home and my strength. But every now and then I have to remind my little brother to count with me. Before he begins to fantasize over guns and drugs. Before he lets his mind become raped by girls and thugs. I say come here my little brother and count with me. Before he watches 50 and Yayo make the hood alright- With Britney Spears jingles- I'll say count with me. And sometimes his heart is heavy, he misses his older brother 'cause it is hard to hear him count through 10-inch glass put up by the warden. Hard to hear his voice tremble over his lips, when he writes his numbers in a letter. And he only sees his big brother write those numbers about once a month. Because his brother has no job, no income, no education and in jail rent is a dollar a day. When he gets sad, upset or afraid he comes to me and I hear him say, Tisha come count with me. When teachers say he can't keep up in a class of 20 students and move him into a class of 35, he says count with me. In his later years, when he sees his friends up against a wall with flashlights in their eyes, reads about classmates found under staircases, old girlfriends dumped in alleys or dumped by men who saw their love begin to take life and shape inside of their bellies, he says count with me. He will say count with him as tears roll down my face as I pack a bag for him. I won't see him for awhile, I am sending him away Because I won't let my brother die in a war they say is being fought for a cause that don't mean shit to us. So three days passed and they waited, three days passed and they were hungry, three days passed before we started moving. And one by one, two by two, and three by three, they Died –four WHAT? So, no they won't replace my brother with a flag. 'Cause at the Superdome an old lady wrapped the flag around her shoulders to help keep warm-and right about now that's all it's good for. So keep your Flag.

The Challenger Self

The Challenger Self, though similar to the Reformer/Activist Self, tended to more specifically challenge and/or protest a *particular* norm, ideal, behavior, or condition (whereas the Reformer/Activist Self often cited a laundry list of societal ills within a

singular poem). The Challenger Self also came off at times as a martyr, savior, or hero stating that *they* had come to bring about change or save, however not all Challenger Selves came off this way. Challenger Selves spoke to topics and issues such as homelessness, stereotypes of Black women, feminism, promiscuity, Hurricane Katrina, the beating and murder of Chicago teen Derrion Albert, emotional pain inflicted on women by men, slavery, the invisibility of Asian voices in America, personal responsibility, and emasculation. A young man named Zane used one of his poems to challenge the notion that men, specifically Black men, are not suppose to show emotion or cry when they are angry or hurt:

> We men get heated, but we can't cry. That's why there's so much water and hate boiling inside. It evaporates making the dark clouds in front of our eyes how can we reach for the stars—we can't even see the skies? Ya'll need to see me cry tonight… you walked back right into it; you weren't compatible, but you just *had* to go through it, now let me trace back- searching for another possibly because you never got the attention from your mother… going in and out the womb of many women in hopes that a soul will consume a broken man who's afraid of loneliness… he just needed a shoulder on which to cry. Ya'll need to see me cry tonight. 'Cuz as soon as a brother goes sensitive here comes the others with the negative synonyms, "you bitch ass nigga with your bitch ass cryin'" —I'd rather let it all out than find myself dying—drowning on held back tears of frustration… of me and my fathers relations—knowin' that I probably wouldn't recognize his face if he was one of the folks makin' drinks up in this place. Or I go along and act like everything's cool—when you start to act suspicious we say "nah, it's all good." It's all good is just a cover up for how bad it is, so when your homeboy says it, think of how sad he is. Before you brush it off or paint it with a new lie, think about the situation and don't be afraid to cry because we men get heated, but we can't cry—that's why there's so much water and hate boiling inside. It evaporates making a dark cloud in front of our eyes how can we reach for the stars if we can't even see the skies? I mean brothers are still holding their breath—waiting to exhale, hiding our true feelings—for the definition of being male means being a man means being strong at all times… So why would a guy cry—sticks and stones hurt you but words are a different story. Physical can cause pain but the mental gets real raw—words last longer…

44

The Humorous Self

The Humorous Self addressed topics in a purposely joking, playful, witty, facetious, or amusing manner often performing works in the formats of parodies, similes, or haikus. The Humorous Self poked fun at stereotypes of poets and talked about food, heartbreak, romance, sexuality, age, and money. D' Andre was by far one of the most amusing and humorous artists, which perhaps is why he hosts a very popular open mic. After another artist requested he perform a certain poem he introduced the poem by saying:

> I was just talking to a Korean Stripper who called herself China Vagina (audience bursts out laughing) literally, no, no bullshit! Seriously! And we were just talking about life and I asked her where she wanted to go… and I prefaced it by saying 'don't say New York,' 'cuz I asked one of my students where she wanted to go in life and she said New York- I was like that's it!? (audience laughs) Fuck! Underachiever! (audience still laughing). But anyway she said Brazil and I said 'I've been' and so this is about the 'I've been' (some audience members still laughing).

D' Andre then performed the piece both talking/rapping and singing about being a heartbreaker all his life and meeting his match in Brazil:

> … up in Mysteria Lane looking for the next desperate housewife (audience is laughing)… I need to settle down, syke I'm a damn liar, I'm not your family guy I'm more like the quagmire, giggity thickety (inaudible- audience starts laughing then D' Andre starts laughing and stops to say 'I'm sorry, I like that line. It's one of my favorite lines' the audience is still laughing). I'm not your family guy I'm more like your quagmire giggity giggity quick to slip up in your thickety… she didn't speak much English, but like Babyface we had a way of talkin' better than words. Five- seven with heavenly curves… I left my boys to their own devices, politic with the chicks, she never quoted a price… the woman looked like Kim Kardash—I wanted to do the Ray J with her ass (audience bursts out laughing at his reference to the Ray J and Kim Kardashian sex tape). She sat me down on the couch and poured two patrone shots, in a minute or two she slipped out of her swimsuit… she saddled me, straddled me, road me like a camel b, handled me with passion and heat and left me fast asleep. Woke up and my ass was short, no

45

wallet, no phone, no camera (audience starts laughing), no passport (audience still laughing)…

Themes

Writing the Self Out of Trouble

"Writing is better than breaking windows," says spoken word artist Lyrical Empress. While we sit in the audience captivated by this woman with a booming voice and vivacious personality she tells us, perhaps facetiously, that if she didn't write poetry she'd probably "be a murderer or in jail." Lyrical Empress writes through things, "poetry has always been my way," she says. "When Katrina happened I wrote a poem for *myself* to deal with it, not for everyone—poetry got me through…. As a poet you search for the truth—you want to know why." As indicated in the words of Lyrical Empress writing can be therapeutic providing catharsis. It can allow one to release raw emotions and channel feelings such as anger, rage, sadness, fear, betrayal, pain, and despair through a constructive medium as well as gain clarity. Because of the emotional nature of the poems written by artists working through problems, the Passionate Self was displayed often.

Figure 2. The Passionate Self

One of the most violent poems was performed by a young woman about ending a

relationship, in which she was fed up with being mistreated and lied to, by killing the

other individual. She introduced her poem saying, "I can get pretty violent." What

follows in an excerpt from one of her poems:

> I'll be ready with my gun in my hand, meet me at the door. No! You can't come
> in—hell no! Don't you speak, just give me the pleasure of watching you bleed.

> No! No! No! Don't you say a word, I have heard all your sentences all your creative lies I've seen the shit come out your mouth I've been your toilet, your trash bag. I've seen your acting—you rehearsed with me a number of times… Don't you run, I wanna see you converse with my gun! Common! Tell it all your lies. What? Now that I've got metal in my hands you're afraid of me? Do it! Give me reason to let you leave, to allow you to be free—to be FREE. Because even after I kill you and I WILL kill you… I will now be.

Though it is not possible to know without asking, perhaps the author has learned to deal with her rage by writing, which is clearly more socially acceptable and productive than committing acts of violence. By writing through her anger it becomes clear that she is hurt because she feels abused, which is clear by her statement that she was treated like a "toilet" and "trash bag." Regardless of if the poem is telling an actual story, indicating what she wishes she could do, or a symbolic representation of ending an abusive relationship she is still in, it serves as an outlet and means for her to work through an obviously troubled situation. Though not as dramatic, multiple other spoken word artists used their writing to work through their feelings regarding failed romantic relationships. Zane spoke about being frustrated with love:

> … I have a way of coming across a lot of wrong ladies who instead of kissing me and caring they would rather play me. Instead of giving me their heart they would rather give me rabies… I'm giving up on relationships until I turn eighty—period… 'cuz I never know where to start, so I'm gonna start with the heart. So the hell with ever acknowledging or recognizing true love… there will be issues of baggage from past relations—don't you know I have problems too boo. I'm not your savior. But over time things change and I might meet someone—not the same bitter damsel, but the right sweet one and I don't wanna have baggage, so I'll leave it with the bellhop 'cuz this elevator of relationships has come to a glass top. 'Cuz for the healing process to ever begin this "fear Zane" phase must come to an end. But I never know where to start, guess I might as well start with the heart.

Michelle expressed the pain of an ended relationship:

Missing you has become a full time occupation. With no leave or vacation, I get no sick days or holidays with pay. I make a living of living in the thoughts of your absence. And I'm lacking sleep and concentration unable to focus on fruitful moments that don't include you, so accustomed to you occupying moments of my mind that there are no longer empty spaces. But emptiness lingers in different hiding places like- your finger tips that use to speak whispers across my skin… that I miss you is an understatement…

Elena used poetry to deal with the pain and her feelings of betrayal regarding a recent situation in which someone she was romantically involved with ended things and took legal action to keep her from contacting him. She prefaced her poem by saying, "Last week I had to go to court um, and I got a, a temporary peace order put on me…" She then detailed her experience:

Waiting for a judge to decide if I'm ultimately crazy—just like two weeks ago I was talkin' to baby as he clinged onto my breasts—I threatened to kill him… I confess, but it was a joke… flashback… I can remember when I use to let him down my throat I almost choked on those memories. He called it love last week, I guess his feelings just be changing,' he use to call me queen as he unbuttoned my jeans now says he wants me to stay away. Today I learned what true betrayal is. Tryin' to let shit go when my mind keeps speakin,' tears seepin' off'a this page feelin' caged… before court mama says life goes on, but reality is tough—you gotta grow tougher skin—he was ugly anyways, forget him… the not knowin' insecurities growin' I ask, but I know I'll never get answers. My mind allows me to flashback. I wonder if he remembers those late nights legs spread in the backseat of his car… protected not by latex, but by the stars—I guess my need to be in love would take me far and I'm risking my life and I know this shit ain't right, but he left a permanent stain, not just on my vagina but on my brain. Asking me if I'm sane so I say goodbye insanity.

D' Andre's poem was about losing a close friendship with a woman he felt was his soul mate due to another man coming into her life. He began by saying:

I've wasted a lot of love ya'll, you dig? 'Cuz that's a poet's curse you know—we gotta live the shit so we can talk about it, so ya'll won't have to go through it—so this is about the last one that got away… the last of the Mohicans… the last of the

girls who I still got along with she called me at my job called me damn near crying talking about she 'bout to move in with this dude—she don't know what that'll mean for our relationship 'cuz we real cool and everything like that and he's jealous of me even though he never met me just 'cuz of the things she'd say about me. And that's not the first time I've heard that but I hope it's the last time I heard that…

D' Andre then proceeded to perform his poem:

This is the poem where I say everything's gonna be alright. The first lie I've told you in nine lifetimes. Why? 'cuz cats be fakin'. This is the part where I get to wonder whether your phone call was an invitation to your rescue party. Is this the part where I Larenz Tate give chase to find Nia Long… no, no this is past the commercial break so welcome to passive aggressive progressive heartbroke insurance where we're such bloody fuckin' nice guys that we'll tell you exactly what our competition is sellin' even if it reveals that they are in fact the better bargain. Is this the part where I bow out gracefully… where I once was her plus one now the doorman unceremoniously hands me a warm wet towel upon entry and just asks that I not mess up the glass… how dare they take back what was never mine, but then how could they not because—this is the part. This is not, I repeat this is not the part where I Darius take you Nina to be my unlawfully wedded quote unquote urgent as a mutherfucker, mutherfucker—this ain't a movie—I don't have you at hello, I have you at goodbye—if at all. In fact goodbye is too good for what this is because real goodbyes at least allow for the sweetness of nostalgia. Goodbye is you went to the Peace Corps, or the Marine Corps or heaven's door. No you—you went… to Brooklyn—with him. And I love Brooklyn, no I like Brooklyn… we LOVED Brooklyn. We made love to Brooklyn… This is the conversation where I make shit easier to digest for someone who's not even the one eating—for someone who's not even in my view, but definitely in the picture…. Let's not act like someone with a Y chromosome will not ask why so and so is over. You always liked my puns, well here's one "what did the jealous boyfriend say to his girlfriend's soul mate?" give up? WHO THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE SPOONING? So I'm alone to catch the L to see you—I'll just catch the L—let's not fake like this isn't the apocalypse of our (inaudible) Sundays at Tom's Diner… what's YouTube without you because the H-E loses the A-R-T when the H-E-A-R-T is broken in two. This is the part where the one that got away revs up a getaway car…. This is our last Brooklyn sunrise—you did in fact admit that we had a gift for finishing each others sentences… well this is the part where you get to finish this—I love…

Here D' Andre used his poem to express the thoughts and feelings he wanted to

communicate to his friend, but felt he could not in order to allow her move on and make

her own decisions. While he does not state whether or not he showed this poem to the woman he wrote it about, one artist did. In one of his diary entries artist aDSp wrote, "Some of the best things that I have written/created was when I was drowning deep in the water." Later in the same entry he expands saying:

> I was going through a difficult time with someone I care about. We were going through a hard time in our relationship. We were not talking and mutually considering cutting each other off permanently. That's the first time I can say that I wrote in a long time. It was a long verse/poem reflecting on our situation. I sent it to her in an attempt that it would mend some of the damage done.

In this situation aDSp's writing became a communication tool. He used it not only to work through his emotions, but also to convey things he hadn't been able to say to otherwise express to his romantic partner.

While the majority of artists who used their poems to write through struggles addressed romantic relationships, not all did. At one open mic a young woman used her poetry to talk about family struggles including the death of her father. Through her writing she spoke about becoming emotionless and turning to drinking and partying and at one point began to cry on stage. Given that she had brought her entire family to watch her performance, it seemed that writing and publically speaking through her trials and emotions served as a form of not only self-help and empowerment, but as an explanation to her family as to why she had acted out.

Though many artists do write about the actual problems they are facing, they may not always specifically address these troubles when using writing to deal with tough times. Sometimes writing about something other than their troubles serves as a coping

mechanism or means of escape. During our interview Sergio discussed preparing for a

poetry slam:

> … I was going through, uh a rough time in my personal life and, uh… it was the first time I'd ever really written slam to be performed and'uh (I) just like poured everything I had into it and like really used it as a distraction for the weeks leading up to it to try and get myself really into it.

Regardless of the topic or emotion, as one writes through difficult life experiences it can

become a powerful space for work on identity and the self.

Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-identity Through Reflexive practice

ADSp stated in his first diary:

> If you saw a chronologically order of all 'my expressions' it would definitely tell me life story to date better than can ever. The only exception maybe my music… In the end a majority of the songs I created… was influenced by a significant event or person in my life or a strong thought or something strong I guess.

ADSp recognized that much, if not all, of the material for his art came directly from his

life experiences. Another artist from Cuba also stated that his art chronicled his journey

of arriving and living in America. Artists' poems are in fact an account of their lives

whether or not they mean them to be. What an individual does or does not write, how

they define topics and circumstances, and the tone of their poems all give insight into

who they are, where they come from, and how they view the world. As artists write about

their lives they are able to explore, reinforce, create, and reject identities and social

constructs.

Amarina uses much of her writing as a space for exploring identity conflict. She

largely examines her gender, sexual, national, and racial identities as well as abuse, and

family dysfunction. In the following excerpts from one of her autobiographical poems the Survivor/Helper Self is evident as she discusses these identities and topics:

> … Women have always been the center of things beautiful for me. Becoming woman has always been the center of my girlhood… when I bled for the first time I told only my best friend… assured her that this blood meant we could make babies. Being girl and vulnerable meant I had to run faster than itchy fingers, farther than sweaty palms reaching for my hands, my tiny breasts had to be brave against the full fling of his fury—when I refused, when I stabbed him pencil point sliding swift into his flesh—the whole house stirred and slipped silly into a frenzy and I was proud of my pencil point sharp and without fear. My aunt beat me anyway and I cried more out of loneliness than anything. One cousin's name still remains quiet upon my tongue—I think of him when I am sad or angry or afraid of things that do not make noises in the dark. The other one stark raving mad showed me his dick told me I smelled like a woman in my little girl's body hips barely budding he cornered me in the hallway the bathroom, when I bled I washed quick and quiet in secret I became a cradle for civilization—no body not woman can claim that privilege… I am a girl become woman now no queries necessary under my skirt my jeans cargo pants panties boxers under my briefs rests my pussy my twat my cunt bleeds. Once a month I am reminded that though the traffic from my womb has been slow though I have not yet given birth, I can. My body can do something no boy or man or not-woman can. Do it! I dare you to make people without a vagina… yesterday my mother told me to write my story no matter that I write her in unflattering truths… I wished that every girl whose mother left would give her permission unnecessary, but grand to say what happened to her flesh and fury to write how she survived the splendor of being a small girl in a big world that so deeply favors men…

During both her performance and Q & A session as well as her poems, she spoke of the difficulties she had faced throughout her lifetime due to her refusal to subscribe to gender norms both in her appearance and language and using her writing to explore these struggles of defining who she was and rejecting the identities others labeled her with. Another poet, Naya, discussed the weight of trying to live up to unrealistic physical and emotional standards of being the ideal Black woman, but also prefaced the poem by saying it was for any woman or lover of women:

53

When I come around, some they try to break me down, no one knows just what's inside to concerned with the outside, why they messin' with my mind?—Black woman. At a very young age I was taught to use my own shoulder as a pillow when the weight was heavy. Tie my shoes tight as to walk my talk without tripping, smile like Miss America on days I felt like second runner up, pray to God to fortify the God-strength in me, learn to spell my own name correctly so no one else could define me, bite my tongue to hold back the beasted growls in me, stand up tall Black statue seekin' liberty, march like a soldier on the journey to my destiny and always look back when my future seems unclear to me, but I'm just learning that it's okay for me—to cry. I once stood still, voice concealed, stamped symbol of asexuality and from mammy to video vixen I've listened, paid attention to what I am and what I am not to be—forever your cowardly spirited soliloquy… I choose devoutly my foe, to be Black woman—strong… I be Queen Sheba heart of gold, giver of spice and stone—Amazonian princess positioned on the throne mane of a lioness and a mind of my own—sharp in my bite, but delicate in my tone. Eyes like a hawk and strong in my bones—took time to realize that I can't make it on my own. Sister to my brother 'cuz his battle's rollin' on. Made beautiful by the creator of fabric intricately sewn. Black woman, Black women, women—be.

Here Naya chooses to redefine beauty as internal and something that Black women (or women in general) obtain by being true to and embracing that which they are rather than attempting to fit into a predetermined mold created by others. In another poem challenging femininity and beauty Zina talked about men finding her physical appearance and actions to be incongruent, constantly telling her she was too pretty to cry, cuss, and fight, thus implying that a physically beautiful woman should not do such things:

Yes, you love me so much. I am such a beautiful thing. You can't—stop—staring. But when I start talking you'd rather my silence. How can a beautiful woman be so damn violent? And when I start yelling, you covered your ears—how can a beautiful woman instill so much fear? And when my words start smacking you in the face with the truth, you lie to yourself again, you say 'maybe, well maybe I've had one too many shots of patron before I gave her that damn compliment.' Well after all, to be beautiful well, that's the best compliment I can get from a man, now isn't it? isn't it? Well honey, well—consider me uglier than the devil sitting in hell because I am never going to shut up.

In another poem about gender, Kim spoke about the multiple roles, characteristics, and

identities of "real" women:

> Real women I know have flaws, not just cellulite and acne scars or body odor or bad musical taste, but serious flaws. Flaws like cheating on our partners or stealing our best friend's lovers, flaws like looking for what's the best inside of ourselves… inside of somebody else—assuming crisis assuming miracle or assuming nothing at all. Real women I know never knew how we grew up so fast holding fists out with eyes closed we become wives, divorcees, widows—we become addicts, abusers, liars. We become all that we didn't understand about the adult world shocked that the little girls in us haven't yet disappeared. Real women I know keep no good friends on the couch for months don't bug them about their hustling, let them back in when they come knocking at the door. Real women I know are in therapy and madly in loooove with our shrinks, happy to talk about the sad parts, sad to talk about the happy parts, sick of going on medication. Real women I know destroy ourselves with work or television or people who refuse to treat us well, we are persistent in this effort and yet we cannot refuse the invitation to continue on. Real women I know work thousands of miles away from home, collect barrettes in a chest of drawers, pack cardboard boxes full of soap, shampoo, and candy to send home. Real women I know support the economies of entire countries. Real bio women I know aren't women at all, but tranny boys gender queer, gender fluid, with short hair and button down shirts—genitalia only one tiny part of the gender puzzle—when the world offers so much more. Real women I know laugh in bed while smoking weed and eating Girl Scout cookies, post diagrams for their partners on how to give oral sex properly by the bed… Real women I know are mothers—unexpectedly, the babies come. With two feet on the ground, arms stretched wide open ready for whatever arrives. Real women I know are driven into the ground eternally, never given rest—take on evvverybody else's problems—never allow ourselves to give up.

Kim challenges ideas about what "real" women do and who "real" women are, as well as,

encourages women to never give up on themselves. Through their art Amarina, Naya,

Zina, and Kim not only confronted gender norms and roles in relation to beauty, race,

sexuality, strength, and validity, but also encouraged women to embrace who they are

and what they have experienced, pressing on with confidence. As previously

demonstrated by Zane's poem challenging the gender notion of the stoic male in times of

emotional anguish, discussion of gender was not limited to females. Rickey performed a

piece in which he spoke about women emasculating men when they do not get their way

saying, "…Lola challenges my manhood when she doesn't get her way even when I give

her what she wants she still has the nerve to call me gay…." Throughout the poem

Rickey uses the character "Lola" to represent conflicted women who want men to

provide everything for them- yet be entirely independent, are unwilling to compromise,

project the pain of failed relationships on current lovers, and use men's masculinity as a

weapon. Talk of gender in relation to males also surfaced in a conversation with Lyrical

Empress as revealed in this section of my field notes:

> … Lyrical Empress speaks about male poets performing her work without giving her credit, challenging and disrespecting her, sleeping around, and mistreating women. Upon asking her about a well-respected male artist she says that he is a "hoe" who has a bunch of children and has had relationships with some of her friends and not treated them well. I ask her how in an art form that is about working through problems and finding ones' truths these men can talk about so many positive things such as social change, uplifting others, and bettering themselves, yet live the exact opposite lives of what they write about. She replies that the men write about what they *want* to be- not what or who they actually are.

Lyrical Empress highlights contradictions between what some male poets say and what

they actually do. It is important to note that such discrepancies are not limited to males

nor poets, but rather are magnified in a medium where a premium is put on ones' words

and being authentic.

Within this theme of self and reflexivity, an interesting concept seemed to surface

in which some artists appeared to imply that one should *only* speak from their

experiences; however, this was complicated by contradictions in their speech which also seemed to indicate authenticity in speaking about social issues one has witnessed or is aware of. I term such references to genuineness and legitimacy "authenticity claims." At one open mic, a poet specifically stated in her poem that she didn't talk about the ghetto or other things she had not encountered. For her there seemed to be something unauthentic in writing about circumstances that one has not directly experienced. Sergio implicitly stated his feelings that poets should not talk about issues that haven't affected them in the following excerpt when asked if and how gender plays out at spoken word events:

> I see a lot of instances um where a feminine poets er (slight laugh) *female* poets rather will talk about feminine issues. Um, especially dealing with a being discriminated against the sort of glass ceiling idea. Um, and how that's played a role in their lives. Uh, I've really never seen any *male* poets talk about it, which I dunno if that's just from a lack of experience. And I dunno if that's necessarily a bad thing since um, obviously (pause) a per- a spoken word poet is gonna be getting at issues that have impacted them in their lives and so if that's not an issue that I feel like men have experienced maybe then uh, it's not the case that they *should* be talking about that.

By mainly associating gender with femininity Sergio feels that women have an automatic right to discuss gender that men do not necessarily have. What is interesting is that in a discussion on race he seemed to contradict this belief stating:

> Uh, one of the best poems on race that I read, er that was read while I was in high school, uh was about African Americans and the discrimination that they've witnessed- that this person had witnessed first-*hand* they weren't obviously- uh harmed by it because they were Caucasian, but they had witnessed it and sort of seen it from that side. Um, and like I said the-the the guy was Caucasian so it was it, I don't think you have to be a certain race in order to talk about race in spoken word, uh- um, but I think that it definitely plays a huge part in the culture.

57

Thus it appears that one may not actually have to experience something personally, in order to write about it. What one sees going on in the world may be enough to validate their choice to discuss it. In fact, Sergio found it quite moving that a Latino poet wrote a poem about the strife African Americans face in American society:

> Um, one of my absolute favorite poems is by Carlos Andres Gomez and it's uh it's called 41. It's about um… it began with an A, last name is Diallo in New York city—he was shot forty-one times by a four officers who thought that he was a rapist and he wasn't… Where it's basically like you know this one instance of uh someone being shot because of their race wasn't just this isolated incident, where racism is, you know present in these four officers or in this community in New York City—it was, it was uh, just sor- a sort of symbol for what goes on in in you know, America as a whole. And so um, that sort of exemplified to me the use of like race especially because, like I said, he's a Latino American he's not an African American and it-it sort of showed to me… how racial issues transcend what specific race you are.

Sergio took notice of Carlos Gomez's choice to highlight and speak about a particular incident, tied to a history of police abuse toward African Americans. Though Latino Americans often face some of the same ill treatment by law enforcement, he chose to use his poem to speak specifically on the behalf of African Americans. Most likely Carlos Gomez takes Martin Luther King Jr.'s stance that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and realizes that speaking on behalf of and standing in unity with others is necessary to create change. It became evident that use of the art form for teaching through life experiences and targeted messages was often the norm.

Use of Poetry to Deliver Messages

The high level of personal disclosure, in poems performed at public events, created a space in which the personal story could become a message or warning. However, it is important to note that a public performance involving personal disclosure

does not necessitate that the artist intends for the story they tell about them self to convey

a message or serve as a caution to others; they may simply view it as sharing something

they experienced. One young man shared an experience about meeting a man on the

internet:

> …I introduce the first performer. His poem talks about finding a man on the
> internet and his experience when he goes to meet him. He finds out the man lied
> about his age and is much older than he said. He has sex with the man…

Without asking the author, it is impossible to know if the poem was based off of his own

experience. What is also not apparent is if the author wrote the poem simply to tell a story

or as a caution about the freedom the internet allows individuals to invent and portray the

self in ways that may not be congruent with reality. Regardless of the author's intent, to

me the poem was a warning about the dangers of the internet and sexual predators who

misrepresent themselves in order to gain the trust of and access to young people they

wish to engage in sexual acts with. In my interview with Sergio he seemed to believe that

messages, such as the one I took away from the aforementioned poem, were somewhat

intrinsic in the sharing of personal experiences and that something might be gained from

listening to any poets' work:

> I dunno I feel like I'm sharing my experiences with people who ya know, they're
> not me and they don't know I go through- um, but people can relate to- to your
> personal experiences and try ta try ta at least learn from your eyes I guess...
> obviously I realize that I'm I'm probably sounding kinda prophetic here, but I'm
> not like I realize that my message is probably not gonna heavily influence
> anyone's life, but I kinda, I would like to think that at least some people would
> can take some things out of everyone who gets up at a spoken word event and
> performs.

Though delivering a message was not necessarily the point of some artists' poems, numerous poets did use their art to deliver targeted messages.

For many artists, poetry is a platform to create change and advance their beliefs, often in hopes of helping others and improving society. They feel a responsibility to liberate and inform their audiences by speaking about personal experiences and societal issues. During her workshop, Lyrical Empress stated that with spoken word you have the opportunity to save or change someone every time you speak. She believes a poet's job is to take the journey others don't take:

> … a poet's job is to feel, to get to the other side. I'm a poet that comes with a resolution - how can I handle situations? I hate when people tell you all about the problem, but don't give any solution—tell me how I can handle situations…

Here Lyrical Empress makes the distinction between herself and other poets whom she believes often cite problems, yet do not offer answers. One poet wrote an entire poem condemning the use of spoken word for anything other than social activism. Some poets come to view some of this responsibility as a burden. D'Andre jokingly referred to it as "a poet's curse," saying "we gotta live the shit so we can talk about it, so ya'll won't have to go through it." Whether poets embraced this responsibility or found it to be cumbersome, they used both their voices and attire to fulfill it. Some artists wore their messages, sporting t-shirts that said things such as: "Marriage is so gay" (in reference to marriage equality), "F- the economy" (to show disdain for the economic downturn and possibly the government), and I Ain't A King… I'mma Kingdom (which could be taken

as a reference to Christianity and/or the fact that he represents an empire rather than just himself).

The techniques used to convey messages were sometimes as important as the poems themselves, as illustrated in this passage from my field notes:

> … A young African American male is performing a poem about being tempted sexually; the poem is quite explicit. The student activities administrator, who put on the event, is looking at me sideways as if to ask where the poet is going with the poem as it becomes increasingly graphic. At the end of the poem the author describes a scene in which a young lady is performing a sexual act on him and then tells him she has AIDS. The poem concludes by telling the audience to get (HIV/AIDS) tested. It reminds me of a poem by spoken word artist Messiah who performed on and won Amateur Night at the Apollo. Messiah talks about a female in terms of her being a champion boxer who "knocks men out" in the ring until she meets the one she cannot defeat. It is not revealed until the end of the poem when Messiah says the word HIV that we realize the use of boxing terminology was a metaphor about a promiscuous female and that the poem is a warning about contracting sexually transmitted diseases, specifically HIV/AIDS.

Poetic pieces such as these are crafted to grab the attention of audience members in order to deliver a very specific message regarding a social problem. In the case of the sexually explicit poem, it is the overt sexual tone that first captures the attention of listeners paving the way for a targeted message to be received by intrigued audience members. In the case of Messiah it is a surprise ending that grabs the audience. While I have heard many poems warning about the perils of contracting HIV/AIDS, I remember these two poems because of the unexpected endings. Props, though rarely used, possibly because they are often banned in poetry slams that many artists participate in, are occasionally utilized. Before performing a poem about the brutal beating death of Chicago teen Derrion Albert, one artist told the audience that he usually brings a two-by-four when performing the following poem (he also prefaced the poem by explaining that, "in the

61

video (of the murder) there's a part where somebody yells out 'put that nigga to sleep'…so that's where that line comes from"):

> Put that nigga to sleep! Put 'em to sleep! Get him! Get him…! Put that nigga to sleep! tragedy, copied and pasted we just wasted, everyday wasted—over gang affiliations, territory, colors, what set you claim—young warriors, inner-city soldiers who were never taught to love each other… brothers who should have been on their buddy list—instead they playin' Vice Lords, Folks, Bloods and Crips—gangsta male, g-mail they could be puttin' brothers in boxes—we click on in-boxes to read the story, no one really gets the message, no attachment included. We throw away lives in a matter of seconds, human life deleted quicker than junk mail—the virus is in our minds… another Black male in our subject line. Chicago honor student Derrion Albert now dead at the age of 16—this year—September '09, nah this ain't Columbine, this time—it's that old cliché DOA ever presently on your way Black on Black crime. Put that nigga to sleep! Put 'em to sleep! Black is beautiful, Black is beautiful as Ruby Dee and Isaac Davis showin' a (inaudible) love to each other… Black is beautiful, Black is beautiful as three generations gathered around one dentist table, but yo we ugly too—we beautiful, but we ugly too. Ugly as Tupac's bloodied body left lifeless on the Vegas strip we—beautiful, but we ugly too… ugly as the third teenager killed in Chicago last month Derrion Albert outnumbered—in an out of consciousness, body brutally beaten, body brutally beaten… brains bashed in—flesh beaten by boys not yet man, brutally beaten—outnumbered 3pm… Chicago inner-city brawl for Monday after school special. This is reality TV, the real *Real World*, *True Life,* for real *Survivor* except here, you don't get voted off, your own people kill you off. Brutally beaten, boys turned temporary beasts… this ain't Afghanistan it's the south side of Chicago…

Even without his two-by-four prop the artist utilized the common techniques of repeating particular lines in succession (for emphasis, which is usually done three times) and composing intricate plays on words.

Whether or not they used props, poets performed powerful and dynamic poems. The Challenger and Reformer/Activist Selves are quite evident in the following excerpts, as artists seek to convey a variety of messages. During his performance, James the featured poet of the night, challenged listeners to think about the wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan, religion, and current problems in the African American community such as

diabetes, abortion, STDs/AIDS, lack of knowledge and role models, and absent fathers.

He proposed education and abstinence as the answers. The following are passages from

three of his poems:

> I spread the thighs of my notebook looking to lay my language inside like the ink pen is my penis that injects my English upon the page. My perceptions are presented on stage as premature mothers give birth to premature babies produced by overgrown men… praise the preacher, not knowing God is the greatest. Life is a great test, but I'm a child of the father—no need for DNA test. Modern day man stressed by religious divisions as I reflect on European missions… I choose not to school the beliefs of other religions—who is modern man to tell you what's wrong and what's right? …I converse with Christians, Muslims, Rastas tryin' ta figure who is God, who is Allah… who is Jah—I studied Jesus, Muhammad and Haile Salassie while acknowledging my own ignorance… education erases ignorance. Education erases ignorance, equaling the interpretation of what I call my environment. You see, my eyes are opened... by peers who are hoping to own a car by now, but only can afford a backpack for miscarriages. Mental stability with no sexual protection and her answer was std. STD was her answer the question, "what do prostitutes and college students have in common?" And everybody's doin' it and everybody's doin' it, and everybody's doin' everybody and now nobody knows who—they are. Identities lost like car keys when you're late for church, and I find myself takin' out loans for sins that Jesus has already paid for. Afraid to accept the change I try to remain the same, I try to remain same… I be tellin' my boys to get a library card and learn yourself, about yourself—too many miseducated Negros are takin' the souls of Black folks, never knowin' that Black boys grow into Native Sons. I be the native son based off Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Langston Hughes… W.E.B. DuBois. I be listenin' to the Roots, Common, and Badu. I be listenin' to Marley and studyin' Garvey and relatin' that back to rap music—Mos Def and Talib Kweli or Black Star—most definitely don't know about the Black star line because we be too busy tryin' ta stand in line to see black stars and truthfully we all suppose to be stars preachin' to the darkness and shinin' our light- yet many of us suffer from temporary highs spent a whole weekend tryin' ta get high then try to rest up for Monday morning… we be afraid of death but anxious to bring life into this world knowing that the good die young- the good die young so we commit sin… tryin' to be God, thinkin' that we are God simply because we sacrifice our sons—sending teenagers to fight in a war that none of us understand. 11,000 troops into Afghanistan over 3000 soldiers killed for Iraq nah over 4000 soldiers killed for Iraqi freedom and the death toll continues to rise…

(lists the names of soldiers who have been killed) buck! buck! buck!, buck! buck! buck!, buck! buck! that's 4000 soldiers on my mind. So 4000 soldiers is how I start this rhyme… my people prematurely die for peace—president say we ain't finished, too much pride to quit now. People who once took a stand now choose to sit down, so I jump up off the porch beggin' to carry the torch two lighters in my palm, I'm on fire in my pocket- dislocated from my folks poems place me back in socket—so I guess I need this joint- lyrics are the ligaments holdin' my world together. Some cats they use the big words to prove how clever… I burn truths through mics. Like I'm worried about the economy… while you argue on the train debatin' on who the nicest… slices of the American pie, rarely served in my community. American dream, rarely seen… makin' rappers like Plies a role model—make me wanna get a gun so I could ride out for my folks—put a hole in his lungs and shout "power to the people!" like Huey and his boys—and I'll call it self defense—my folks are bein' destroyed—don't care if I kill some fuckin' rapper for his lines when my country kills without reason—4000 soldiers on my mind.

… love circulated like kitchen fans. Eating corn bread and cabbage—hash and black eyed peas those days long gone I'm thinkin' PhD's- conversation with my grandmother—the other end of the phone—I'm tryin' 'ta explain why I stopped eating neck bones, stopped eating pork chops, don't even want bacon in my greens—I ain't runnin' from my culture I'm runnin' from heart disease…

… some things just ain't worth dyin' for no matter how good it feels... 65% of the students at my high school have sexually transmitted diseases, 16-year-old sex fiends—can't tell you what percentage actually passed away… some things just ain't worth dyin' for—what I'm tryin' for, what I'm strivin' for love, marriage, then the carriage in that order—'cuz some be skippin' love and marriage—love, marriage, then the carriage two parents behind the carriage so the carriage stays on course. See my parents never married so there was no divorce, just a thirty-eight-year-old lady, her early eighties baby and another hard head whose daddy we ain't seen since like—Whoosh… Fast-forward to '09 it's some whole other shit, women only measure love in inches and who's layin' good dick… doin' it and doin it and doin it well, doin' it and doin' it and doin' it well, doin' it and doin' it and doin' it well—but she don't represent no queen… my mothers generation can't understand why a strong woman won't demand a strong man… fast paced nation apathetic killer—protesters for pro choice, dead babies can't protest death… for some pregnancy be the real inconvenient truth. Fast paced nation—apathetic killer ain't America all about convenience in the first place – from iPods to blackberry to abortion clinics—if it complicates your life, might as well just kill it. I mean your convenience is worth that child dying for—finding it to inconvenient to use a Lifestyle, Trojan or maybe birth control- go ahead and kill it before it develops a soul, not to mention religion. What about rape? What

about rape though—hold up, if we aborted every child produced from rape there would be no African American race, no Black community or the problems that lie within it… my greatest goal in life is to be a good husband, a good father so my wife and I can build a strong Black family—something rare, something rare but needed in my hood—even deeper, three things plague my community AIDS, Abortion, Absent Fathers—Abstinence is my way of breaking the cycle…

Kim called for the recognition of Asian's within the political arena:

Black, white—whatever a humble memo to the candidates for the presidency of the United States of America. Dear campaign trail stomping, advertisement fundraising, perfect hair having, mudslinging with a smile so as not to make it seem like mudslinging candidates for the presidency of the United States of America. I… would like to make a request—for myself and others like myself, to be enumerated in all further speeches, debates and miscellaneous communications with the American public at large. Now this could be in reference to our nation of Ben and Jerry chunky monkey ice cream eaters or our nation of women under five foot two with slightly Napoleonic tendencies—this could be in reference to our nation of Janice Dickenson modeling agency watchers… or those who have not yet learned to skateboard, and although all of these above categories would be accurate- the nation I would like you to refer to is even less of a statistical minority than some of those listed above and a fairly obvious one, and that would be Asian. OOOhh I know you may balk and scream about how many *Aaasian* events you've gone to or how many *Aaasian* donors you've taken money from, but this election year I would like to banish the term in your words "black—white—whatever" to the mass media rhetoric garbage can forever. Even worse than this is in your words, "We believe in the rights of all people—black —white—blue—purple—green—silver—now I consider myself a fairly well informed and well traveled individual and although I do not think that blue or purple or silver or green people exist red and yellow and brown people do. And although we may not call ourselves these things, but if we are going to relegate our communities to these sloppy pots and essentialize to the colors of the rainbow I would like to mention that "whatever"—does not represent me—nor does blue or purple or green or silver for that matter and you may groan "aww well, we can't talk about everybody's problems" and that much is true, but I am a sucker for specificity. And when it comes down to whether or not I exist, and further more whether my heart, my uterus, my tax return and my generation is gonna be governed by your corny self, I would like to say that I'm real. I'm here. I'm voting. And believe me—this girl is *yellow*.

Thomas spoke about the media's negative and racist portrayal of African Americans during Hurricane Katrina, tying it to the a history of slavery and White supremacy in America:

> … Niggas loot, white folks find—this is the science, scripture spewed from the frothy mouths of reporters, who ignored dying grandmothers to give us this scoop: the unwashed masses, their poor asses were stealing, pads & pampers, bread & water & lawd no, TVs too. Niggas loot, white folks find & white folks found it hard to believe that black folks would not die solemn deaths, that we would not dehydrate with dignity while our govt. watched our suffering with muted concern or excited amusement. Niggas loot, white folks find, we find this easier to understand than how W got elected twice or how 20 thousand people can be forgotten & warnings ignored. Niggas loot, white folks find & we find ourselves here again the Sisyphus of our reality a historic requirement to defy immoral laws that protect water-logged DVDs more than water-logged elders. So we're looting tonight refusing to surrender to the devastation of wind, water, or white supremacy…

Zane shared "true tales based on" his "neighborhood," calling attention to the high levels of violence and murder in South East Washington, DC:

> Yesterday—I rolled through the hood—and I seen something—and it hurt me. The bullets blared, young brother took his last gasp for air—his last seconds weren't very clear—kinda peaceful. Who would think that the hand-to-hand transfer would get to him taking the bullet-to-heart transplant—he didn't have a chance… and here it is trees with the strange fruit—teddy bears and liquor bottles sitting around the roots… pull up slow, roll down windows, point guns and fire bullets—the bullets ricochet and hit mother's only son—playing on playground— no chance to get down, the boy never heard a sound. Kinda peaceful. Now the families are up in arms…

And Jermaine challenged men to treat women with care and respect:

> They once told me that if I were to place the lobe of my ear between the thighs of a battered woman I'd be able to hear the lies of a million men, swimming inside an ocean of her tears… or perhaps I might hear the doom… from falling fatherhood promises, spiraling in flames, dropped before she was ever named- still yet to make it to the ground floor of her soul they told me to try sending her a

compliment—and, and watch it be froze in mid-air from a stare so cold not even pneumonia knows the benefits of its frigidness. She endured the nightmares of a newly widowed Coretta Scott King—afraid to dream, for those closest to her were killed for doing the exact same thing—once believed that orgasms felt like wedding rings… she'd exchange her vows in flesh and gave them to any being who wrote love letters inside of her waistline… chivalry remains a cruel joke, far too witty for her self-esteem's comprehension. Her indifference has become way of living—receives male deceit without flinching, no longer does it sting—hating men has become involuntary… she does it more than she blinks… affection disguised as erection inside the fallout shelters of her feelings—healing seems like blasphemy but from the look in her eyes she has to be tired. You can see the desire—struggling to escape her wetness, shackled down by sounds of same 'ol song rewound… sounds like nails screeching on the canvas of blackboard and she acts like she can't stand to dance to another song… suppose to be brothers and fathers, suppose to be humans… suppose to be friends and actual human beings. Turned her virginity into urban myth… she Eve with Adam nowhere to be found—nowhere to lead his queen from the destruction she sees—from the destruction she is—she is Armageddon with childbearing hips—her mouth is now a guillotine beheading anything or any person—dismembering any man who ever crossed her. So you better not look like you love her—because she has seen so many others with the same ugliness embedded into their smile. She has been trained to not let false saviors come in to savor the sweet taste of her trust- only to not appreciate the robust flavor she's gained from years of not giving it to anyone. She's been bitter for so long… she longs for just one man in this world to prove her wrong question is—will that man be you?

Though the delivery of messages, such as these, was central to artists, they also

mentioned aspects of the spoken word community itself as important.
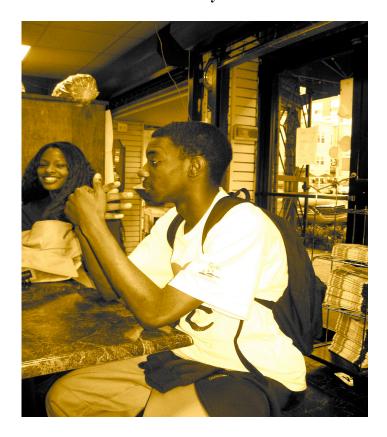
Perceived "Family" Functions

Figure 3. Poets Having Lunch Together at Local Café

In his interview, Sergio said the following referring to spoken word poets at

his University:

> I feel like here it's, ya know very like close knit community with the people who have done the spoken word events before—like I always see the people who have done it in the past and uh it's always organized by the same people and everything so it's kinda like a (pause) nice community for, for doing that too…

Though the community of poets on his campus is quite transient, often coming together

only at events, of which Sergio has participated in just a few, he still viewed the

community as cohesive. Through consistency in organizers and participants he was able

to overlook the otherwise quite temporary nature of the group. A feeling of closeness or familiarity with one another may also occur due to the high levels of personal content often present in poems. For example, an audience member may feel a bond of sorts with an artist because they are able to relate to a situation, struggle, or feeling expressed in the artist's poetry. Such perceived shared experiences might allow individuals to look past the fact that they are otherwise strangers. Therefore it is not surprising that a feeling of intimate connection between performers as well as audience members might occur. Another aspect of the community, which artists seemed to place importance on, was its strong networking and collective economic practices.

Lyrical Empress gave examples of people opening their homes to her while she was performing abroad. She said that poets generally provide for each other pooling and sharing resources, so having money to travel for performances is never an issue. I might also add that it is not uncommon for an "offering" to be taken up, as was done at several of the open mics, to fund the travel expenses of feature performers since they are usually not paid. During our discussion, Lyrical Empress made it a point to mention that she has never heard of a poet stealing from another artist they stayed with because it is just not the nature of the group; perhaps this level of openness and respect has to do with the closeness or perceived closeness between members. Lyrical Empress also talked about the importance of helping other poets secure feature performances and other opportunities to share their work. This sentiment of helping "your fellow man" out was also shared by one of the open mic hosts:

69

> … when it really shakes out—it is about helping your fellow man. It is about calling up Jessica, who I know, and saying… yeah you can come be a feature… and then you hook up somebody else and somebody else hooks up somebody else…You have to look at it how can I help folks, 'cuz really that's all that life is about… how do you get what you want- by helping other people get what they want. If you want to be successful in life, you help other people get what they want…

This dedication to assisting others also played out during an open mic I was hosting, as demonstrated in my field notes:

> Throughout the night a couple of students associated with one of the literature magazines on campus asked if they could come on stage to announce their upcoming open mic event. After receiving approval from the main organizer of the open mic I turned the stage over to them to promote.

While participants do tend to hold views about which open mic spots are the "best," and friendly competition may sometimes play out, hosts of open mics generally collaborate and cross promote supporting each others' events drawing from one another's crowds. Thus the same individuals run a high likelihood of running into one another and developing a sense of community. Because the host is often the most visible poet they often serve as a liaison between individuals and events. However, their role is much more involved than simply that of a contact person.

Hosts are responsible for setting the stage and ultimately the tone of the night in a way that draws the audience in as active and respectful participants. Before the first performer comes on stage hosts generally voice the universal open mic rule: *respect the mic* as the following host explains:

> The rules of tonight is that we ask everyone to please respect the mic. Um, uh do not talk so loudly that other people around you cannot hear the poet that is on the

70

mic. The rules tonight are that you get five minutes only- no exceptions no um no extensions, do not turn your head and look at me and go 'can I…' I'm gonna say 'hell no' (some laughter in audience)…

Thus, respecting the mic refers to poets staying within allotted time limitations and following any specified guidelines as well as audience members keeping noise and side conversations to a minimum and can also indicate that negative comments are to be kept to themselves.

Figure 4. Host 'Setting the Stage'

Hosts utilize various techniques to create a sense of closeness and a light hearted atmosphere in which individuals feel free to interact and share just about anything. Almost all hosts use a combination of call and response, humor, stories, and references to popular culture and current events in order to create a shared experience. Because the audience is an integral part of open mics some sort of call and response between the host and audience is often repeated throughout the night to create high levels of energy. The host will often playfully refuse to bring a poet to the stage until the level of excitement in

the audience response is at a level that satisfies them. The following is an example of a host using both humor and a sing-a-long of a well-known '90s television series to gain the involvement of her audience:

> ...If this is your first time and you feel the need to giggle—(whispers) it's okay—laugh. For all of the people who um the only thing you know about poetry is what you learned on love Jones wit your momma this (snaps fingers) don't work—clap, laugh, stomp your foot, tap your girl (and say) 'did you hear what the hell she said.' I'm serious… you will get out of the people up here (on the stage) what you give them. So if I have a room full of stone faced people starin' back at me goin' humph (makes emotionless face) I guarantee that's the amount of energy that you're gonna get back. So if you're really here to have some fun, if you're really here to, to hear some entertainment um you gotta give the energy. So I'm gonna do what I usually do just to do an energy check in the room. I'm gonna sing a song and I need everybody to sing it with me. That means crowd participation- at like the top of your lungs… (proceeds to get crowd involved in singing and laughing along to the theme song of the TV series The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air).

While there seemed to be many newcomers the night this poet was hosting, which led her to explain the basic tenets of open mics, by and large audience members tend to be regular attendees and have a rapport with hosts. They are usually quite involved in creating the atmosphere, by speaking openly to the host and making affirmative comments, sounds, or gestures during performances. Thus a spirit of support, and encouragement is often present as is also revealed in the following passage from my field notes:

> As the host I started off the night by telling the audience that on the west coast, where I am from, we show love to performers by slowly rubbing our hands together (as one would do with a stick between their hands to start a fire) as an indication of sending positive vibes, especially when the performer is forgetting their words- instead of clapping or snapping or shouting out words of encouragement, which can be distracting. When it was apparent an artist was struggling to recall lines or was nervous the audience took to the new method of showing support and sent "vibes". Some of the performers specifically asked the

72

audience to "send vibes" when they were struggling to remember words to their poems. During the open mic aDSp sent me a text message saying "Now that I'm seeing it I love the goodvibes thing. Good stuff."

While I had asked audience members to send good vibes in the event that an artist forgot their lines, snapping and calling out words of encouragement are the most common ways audiences show support for poets who cannot remember the words to a poem while performing.

Many times it is not just the hosts who create a sense of comradery. Performers also quite frequently employ humor and provide background information on their poems, which allows the audience to gain some insight into the actual lives of the artists. For example, to quiet the crowd before he began performing D' Andre jokingly asked, "Ya'll listening?" then proceeded to explain, "I'm just checking. I teach eighth grade science all day so I deal with mutherfuckers who don't listen all day… (audience bursts out laughing). So I just be liking to know that on my free time mutherfuckers is actually listening – that's all … (audience laughter still dying down). Naya also joked with the audience during her feature performance asking the people in the front row if they were awake, then saying, "I'm just making sure. I know sometimes I'm six foot one and I'm standin' right in front of ya- ya might be a little bit intimidated, but don't be- we're family right?" Prior to saying this Naya humored the audience by talking about what she referred to as "the love" of her life:

> Krispy Kreme doughnuts at fourth grade birthday parties, it was the Grands buttermilk biscuits that made me tardy. Can't count the number of McDonalds' apple pies I ate—143 pounds in the third grade and they-(imitates the chorus of Amy Winehouse's song Rehab exchanging the word Rehab for fat camp) they tried to make me go to fat camp, and I said no, no, no (the audience joins in

73

singing the 'no's' clapping and laughing). My mother told me at a very young age that if I had a kid she'd kick me out of her house, so I—clever, locked up my legs and threw away the key, replaced my desire for sex with a fascination for TV… and now I'm delusional 'cuz I taste big Angus burgers on the train—smell Subway... and I think Tony the Tiger just winked at me… and I'm starting to believe Aunt Jemima's really a part of my family (audience laughing heartily). My friends keep telling me I need help for this… I go to movie theaters just for the popcorn, I, I sneak slices of (inaudible) bread instead of porn…

Throughout her poem Naya joked about a something most people can relate to—an affinity for certain foods. Almost everyone at one point or another has wanted to eat their favorite food so much they could taste it. This poem instantly drew the audience into Naya, giving her their undivided attention. Poets also often poke fun at themselves by imitating poet stereotypes such as the beatnik poet, the overly socially conscious poet who screams and yells and repeats the same phrases three times in a row to make their poem seem "deep," or the "poetry voice" as Naya did in her next poem. She began by asking the audience, "You know what a poetry voice is… even if you're not a poet?—that, that stereotypical poetry voice?" Then, using her best "poetry voice" she read her poem, exaggerating and making fun of the stereotypical spoken word artist image of an overly spiritual and optimistic African American individual who has "natural" hair styled in an afro, twists, dreadlocks, braids, or cornrows that has come to bearing knowledge to their audience:

I want tooo close my eyeees (audience member can be heard saying "you know she's right")… I want tooo close my eyeees, lay back and listen to hip hop that's so smooth—watch rap videos without becoming angry… think of love without growing impatient… rewrite the Bible and watch the world—smile (audience bursts out laughing). And I could accept the parts of femininity I try to forget, peel off my fingernails, grease my scalp, light a candle burn some incense and play my favorite D'Angelo CD (audience laughing) and all because, that's exactly what you'd expect me to say. (stopping the "poetry voice" she continues)

74

Everywhere I go people are always asking me if I'm a poet- and my first thought is—it's my hair right? (Naya's hair is in Senegalese twists, the audience laughs knowingly). But I respond, hell yeah I'm a poet—that's right playahaters I'm sensitive! (audience laughing). I spent countless hours thinking of poignant ways to express and articulate all the messed up stuff humans feel—turning our garbage into beauty, our confusion into clarity, our anger into excitement, our boredom into big-city passion, our 50 cent is Idris Elba… (a girl hollers our Whoo! as other women laugh and clap)… a mastermind of metaphor… it all started with dreams of microphones and turntables, skylines and skyscrapers… light to people just like me, eager to listen—be taken out of their individual world, and for three minutes or however long it takes me to finish a poem- they become a part of my community, a family dancing in sync to the dj's rhythm…

At the end of the poem Naya specifically points out that the poetry itself, regardless of what it is about, is what unites individuals listening; it is the common denominator they all share. As fun loving and supportive as the spoken word community can be, no "family" is without their problems.

A long-standing joke within the spoken word community is voiced by Lyrical Empress in the following quote, "Don't date no poet because they will ream you." During her workshop Lyrical Empress spoke about the propensity for poets to use their art as a means of public retaliation through an example of a failed relationship between two poets she knew. She explained that because a poet felt extremely hurt by the actions of his former girlfriend, he wrote a poem called "Ass Tissue," equating the way she treated him to how people use toilet paper and now, every time he performs the poem she and anyone else who knows about their former relationship, knows the poem is about her. It is not uncommon for people to perform poetry pieces about recent breakups, past loves, former friends, or foes. Often the audience serves as a source of camaraderie cheering on the

poet as they describe the wrongdoings of the other person or "poetically diss" them

through creative metaphors, similes, haikus, and other linguistic forms.

6. Conclusion

I began this research with a desire to find out how spoken word participants utilized the medium, with a focus on themes, self, and society. By employing the grounded theory method I was able to identify why many artists participate in spoken word and how they use the art form. Four recurring themes emerged from the findings: 1) *Writing the Self Out of Trouble*, 2) *Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-Identity Through Reflexive Practice*, 3) *Use of Poetry to Deliver Messages*, and 4) *Perceived "Family" Functions*. Five main types of public selves surfaced: 1) *the Passionate Self*, 2) *the Survivor/Helper Self*, 3) *the Reformer/Activist Self*, 4) *the Challenger Self*, and 5) *the Humorous Self.* The Passionate Self followed by the Activist/Reformer and Challenger Selves were the most commonly displayed public selves. Perhaps the large focus on romantic relationships (by the Passionate Self) reflects a level of importance placed on such relationships by society and/or an area of social relations plagued by great tension and conflict, as romantic relationship poems were most often about problems rather than happiness and contentment. The frequent displays of the Activist/Reformer and Challenger Selves came as no surprise with the seemingly wide-held belief (within the spoken word community) that poetry should be used to deliver messages and create change or as Medina argued—to humanize, which Mead would most likely agree with.

The types of selves often fell within particular themes. The Passionate and the Survivor/Helper Selves often came up when speaking about dealing with or overcoming difficulties in one's life (Writing the Self out of Trouble) and in poems about self-identity (Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-Identity Through Reflexive Practice). The Reformer/Activist and Challenger selves emerged primarily when poets were delivering messages (Use of Poetry to Deliver Messages), however the Challenger Self also came up in relation to self-identity (Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-Identity Through Reflexive Practice). The Humorous Self generally served as a means of bonding between artists, hosts, and audience members putting it within the theme of Perceived "Family" Functions. It is important to note that similar to the dynamicness of a personality enneagram, in which an individual flows between expression of their dominant personality type, shades of the adjacent personality types, or even additional connected personality types (when faced with particular circumstances or phases of their lives), the poets also frequently expressed one or more public selves within a singular poem. Therefore, while specific public selves tended to fall within the same themes, it was possible for them to appear in one or more, as all of the selves did or could have.

Regardless of why they performed, what they spoke about, or which public selves they portrayed, artists were asking their audiences to engage in the process of *verstehen*. Poets were requesting that members of the audience attempt to understand what they spoke about from their point of view by sharing their experiences, feelings, beliefs, and worldviews. Even within humorous poems, artists were calling for audience

members to view certain topics from a funny and amusing perspective, as they did. Mead's emphasis on social experience as a guiding factor in shaping personalities and assisting in the creation of self was quite evident in the numerous poems that spoke of personal experiences and the types of selves particular artists expressed most frequently. Reflexivity, as focused on by Mead and Giddens, was also present and apparent through the large use of narratives in which artists reflected on their life experiences and feelings in relation to self and identity, as demonstrated in the Creation, Continuity, and Modification of Self-Identity Through Reflexive Practice theme. Within spoken word artists are able to maintain particular narratives of self by continually reinforcing them within the poetry they publically perform. However, such narratives may be interrupted if the artist is known to act in ways that contradict the self or selves they present in front of audiences, as illustrated in Lyrical Empress' comment that male poets write about who they want to be, not who they are. Thus, Giddens (2008:108), is correct in asserting that one must maintain a strong narrative, "which can explain everything that has happened," and that such a narrative must be "creatively and continuously maintained." Perhaps part of the success of famous spoken word artists is their ability to convince audiences to interpret behaviors and events (in their lives and society), in the same manner in which the artists themselves do. To achieve this poets may utilize the techniques of impression management, presented by Goffman (1952:6), to "influence the definition of the situation" their audiences come to have.

One main limitation of the study was that even with recordings of many of the poets' performances, exact words could not always be made out. Another shortcoming of

79

examining artistic material is its subjective nature. Without speaking to the artists it is not possible to know if the poems were in fact about their own experiences and identities, nor if my interpretations of their poems were in fact correct. As an artist I personally have composed poems as if they were about another person when they were about my own experiences or circumstances in order to maintain a sense of privacy; conversely I have also written about the situations of others in manners that viewers might interpret as being my own. However, what an artist specifically intends to communicate and whether or not it is autobiographical may not necessarily be important. Regardless of the author's intent, various public selves will be displayed and members of the audience may take numerous messages away. Therefore research on art will always be inherently subjective. However, viewing art against the backgrounds and perspectives of its creators can provide some framework in which to better understand it. Therefore it is significant to note that while the racial makeup of audiences varied from event to event, overall the majority of the poets and audience members were African American, which accounts for the large focus on African American identities and communities within artists' poems as well as some of the frequently invoked delivery styles exhibiting aspects of nommo. As previously explored in the review of the literature and evidenced in the findings, there are indeed strong ties to African and African American cultures in the spoken word community.

Appendix A: Face Sheet

Name/Pen Name_____

Year you were born_____ current age_____

Which of the following describes your gender identity:
Male_____ Female_____ Transgender_____

What city/state do you currently reside in?_____
Would you describe that area as: Urban_____ Suburban_____ Rural_____

What was the religious affiliation of your parents growing up (if any)?

What is your current religious affiliation (if any)?

What is your cultural affiliation (refers to shared language, customs, beliefs etc.)

Describe your racial group affiliation (if you identify with more than one group please list all groups that you identify with)

What is your current occupation (includes student and stay-at-home parent)

What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?
Middle School_____ High School_____ Some College_____ Bachelor's Degree_____
Some Graduate School_____ Master's Degree_____ Doctoral Degree _____

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Tell me about your first experience with spoken word
(where you lived, where you heard it (event, TV, DVD, CD), what age you were, who you were with, how it made you feel)

Have you studied poetry?

Where did you "grow up in" (spend majority of childhood in)?

Tell me about the experience of listening to spoken word

Do you perform spoken word?
Do you copyright your work?
Tell me about how you choose what you are going to perform?
How do you choose where you will perform?

Have you ever watched or participated in SLAM poetry?
What are your thoughts on SLAM poetry/competitions?

Is there a difference between spoken word and poetry?

Is there a difference between rap/hip hop and spoken word?

Do you have any interest in social activism?
What social causes/concerns are of greatest interest to you?
Do you utilize spoken word to discuss your views on activism or politics?
Does social activism play a role in spoken word to you? How?

How often do you attend spoken word events?

Do you find there are different types of spoken word artists?

Who are your favorite spoken word artists?
What do you like about these artists? What draws you into their work?

Tell me about any specific books/poems/art that have had a significant impact on you.

REFERENCES

REFERENCES

Adams, Bert N. & R.A. Sydie. 2001. *Sociological Theory*. Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press.

Asante, Molefi K. 1987. *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Bergland Holen, Jodi. 2009. "Review: Writing in Rhythm: Spoken Word Poetry in Urban Classrooms." *Teaching & Learning* 23(3): 134-135.

Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Brantley, Ben. 2002. "Theatre Review: Untamed Poetry, Loose Onstage." *New York Times,* November 15. Retrieved March 3, 2010 (http://theater.nytimes.com).

Camangian, Patrick. 2008. "Untempered Tongues: Teaching Performance Poetry for Social Justice." *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 7(2): 35-55.

Cook, Dara. 2001. "You Can't Keep Simmons Down on the Phat Farm- Entertainer Russell Simmons." *Black Issues Book Review*. FindArticles.com. Retrieved February 23, 2010 (http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HST/is_1_3/ai_71317330/).

Coser, Lewis A. 1977. *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context.* 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Desai, Shiv Raj and Tyson Marsh. 2005. "Weaving Multiple Dialects in the Classroom Discourse: Poetry and Spoken Word as a Critical Teaching Tool." *Taboo* Fall-Winter, pp. 71- 90.

Emerson, M. Robert, Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Ferdman, Bernardo M. 1990. "Literacy and Cultural Identity." *Harvard Educational Review* 60(2): 181-204. (Retrieved from ProQuest on November 17, 2009.)

Fisher, Maisha T. 2003. "Open Mics and Open Minds: Spoken Word Poetry in African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities." *Harvard Educational Review*. 73(3): 362-389. (Retrieved from ProQuest on November 17, 2009.)

Fisher, Maisha T. 2005a. "Literocracy: Liberating Language and Creating Possibilities: An Introduction." *English Education* 37(2): 92-95. (Retrieved from JSTOR on November 17, 2009.)

Fisher, Maisha T. 2005b. "From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Contexts. *English Education* 37(2): 115-131. (Retrieved from JSTOR on November 17, 2009.)

Freire, Paulo. 1989. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company.

Gabbin, Joanne V. ed. 2009. Mourning Katrina: A Poetic Response to Tragedy. Buena Vista, VA: Mariner Publishing.

Gauntlett, David. 2008. "Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity." Pp. 99-124 in *Media, Gender and Society: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Gehring, John and Christopher Powers. 2005. "Outsiders' Art." *Education Week* 24(37): 25-29.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Doubleday

Gordon, Beverly M. 1993. "African-American Cultural Knowledge and Liberatory Education: Dilemmas, Problems, and Potentials in a Postmodern American Society." Urban Education 27(4): 448-470. (Retrieved from SAGE Journals Online on November 17, 2009.)

Hall, Horace R. 2007. "Poetic Expressions: Students of Color Express Resiliency Through Metaphors and Similes." *Journal of Advanced Academics* 18(2): 216-244. (Retrieved from EBSCOHost on November 17, 2009.)

Jocson, Korina M. 2005. "Taking It to the Mic: Pedagogy of June Jordan's Poetry for the People and Partnership with an Urban High School." *English Education* 37(2): 132-148. (Retrieved from JSTOR on November 17, 2009.)

Jocson, Korina M. 2006. "There's a Better World: Urban Youth Rewriting Their Social Worlds through Poetry." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 49(8): 700-707. (Retrieved from JSTOR on November 17, 2009.)

Kinloch, Valerie F. 2005. "Poetry, Literacy, and Creativity: Fostering Effective Learning Strategies in an Urban Classroom." *English Education* 37(2): 96-114. (Retrieved from JSTOR on November 17, 2009.)

Low, Bronwen. 2006. "Poetry on MTV? Slam and the Poetics of Popular Culture." *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* Winter: 97-112.

Mahiri, Jabari and Soraya Sablo. 1996. "Writing For Their Lives: The Non-School Literacy of California's Urban African American Youth." *The Journal of Negro Education* 65(2); 164-180. Retrieved from JSTOR on November 17, 2009.)

Medina, Tony & Reyes Rivera. 2001. *bum rush the page*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Morrell, Ernest and Jeffrey M.R. Duncan-Andrade. 2002. "Promoting Academic Literacy with Urban youth through Engaging Hip-hop Culture." *The English Journal* 91(6): 88-92. Retrieved JSTOR on November 17, 2009.)

Morris, Charles W., ed. [1934] 1967. *Works of George Herbert Mead. Vol. 1, Mind, Self, & Society: from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Powell, Catherine T. 1991. "Rap Music: An Education with a Beat from the Street." *Journal of Negro Education* 60(3): 245-259. (Retrieved from JSTOR on November 17, 2009.)

Russell Simmons Presents Brave New Voices. "About the Show." HBO Web site. Retrieved February 23, 2010 (http://www.hbo.com/russell-simmons-presents-brave-new-voices/index.html#/russell-simmons-presents-brave-new-voices/about/index.html).

Smith, Marc Kelly and Joe Kraynak. 2009. *Stage a Poetry Slam: Creating Performance Poetry Events*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Media Fusion.

Somers-Willet, Susan B. A. 2005. "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity." The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association 38(1): 51-73. (Retrieved from JSTOR on March 14, 2010.)

Spun, Brandon. 2002. "Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway." *NY Rock*, December 2002. Retrieved February 26, 2010, (http://www.nyrock.com/reviews/2002/defpoetry.asp).

Stovall, David. 2006. "Urban Poetics: Poetry, Social Justice and Critical Pedagogy in Education." *The Urban Review* 38(1): 63-80. (Retrieved from SpringerLink on November 17, 2009.)

Strauss, Anselm L. 1987. *Qualitative Analysis For Social Scientists*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Walker, Felicia R. and Viece Kuykendall. 2005. "Manifestations of Nommo in *Def Poetry*." *Journal of Black Studies* 36(2): 229-247. (Retrieved from JSTOR on February 23, 2010.)

Weber, Max. [1930] 1992. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Naliyah K. Kaya graduated from Shoreline Community College in 2003. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Hampton University in 2006. Her poetry has been published in *Spindrift, The Saracen,* and *Volition*. She is the co-founder of Cultural Fusion Field Day at George Mason University.