THE OMNIDIRECTIONAL MICROPHONE:

PERFORMANCE LITERATURE AS SOCIAL PROJECT

by

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Abstract

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Beginning with the metaphor of an omnidirectional microphone—which detects sound from all directions and records ambient sounds as well as single voices—the author proposes that the study of spoken word performance has the potential to shift literary criticism towards a more contextual, relational, non-evaluative understanding of literature. Because spoken word is a highly social, community-based practice, it requires attention to contexts as well as texts, and this study conceptualizes the form through the relationships among poems, performers, and audience—as well as critics and skeptics.

This study is the first to look at spoken word as a global phenomenon, drawing on research into writing-performance communities in New York, Montreal, London, and Melbourne. The first part lays out a careful but capacious definition of spoken word—a term with different connotations in different countries—to include not just poetry but also storytelling and text-based performance art. In the second part, an episodic genealogy connects the form to flashpoints in the history of 20th-century art and literature, from Dada to Beat poetry to the invention of the slam.

The third part of the dissertation asks, why does an activity that means so much to so many participants make so many others uncomfortable or even angry? Why do critics decry spoken word as "the death of art"? Employing ideas from Bourdieu, Agamben, cultural studies and performance studies, the author examines how aesthetics and identity are intertwined in a loop of community-building and exclusionary violence, and how the multiple overlapping identities of spoken word scenes potentially create a "whatever" community in which taste does not dictate identity. Spoken word is also shown to be a form in which identity is constantly redefined through parodic performativity. The final part theorizes the relationships between performance and voice, memory, and technology, postulating that spoken word has appeared at this point in history because of our changing relationship to text and recorded audio. Throughout, the dissertation argues that if we focus less on evaluating poetry as good or bad, we may understand what makes our experience of literature—to borrow terms from J. L. Austin—happy or unhappy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began performing and thinking about performance in the early '90s, long before I embarked on my doctoral degree. This text, nearly two decades in the making, is a modest first step towards understanding the cultural and social significance of spoken word. It is a step that was not always easy for me to take, however, and I owe much gratitude to all those who helped me along, some of whom I'd like to mention here.

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It would be nearly impossible for me to mention the names of all the writers, performers, organizers, and editors who have helped me and hosted me, informed me and challenged me, as I toured, witnessed, discussed, and explored spoken word over the years. I will run the risk of omitting many, however, so that I can mention a few who

have been especially helpful by providing either information and insight or aid and comfort. In the United States: Louis Bury, Leah Souffrant, Bob Holman, Regie Cabico, Charles Bernstein, Susan Somers-Willett, Jenifer Vernon, Anne Waldman, and Patricia Smith. In the United Kingdom: Todd Swift, Lucy English, Jem Rolls, John Paul O'Neill, Helen Gregory, and Colin Christie. In Australia: Sean Whelan, Emily Zoë Baker, Alicia Sometimes, David Prater, Klare Lanson, Philip Norton, Benito di Fonzo, Tug Dumbly, George Dunford, Mandy Beaumont, and Tim Sinclair. And in Canada: Cat Kidd, Ian Ferrier, Andy Brown, Victoria Stanton, Vincent Tinguely, Trish Salah, Alexis O'Hara, D. Kimm, Fortner Anderson, Jason Camlot, Gail Scott, Jill Battson, Sheri-D Wilson, Hilary Peach, Jim Munroe, Diane Borsato, Erin Robinsong, and T.L. Cowan, to whom I'm especially grateful for the feeling that we are sharing this discovery.

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INTRODUCTION

There is no question anymore that there is such a thing as spoken word, as distinct from "the spoken word." The term has been embraced by popular culture, even if it is not always clear what it means. It shows up regularly in popular media, without the definite article and no longer bearing the stigma of scare quotes. It shows up on the social-networking website profiles of young bohemians from Anchorage to Auckland. It shows up in bookstores and record stores, on Broadway, on TV, and on the résumés of aspiring actors in L.A. At this point, in the era of Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam on HBO, nearly two decades after the first National Poetry Slam and five years after the first Individual World Poetry Slam, the perennial announcements of the popular poetry renaissance and/or revolution have become old news. Even the phrase "spoken word movement" doesn't raise too many eyebrows. Not only has it become clear that spoken word is a distinct and resilient phenomenon that is unlikely to disappear, it is also obvious that it represents a significant portion of contemporary English-language literary production. Partly thanks to the continuing popularity and influence of hip hop culture, with which it has always had a symbiotic relationship, spoken word has become an established cultural form in its own right. Its evolution has paralleled that of hip hop, in fact: the term gained currency in the early '90s, about ten years after the beginnings of hip hop, and the peak of its popularity came in the mid-to-late '90s (around the time of the documentary film *Slam Nation*), a decade after hip hop's golden age. And just like hip hop, in its second decade spoken word has gone global and moved to the suburbs.

While I was writing this, if someone at a social gathering casually asked me what I was working on (and obviously expected an answer no more than a few words in length), I would most often say "spoken word"—and in most cases my interlocutor would recognize the phrase. As soon as I uttered this description, though, I felt a bit uncomfortable with it, partly because of the terminological slipperiness involved and partly for other reasons, some of which are straightforward and some very elusive. To begin with, the term *spoken word*, taken literally, is too broad to mean much of anything; adding *performance* by way of explanation is just redundant. When used by poets and artists over the last two decades, though, *spoken word* has usually meant something quite specific and identifiable: a performative artistic practice incorporating writing and speaking that is often defined chiefly by context—in other words, it is what people do at spoken word events. Maria Damon and Ira Livingston have written, "A cultural studies-inflected definition of poetry must at least begin with a rough-and-ready social definition that includes *all that is claimed as poetry at any given time*" (*Poetry* 3). Similarly, spoken word can be defined as that which is claimed as spoken word. Of course, many performers whose work *I* would claim as spoken word want nothing to do with the term. They may not like its connotations, or they may prefer another label, such as *poet*. On the other hand, there are those who insist that spoken word should not and must not be considered poetry, or who reject (even more vehemently, which is telling) the claim of spoken word performers to call themselves poets. In my opinion, this is an example of generic purism that defies logic, and yet I find myself agreeing that *poetry* is not exactly the right label for what happens at spoken word events.

S*poken word* is not just a synonym for *performance poetry*. Although many of its participants refer to themselves as spoken word poets, or simply poets, it's an oversimplification to think of spoken word as a sub-genre or style of poetry. The performance of poetry is certainly involved, but there is more: there is theatre, music, narrative, and movement; most importantly, there is a social project, a communal activity. I have a somewhat personal stake in this subject, aside from my academic interest, since I have been a participant in various spoken word scenes to varying degrees since the mid-'90s. I have performed on spoken word stages in dozens of cities, in ten or so countries, and have received awards and national artist grants to record my work. None of that work, however, has involved what would normally be considered poetry on the page, which is one of the reasons why I prefer *spoken word* to *performance poetry*. In fact, a large percentage of the texts performed as spoken word, I find, are audibly indistinguishable from creative prose, and an insistence on the label *poetry* is in many cases an affectation. I see my own performance work as closer to theatre than poetry in many respects, yet it is not theatre in the traditional sense. Part of the reason is that I am still a writer when I am on stage, not an actor. At the center of this complex, hybrid, interdisciplinary phenomenon is writing.

The terminology, though, is only the beginning of the discomfort. Those who take the term *spoken word* for granted, and those who don't recognize it at all, are probably indifferent to its definitional instability, but one group of people for whom spoken word often raises hackles is other poets, those who do not think of themselves as spoken word poets, or who contest the very idea of a "spoken word poet." The explanation usually

given is just that spoken word is "bad," that it is all flash and no substance, that it is vulgar or shallow or derivative, devoid of actual poetry. I think the diverse motivations behind this attitude are complex and interesting. In fact, rather than saying that my dissertation is about spoken word, it might be more accurate to say that it is about why both the label *spoken word* and the practice itself are, for me and for many others, a source of discomfort. For some, spoken word, and especially slam poetry, is the worst travesty of creative writing (to which the punster replies: no, poetry is verse). While he was poet laureate of Canada, George Bowering famously called poetry slams "crude and extremely revolting," and it is not hard to cite many other expressions of disdain (Gill). My goal is to explore and examine this discomfort, to see whether it might be productive, because I strongly suspect that the analysis will yield previously unrecognized truths about writing and performance, about the place of orality and the place of evaluative judgment in literary studies, and about the role of literature in people's lives.

Despite spoken word's enormous popularity, to date it has received only very superficial and unsystematic scholarly attention. The following is an attempt to establish a broader context for spoken word and to theorize some of the issues that are unique to it. By examining and exploiting the dialectical relationship between spoken word and poetry criticism, this project produces both a critique and a defense of each, ultimately demonstrating how literary criticism can benefit from interpreting literature as a social activity, and making a point that follows directly from that premise: that "bad" poetry might actually be a good thing.

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In my first two chapters I will delve much more into questions of definition, but let me begin by stating that the lack of a clear consensus on the nature of spoken word is not necessarily a problem to be rectified. On the contrary: if there is ambiguity surrounding the form, its rules, and its relationship to other forms of writing and performance, perhaps that is one of the most valuable characteristics that spoken word has to offer. Not quite "pure" poetry, not quite theatre, not entirely popular but not avant-garde, between art and entertainment, literature and anthropology, spoken word is a form that overlaps with many categories but doesn't quite belong to any.

In fact, a central premise of this project is that spoken word is a phenomenon that demonstrates, showcases and valorizes not-belonging. The history of spoken word is full of contradictions and tensions, between the popular and the exceptional, the masses and the elite, between art and entertainment, between tradition and innovation. The academic study of spoken word, it could also be said, doesn't belong in an English program, in many ways, and I will address this more in part one. Belonging, though, is not necessarily a desirable state of being. Fascism, as Walter Benjamin has pointed out, provides a kind of belonging, and even then, it doesn't always, or even usually, supply political power to those who belong. As an antidote, Benjamin proposed the "politicization of aesthetics as one way of opposing fascism's aestheticization of politics," as Maria Damon has phrased it (*Poetry* 14). Spoken word is, to a striking extent, a category without criteria, a domain in which belonging means only that you are recognized as a participant, not that you are

expected to conform to any common identity or value system. As I will discuss in chapter thirteen, it is what Giorgio Agamben calls a "whatever" community.

What I find most compelling about spoken word, then, is that it provides not just the experience of belonging to a communal project but also the experience of not belonging. What makes spoken word a vibrant form for young writers? There is obviously self-reflection—that is the commonplace observation about the form, that people find their identities by aligning themselves with communities that mirror the image they have of themselves—but there is also difference, and if the audience is a mirror then it is generally a funhouse hall of mirrors. The typical spoken word artist doesn't claim the mic to say, "I am such and such and so are we all; we're in this together;" she claims it to say, "this is who I am, look how different I am from you." Both through the research I have conducted and, more generally, the experience of working on this topic, I have become more aware of the importance of finding and inhabiting those situations where one does not belong. I am an academic writing about a largely anti-academic world of popular poetry. I am a prose writer whose writing community consists mostly of poets. There are drawbacks, of course, to such a position—the most obvious risk is that one's peers may not be able or willing to engage with you and you may end up being mainly an observer. And yet, the experience provides insights that belonging does not.

Does spoken word belong to a certain time, at least? Is it a continuation of ancient oral traditions of song and storytelling? Or is it, alternatively or simultaneously, a fad instigated by a coincidence of historical factors in a particular moment at the end of the

twentieth century? The conflict that I will describe, especially in chapter twelve, between supporters of spoken word and its critics in the poetry world, is in some ways only the latest manifestation of the recurring tension between literary and popular forms of poetry, such as the debate over whether popular song lyrics should be thought of as poetry. Spoken word, even as a distinct contemporary phenomenon, has also been around for some time. This project, then, is not timely in the sense that its subject is new. However, its approach is in synchronicity with new varieties of poetry criticism that are currently being developed—poetry considered as a subject for cultural studies in a way that it has not been before—and in that sense this is an opportune time to be writing this text. Furthermore, not only are critics reconsidering literature as a social activity, but during the lifespan of spoken word, and especially in the last decade with the advent of blogging, podcasting, and online social networking—what is sometimes referred to as Web 2.0—writing itself, and by extension literature, is becoming more social. Electronic communication and other changes in postmodern culture are changing the significance of literature, and I propose that spoken word is a harbinger of that change.

Spoken word represents a new approach to poetry, but this is not its primary significance: it also reflects a changing relationship between producers and consumers of culture, and between the forces that construct and protect identity and those that render it more fluid. This change in how art and literature relate to their audiences and contexts in turn necessitates a new approach to criticism, which has ramifications well beyond the study of spoken word. I hope to demonstrate in this dissertation that because spoken word requires a contextual, relational, and non-evaluative mode of appreciation, it has the

potential to be a catalyst for a new direction in literary studies. Literature is changing—because the reasons people value it and use it are changing—and our responsibility as critics is not to adjudicate but to understand and explain these changes. I have been inspired by an observation Nicolas Bourriaud makes in *Relational Aesthetics* that may at first seem obvious: "Artistic activity is a game, whose forms, patterns, and functions develop and evolve according to periods and social contexts; it is not an immutable essence. It is the critic's task to study this activity in the present" (11).

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It would perhaps be appropriate to present the argument of this dissertation aloud, as a performance at a microphone, in a bar. The defense, at least, could be conducted that way—although for the sake of longevity and future accessibility, a digital recording could also be made. However it is symptomatic of the many contradictions involved in doing this work in this context, that instead I present it in this written form, which is of course no less a performance.

In any consideration of spoken word as an academic field of study, what is most immediately apparent is that there is a vast amount of ground to cover. Therefore what I am undertaking here must be thought of as an introduction to a topic that I think will produce many more specialized studies. Given the lack of consensus on what spoken word even is, I felt it was necessary, first, to cast the rough outline of a definition in order to make clear the boundaries of my investigation, and the first half of this dissertation is

mostly engaged in explaining and problematizing that definition, filling it in, exemplifying it and contextualizing it, both historically and theoretically. The second half moves on to more specific questions about the various functions of spoken word in relation to literature, aesthetics, community, orality, technology, and society. The text consists of twenty-three chapters arranged in four parts.

Part one, "The Omnidirectional Microphone," begins by explaining, in the first chapter, how the microphone, so central to the iconography of spoken word, serves the same purpose as a talking stick, creating a sense of communal acknowledgement by designating a space and a moment in which each participant may speak. The first chapter also discusses the symbolic significance of microphone technology, and insights gained from observing mic technique at an international spoken word conference at the Banff Centre in Alberta, Canada. In the second chapter, I address the question that may be a necessary foundation for discussion of this topic: what is spoken word? How is it different from other forms of poetry performance, or from theatre? The third chapter follows up on that attempt at abstract definition with what may be a more satisfying tactic: anecdotal descriptions of four spoken word performances at four venues in four different countries—highlighting not particular texts or performers but particular events, as befits the contextual, relational approach of this study.

The last two chapters of the first part shift the focus from an attempt to delineate boundaries of spoken word as a genre to an attempt to contextualize the academic study of spoken word within existing theoretical discourses. Chapter four begins by addressing some of the difficulties faced by the spoken word researcher and suspicions harbored on

both sides of the artistic-academic divide. This is supplemented by a review of the (minimal) extant literature in the field, including some of the recent poetry scholarship that has moved poetry studies gently (back) towards an interest in orality and a willingness to study poetry within its social context. Chapter five takes a broader view by tracing a loose network of critical theories, concerns, and insights from the last century that can be productively applied to the study of spoken word going forward. The touchstones include work on orality and literacy by writers such as Walter Ong and Paul Zumthor, and on speech act theory and performance theory, including relevant concepts from Erving Goffman, J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others. Another section investigates the significance of public sphere theory to spoken word, and draws on writers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, and Theodor Adorno to situate spoken word in relation to social and political power structures. Finally, the chapter outlines a theoretical framework in the context of cultural studies and relational criticism, suggesting a heuristic of ideas from Mikhail Bakhtin, Bertolt Brecht, Nicolas Bourriaud and others.

Part two, "An Episodic Natural History of Spoken Word," is intended to establish both that spoken word is a distinct and relatively new phenomenon within literature and performance, and that its roots are deeper and more diverse that some of its critics would suggest. I argue that spoken word's primary characteristic is its hybridity, and that its influences are not limited to the tradition of oral poetry or popular performance. In fact, I theorize that spoken word has as much or more in common with the 20th-century history of avant-garde performance art as it does with troubadors or balladeers. The opening

chapter of this part addresses the practicality and politics of historicizing spoken word. Each of the subsequent five chapters begins with a flashpoint that is used as a reference to unravel developments in the recent history of literature and performance. The first one is November 11th, 1984, the date of my own experience, at age twelve, of reading a civic-minded poem in the auditorium of my high school, illustrating the ubiquity of poetry performance as an element of public and domestic life. The next chapter opens in Zurich on February 5th, 1916: the first Cabaret Voltaire, at which Dadaist poetry performance, and by extension, avant-garde text-based performance art, was born. The chapter goes on to discuss the contributions of surrealism, sound poetry, and performance art. The third flashpoint is October 7th, 1955, the date of the famous Six Gallery reading in San Francisco, emblematic of Beat poetry and jazz poetry and a new sense of the poetry reading as happening. The chapter also looks back to the Harlem Renaissance and ahead to the Black Arts Movement and early hip hop. The contemporary spoken word movement *per se* can be dated fairly conveniently to July 20th, 1986, when the first poetry slam was held at the Green Mill Lounge in Chicago; the next chapter begins with that date and traces the roles of punk, slam, rock, and the music and TV industries in the development of spoken word. Finally, a chapter on the present and global future of spoken word takes us to May 12th, 2009, the evening of Michelle and President Barack Obama's "Poetry Jam" at the White House, incontrovertible evidence of spoken word's cultural significance, at least in the United States.

Part three, entitled "Spowophobia: Fear and Loathing of Performance," attempts to find explanations for the discomfort I alluded to earlier. The first chapter is called "The

Death of Art," after Harold Bloom's opinion of slam poetry, and it broaches the topic of overt criticism of spoken word by analyzing one particular online rant. In the following chapter I elaborate on the theory of the "whatever community," and assert that spoken word has a unique relationship to artistic community. The third chapter draws on Bourdieu's *Distinction* to explain spowophobia in terms of cultural capital. The fourth chapter performs a playful deconstruction of the difficult / boring binary, citing David Antin, Jackson Mac Low, and Kenneth Goldsmith as examples. Finally, the last chapter answers criticism of spoken word as failed poetry by exploring the concept of speech performance as failure, through a reading of J.P. Sartre alongside J.L. Austin.

Lastly, part four of my dissertation, "Spoken Word and Its Others," is itself a kind of whatever community, making a series of sometimes incongruous or contradictory interventions in theoretical questions that surround spoken word. The first chapter postulates that there is something unique about the relationship between spoken word artists and their audience, while critiquing the idea that spoken word is a direct or unmediated form. The second chapter deals with the nebulous yet vital subject of the voice in poetry and performance, whether "voice" is meant literally or metaphorically. Voice is obviously of central importance to spoken word, but how is that any different from other kinds of poetry? The chapter also examines spoken word performance in terms of its physical expressivity, compared to theatre or traditional readings. The third chapter discusses the important role of memorization in spoken word. The fourth chapter addresses the significance of audio and video recordings in the history of literature and performance. The fifth chapter describes how community can be constructed beyond the

live event, in the form of archives and anthologies. The sixth chapter looks at how spoken word is represented and networked around the world via the web, and finally, the seventh chapter of part four, the twenty-third chapter of the dissertation, asks whether spoken word is as resistant to hegemony as many of its practitioners insist it is, and suggests that the kind of tactical resistance it embodies is something less obvious and more ephemeral.

PART I. THE OMNIDIRECTIONAL MICROPHONE

CHAPTER ONE: THE TALKING STICK

In July of 2005, a group of spoken word performers, organizers, and activists from across Canada, and a few from elsewhere, gathered to discuss ways to advance the evolution of spoken word within the Canadian cultural landscape. Bob Holman, omnipresent poetry impresario and activist, provides a first-hand account: "15 poets sitting around a table, 15 spoken word poets making a stab at formulating the future...."[1] The meeting, called the Canadian Spoken Word Summit, was convened under the auspices of the Calgary International Spoken Word Festival organized by Sheri-D Wilson. It took place at the Banff Centre for the Arts, an artists' retreat in the heart of the Canadian Rocky Mountains, nestled on the side of Tunnel Mountain and featuring panoramic views of the Bow River Valley and the postcard-esque ski-resort town of Banff.

Although the alpine surroundings made the word "summit" especially appropriate, it might have been seen as an odd place for a gathering of spoken word organizers, who mostly operate in urban settings. The diversity of the participants and the

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[1] Bob Holman's version can be read on his About.com blog; Hilary Peach also wrote an article about the summit for the Vancouver weekly *The Georgia Straight*. According to Holman's narrative, there were actually at least 18 participants: Sheri-D Wilson, Lillian Allen (to whom Wilson gives credit for inspiring the event), D. Kimm, Ian Ferrier, Jill Battson, Andrea Thompson, Dwayne Morgan, Kevin Matthews, Ken Mitchell, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Randy Jacobs, Hilary Peach, Sean McGarragle, T.L. Cowan, Mark Hopkins, Jem Rolls from the U.K., and from the U.S., Rha Goddess and Bob Holman himself.

backgrounds they represented, however, testifies to the pervasive influence of spoken word: they were English-speaking and French-speaking; aboriginal, white, and black; from various economic classes and levels of education; from cities, towns, and rural areas; and from three different countries. On the way there from Calgary the poets traveled in two vans, and in the midst of heavy Canada Day traffic they somehow managed to collide with one another. No one was seriously injured, but the accident did result in a wrecked van, a delayed start, and an irresistible metaphor: "Crash or Connection?" asked dub-poetry legend Lillian Allen when the group was finally assembled. There must have been some kind of connection, because the participants agreed to form the Spoken Word Arts Network, a loose association of artists, organizers, and activists. Two years later the Banff Centre hosted another summit and a pilot spoken word program in the model of other artist development programs at the centre, under the direction of Sheri-D Wilson. After that, the program became an annual event.

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I was not there for the Spoken Word Summit of 2005, but in April of 2008, the inaugural Spoken Word Program was held at the Banff Centre, and this time I was able to go. It was billed as the first program of its kind, "offering a unique milieu for the spoken word artist to explore and develop both their voice and their career path."[2] The idea was that participants would have space to pursue individual projects while interacting and

[2] This quotation is from the Banff Centre website. <http://www.banffcentre.ca/writing/programs>

sharing ideas with other spoken word performers from different geographical and stylistic origins. There would be performances, of course, as part of the Calgary International Spoken Word Festival, and there would also be faculty-led workshops and discussions, although in many ways the lines between the "faculty" and the "students" were blurred. The official faculty were Sheri-D Wilson, program director, poet-performer, and self-described "Mama of Dada"; Bob Holman, veteran of the Nuyorican Poets Café and the National Poetry Slam and founder/owner of the Bowery Poetry Club; Ian Ferrier, a Montreal spoken word stalwart and a founder of the Wired on Words recording label; and D. Kimm, a francophone text-based performance artist and curator of Montreal's Festival Voix d'Ameriques. But some of the other participants were also nationally recognized figures, such as Jill Battson, a prolific organizer of events in Toronto who created the "Word Up" series of poetry videos on Much Music and the CD of the same name, as well as established performers such as David Bateman, Catherine Kidd, and Andrea Thompson.

My own relationship to the event was also complicated, and it bears some explaining at this point, because it illustrates my relationship to the field of spoken word/performance poetry in general, and because the way in which I have undertaken to study spoken word relies heavily on my status as a practitioner-theorist. My primary aim during those two weeks at the Banff Centre was to advance my research for this project, and I did conduct interviews with many of the participants, but at the same time I wrote, rehearsed, work-shopped, and recorded my own performance texts, and in fact I would not have been invited to the event if I hadn't already been a spoken word performer

myself.[3] Towards the end of the program, I was also a panelist in a public discussion with Bob Holman and Sheri-D Wilson about the academic study and theorization of spoken word, during which I felt I was inhabiting a somewhat bifurcated identity: a member, on the one hand, of the community of performance poets assembled in Banff, and on the other hand an outsider, a member of the dubious critical class. The nuances of this situation are explored further in chapter four.

I have begun this first chapter by speaking about the Banff Spoken Word Program because, first of all, it provides a miniature version of a spoken word scene, bounded in time and space, a sort of Petri dish in which to test various theories about the real-life dynamics of spoken word communities. The program was very much a social event, unsurprisingly—the dining hall, lounge, and pub, just as much as the performance space, were the loci of our most significant interactions—and whether or not the participants knew each other beforehand, there was a sense that we belonged to a society of poets. It was very much a social *project*, as well, or a component of one, with the sense that we were collaborating towards the advancement of the form, collectively creating a cultural phenomenon. This is the same sense that is tangible at the National Poetry Slam or at the weekly slams at the Green Mill in Chicago or the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York, or at nearly any successful local spoken word event with a regular crowd. Our collaboration

[3] I don't think it's necessary to elaborate on my spoken word career, except to say that it predates my academic work on it. This dual relationship to the field, incidentally, seems to be the norm among the handful of scholars who have so far written seriously on performance poetry, including for example Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, Helen Gregory, Jen Vernon, and T. L. Cowan (chapter four addresses some of their work). The phenomenon is perhaps not surprising—writers who are interested in studying spoken word are perhaps also likely to be interested in taking part—but I think the exact dynamics of that choice, and its ramifications, are more significant and complex than they first appear.

was concerned with what happened on the stage—we presented, we appreciated, we applauded, we provided occasional feedback—but it did not end there; it was just as concerned with what happened between us off the stage, which was implicitly a part of the project. Bob Holman, in writing about the first Banff summit, expresses a related idea: "Whenever poets manage to get a gig outside of their living rooms, remember: you are always on, you're always a poet, everyone you speak to is part of your audience" (Holman, "Canada's" 2).

Even though the program was intended to be largely about the production and refinement of new work, it seemed that we spent much of our time on more theoretical questions. One question recurred in our discussions with such persistence and inevitability that it became a kind of joke. It was the biggest yet simplest one: what is spoken word? Some participants felt this was an academic concern that we could afford to glide over, since all of us were already engaged in defining spoken word through practice. And yet the debates continued: Is spoken word poetry? Is it theatre? Is it music? Are we primarily writers, or performers? If it is published in a book, is it still spoken word? Does it have to be memorized? Does it have to be live? Does it have to be spoken? Does it have to be word? Some were more confused by the fact that we were having these discussions at all, as though it indicated some profound existential instability. In particular, I had a number of discussions with Rebecca Singh, a spoken word neophyte who came to it from a successful career in theatre and was puzzled because in her experience the culture of the theatre world did not include such definitional angst. We recorded some conversations about what separates spoken word from theatre. "One of the

main things that I find a little odd," she said, "is the concept of boundaries: what are the boundaries of spoken word, what is and what isn't, and the idea that there has to be a boundary." In theatre, she said, when a work is not immediately classifiable, the tendency is to discuss it in terms of value: is it good or bad? Whereas in spoken word, it seemed to her, there was a tendency to avoid evaluation and focus on categorization: is it spoken word or isn't it?

Comparing spoken word to theatre, in any case, made it possible to clear a certain amount of definitional fog, because there are identifiable conventions that pertain to one but not the other and create the cultures that are characteristic of each form. I will analyze these discrepancies in theatre and spoken-word culture in greater detail in the next chapter, but I want to bring up just a couple of examples here. On the evening of our first group performance, I noticed that Rebecca was the only one among us who took a bow while people were applauding at the end of her piece. It struck me, and I pointed it out to her later: spoken word performers do not bow. For her part, she was struck by the oddness of using a microphone, when she usually didn't use one on stage and it didn't seem to her to be really necessary. She wanted to know: why the mic?

The use of microphones became a sort of theme during the Banff program, partly because some of the participants, notably Moe Clark, were working on electronic voice looping techniques that require not only a high level of control of one's voice and timing, but also a familiarity with the technical capacities of the equipment. Ian Ferrier, who has considerable experience as a poet, musician, and technician-producer for Wired on Words, the spoken word label he founded, led a workshop on mic technique that covered

the different kinds of mics a performer might run into and guidelines for using them.[4] I repeat some of the salient details below because I eventually came to the conclusion that, for spoken word performers, microphones are more than just equipment.

There are two basic types of microphone in common use: condenser mics are more sensitive, require a power source, and are standard in recording studios, while dynamic mics are more durable, don't require power, and are for these reasons used more often in live performance situations. Mics can be hand-held, worn on clothing (lavalier or lapel mics), built into a headset, or mounted on a boom or stand. As any poetry reading spectator or participant can tell you, the mic stand itself can be a significant source of difficulty if it happens that the previous performer was either taller or shorter and there is no technician to adjust it. In voice performance there are some sound quality problems that are difficult to avoid: handling noise from passing, waving, swinging, or just holding the mic; wind noise produced by breathing too heavily into it; and the problem of "popping," which is the audible noise made by certain labial plosive sounds, like the "p" sound at the beginning of "pop." Studio microphones can be accessorized with shock absorbers, windscreens or pop filters to deal with these issues, and some stage mics have these features built in. Good mic technique can also help prevent these glitches, for example by directing the puff of air created by a plosive phoneme away from the mic.

A more fundamental concern is echo and background noise, which is why mics are also categorized according to their pick-up pattern (basically, the range of space in

[4] Some of the information in the following paragraphs comes from Ferrier's workshop, and some from the online article "Ode to the Microphone: A Podcaster's Selection Guide" by David Berlind.

which the mic will detect sound): there are, on the one hand, unidirectional or cardioid mics, which are only sensitive to sound from one direction, and hypercardioid, supercardioid, and shotgun mics, which have an even narrower directionality; these are all designed to minimize ambient sound. Live vocal performances are usually recorded using directional microphones, in order to prevent crowd noise from leaking into the mix, and particularly if there are musicians on stage that might get picked up by the vocalist's mic. One problem with directional mics, though, is that inexperienced users can make mistakes that affect the sound quality in obvious ways: standing too far from the mic or too close, or speaking off-axis—that is, outside the mic's pick-up pattern. On the other hand, there are omnidirectional microphones. They pick up sound from all directions at once, reproducing the entire sonic environment, and they are very easy for anyone to use.

Perhaps it is already obvious, from the preceding two paragraphs, how the realities of microphone technology and usage suggest a rich metaphoric language for the conceptualization of spoken word's social significance, and in particular its status within literary culture. Any expert in the field will agree that there are a variety of methodological approaches to recording sound, and there are a wide variety of microphones designed to work well in different contexts. There is no one "best" technique, and the trick is to choose the right device and the right methodology to properly interpret the source. However, there are certain evaluative hierarchies within the field of sonic interpretation. Cardioid mics are favored for performance because they focus attention on the sound source and exclude extraneous signals. If you are recording a professional, distinctive voice—a canonical voice, let's say—then your goal will be to

eliminate, as much as possible, the distracting contextual noise. It's best to do this in a controlled environment, such as the recording studio; it is easier to isolate the subject in this way rather than attempt to record them in front of an audience. But suppose that you are recording an open-mic poetry reading. You can't move it into the studio without destroying what makes the event what it is. You could set up a cardioid mic on a stand to record each poet, but many of them will be inexperienced in mic technique and you may end up with uneven levels. You won't want to use an extremely sensitive mic, either, since you know that it will get jostled every time someone adjusts the mic stand. An omnidirectional microphone, then, would seem to be the best choice. It will be accessible, since no special expertise is required, and it will pick up the sounds of the audience—the applause, the laughter, the heckling—which, after all, are a part of the experience.

The predominant mode of poetry studies for at least the last half of the twentieth century might be referred to as the cardioid approach: the study of canonical texts, isolated from the context in which they were produced. But spoken word is a form that demands an omnidirectional approach. It requires moving the interpretive apparatus out of the studio—or the library, in this case—and into bars, theatres, and cafés, and it requires listening to voices coming from more than one direction. In fact, every voice in the room needs to be heard in the final recording, not just the ones on the stage. The omnidirectional microphone is an apt emblem of spoken word for many reasons: because of the multiple vectors of spoken word's development, its generic instability, and its potential to evolve in virtually any direction, but mostly because spoken word scenes are

polyphonic in the Bakhtinian sense: every voice is distinct, but no voice is isolated. Ultimately all the voices interact and influence one other as part of the same mix.

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> Mics are used because chips are implanted at birth which make audiences pay more attention to amplified voices. But no way are they required. It's perfectly cool to have an open mic without a mic. If poets complain (poets always complain), you can make one out of cardboard, or create a Surrealist mic out of thick air. (Holman, "Open Mic" 1)

At the final group performances of the Banff Centre program, as each of the participants took their turn on the stage, I became intensely aware of variations in mic technique. In this group of spoken word professionals, no one was new to performance with a mic, but this didn't prevent the occasional popping plosive or screech of feedback. We used several different kinds of mics, both uni- and omnidirectional—the Banff Centre has an impressively stocked tech department—so some people wore headsets, some wore wireless lav mics, and others opted for the traditional boom mic stand, which was raised and lowered and tilted just a little bit for each new performer. Some people even used two mics at once: one for straight vocals and one that was connected to a loop pedal. Ian Ferrier demonstrated his mastery of a particular trick he had shown us in his workshop that takes advantage of what is called the proximity effect: when the sound source is

extremely close to a directional microphone the frequency response shifts toward the bass, so it's possible to make one's voice seem suddenly much deeper by whispering directly into the mic.

Although usually microphones are an invisible part of the spoken word landscape, after talking to Rebecca about the peculiarity of using a mic on a small stage, suddenly I was seeing them as absolutely central to spoken word, at least symbolically. Each performer treated the mic as a necessary conduit to the audience's ears, but at the same time it was a prop, like the teacher's yardstick or the preacher's pulpit or perhaps the lyre of the original Greek lyric poets. Each performer had his or her own way of interacting with it: holding it between cupped hands as though shouting across a field, removing it from the stand to wield it like a rock star or an infomercial host, touching it lightly as though it were a trumpet, or abstaining from any contact whatsoever. On the whole, the microphone seemed to be an almost ritual artifact on the stage, a totem of sorts, with an unspoken importance to the iconography of spoken word and to the identity of the spoken word performer. It is surely the single most commonly used visual symbol of poetry performance: it is in the logo of Poetry Slam Inc. and on the cover of books and anthologies by Gary Glazner, Marc Smith, Alix Olson, Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, Susan Somers-Willett, and likely many others. If spoken word had to be represented by a single image, it would almost certainly be an image of a microphone.

Beyond simple iconography, though, the microphone plays a role in the maintenance of the collaborative dynamic that makes spoken word a social endeavor. As Bob Holman suggests in the quotation above, it is often not really necessary to have an

actual mic at an open mic, but it has a symbolic function and if it is not present then it may have to be replaced with some other collaborative protocol. In effect, it becomes the talking stick of the spoken word gathering, the object that conveys the privilege of speaking upon whoever holds it. The participants accept this privilege in turn, receiving along with it the attention of all the other people in the room, who are constrained by custom from speaking themselves until the person at the microphone has finished.

The concept of the talking stick has sunk so deeply into mass culture's slush pool of re-appropriated ideas that it often resurfaces in pop culture or new age mythology in forms that are far removed from tradition, but it has been a part of many Native American cultures, used in tribal council meetings to designate who has the floor, an object of both functional and ceremonial importance, not unlike a judge's gavel. In an article about literacy as a colonial technology titled "Writing the Talking Stick," Laura E. Donaldson quotes Isabelle Knockwood, a Mi'kmaw from Nova Scotia:

> Our Mi'kmaw ancestors used the Talking Stick to guarantee that everyone who wanted to speak would have a chance to be heard and that they would be allowed to take as long as they needed to say what was on their minds without fear of being interrupted with questions, criticisms, lectures or scoldings, or even of being presented with solutions to their problems. An ordinary stick of any kind or size is used ... (7)

Donaldson makes the argument that the colonizing technology of alphabetic literacy, which in many ways represented a violent disruption of aboriginal traditions of oral communication, was subsequently re-appropriated to function in a way analogous to the more social traditional forms. In some cases the colonized were able to replace the talking stick with the pen, but without losing the polyphonic (omnidirectional?) quality of

oral communication. “The connective attributes of the pen as Talking Stick contravene Western autobiography’s predominant emphasis on the ‘monologic’ self by inscribing multiple lives and voices,” she writes (Donaldson 57). This idea resonates with the microphone-as-talking-stick, which does not displace writing but renews an ancient ritual of oral communication within the context of literate society, in such a way that it creates a radical equality among all the participants. The microphone stand is the only constant element on the stage at a spoken word show: it stands unoccupied between performances and between sets, waiting invitingly for the next performer, as though to underline the principle that anyone in the room can take the stage and have their chance to speak.

CHAPTER TWO: THE INEVITABLE QUESTION

> Every order of poetry finds itself, defines itself, in strife with other orders.
>
> (Robert Duncan, "Order and Strife" 111)

According to its title, this dissertation is about *performance literature*; however, I have also already employed the terms *performance poetry* and, even more frequently, *spoken word*. The inevitable question, then, the one I have been delaying, is: what is it? What is performance poetry? What is spoken word? Or perhaps: why call it one or the other? Why not simply *poetry*?

Let's begin with "spoken word." If taken literally—words that are spoken—the term has too broad a meaning to be useful in this context. It has long been used to designate the recording-industry category that includes comedy albums and audio-books, and in radio to mean any spoken programming, from radio drama to talk shows to weather forecasts. The Grammy Awards have a spoken word category, but most often the award has gone to documentaries or audio-books of politician's memoirs.[1] The term also continues to be used—as "the spoken word"—to mean oral language in general, as opposed to the written word. Here, though, I'm interested in what it means specifically in relation to literature in performance. At a certain point in the late '80s, "spoken word" began to show up as a mass (non-count) noun, lacking any article, in reference to a new

[1] Occasionally the award has gone to a recording of a poet, such as Maya Angelou in 1994, 1996, and 2003. Only once has the spoken word award gone to a *spoken word* artist (Henry Rollins in 1995 for *Get in the Van*).

kind of raucous, irreverent poetry performance that was becoming popular thanks in part to poetry slams and MTV. It seems likely that its usage began with the adjectival form: "a *spoken-word* poetry performance," emphasizing the discrepancy between traditional poetry *readings* (which didn't happen without a written text) and events where spoken language was primary. Subsequently the adjective was called into use as a label for what was beginning to look like a movement.[2] The term is used in this sense in a July 7th, 1991 article about the TV special "Words in Your Face," marking its first appearance in the *New York Times* and, for all intents and purposes, its entry into mainstream vernacular:

> For many of the performers in "Words in Your Face," the phrase "spoken word" is essential to the definition of their work. It takes poetry from its passive province on the page into a vibrant present tense. As spoken word, they say, poetry is better able to compete with other contemporary modes of expression, from rap to television broadcasts to sound bites. (Schoemer 1)

The loss of the definite article from "the spoken word" marked the creation of a new term signifying a new phenomenon, and for some time it served as a kind of shibboleth to distinguish those who were familiar with the new phenomenon, *spoken word* (no "the"), from those who weren't.

The idea that "as spoken word, poetry is better able to compete" with all the more eye-catching forms of culture has been used both as a justification for the invention of spoken word and as a critique of the form. Kristan Anderson, a spoken word performer and youth social worker whom I met at the Banff Spoken Word Program, told me that he

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[2] For more on the development of spoken word in this time period, see chapter ten.

thought that "poetry can be a hard sell for young people," whereas the phrase "spoken word" has different, more accessible connotations. The question of whether to label the work poetry or spoken word is "a marketing question," Sheri-D Wilson told me. It seems likely that the same thoughts went through the minds of the programmers at MTV when they were naming their 1993 "Spoken Word" episode of Unplugged (a series of televised acoustic studio performances), which consisted entirely of poets performing their work. And it may also have occurred to the ad agency hired by Gap, the clothing company, to produce a 1992 TV commercial that featured downtown New York poet Max Blagg reading a poem he wrote for the spot. Joyce Johnson explains in her memoir *Minor Characters* that by the late '50s the label and image of "Beat" had become an easily-recognizable symbol of cool that allowed advertisers to sell sunglasses and record players to middle-class suburbanites; in the same way, the phrase "spoken word" was used—almost from the time of its invention—as a marketing tool, a more zeitgeist-y alternative to the word "poetry." Occasionally it was used to sell more profitable commodities such as jeans, but it was also valued because it could make poetry itself a commodity more easily marketable to young people, and for some that was the point.

Since the early '90s the usage of the term "spoken word" has fluctuated somewhat: it hasn't been universally popular among poet-performers or critics, nor has it had a universally accepted definition. It was called "a pointlessly stiff term for poetry read aloud with stand-up-comic timing and aggression" in the *New York Times* in 1994 (Tucker 1), and in more recent years there certainly haven't been many attempts to use it to sell anything to anyone. It remains very popular, however, with groups for whom

poetic expression is a significant means of performing identity and resisting cultural marginalization—the kinds of poets seen, for example, in the Def Poetry Jam series, which emphasizes race, ethnicity, and urban life—and in this decade, in the US, the term has become aligned, to a certain degree, with hip hop. Some critics have defined spoken word as a category consisting of slam poetry and hip hop,[3] but while these two forms were both highly influential in the evolution of spoken word, they do not easily fit into a single category, and the original burst of activity included many other elements and styles. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, a study that is sure to become a seminal work in the field, Susan B. A. Somers-Willett sets up what I find to be an interesting but misleading opposition between competitive slam poetry on one hand, which she suggests is ambivalently resistant to commercialization, and on the other hand spoken word, which for her connotes "performance poetry through which one can witness competing commercial and artistic interests, especially as they play out in contemporary media and through associations with hip hop culture." That may be an apt description of spoken word on TV, with its lure of mass appeal and possible low-level fame. She seems to be suggesting, however, that the term "spoken word" and the style of performance it was invented to describe have not just become susceptible to commercial exploitation, they have become defined by it. According to her, "the market continues to broaden for versifiers billing themselves as spoken word poets" (12).

That view of "spoken word" does not seem to me to be the rule, although it may have some currency in some cities (Somers-Willett does explain that "*spoken word*

[3] See, for example, Bronwen Elisabeth Low's York University Ph.D. dissertation, "Spoken Word: Exploring the Language and Poetics of the Hip Hop Popular," 2001.

poetry can be used to designate a number of different types of verse" (12)). Many slam participants are more likely to refer to what they do as poetry and to themselves as poets—even in cases when the texts they write sound more like prose. It is worth noting, however, that the term has taken on different valences in different places. In Canada, *spoken word* is much more entrenched as a broadly inclusive term; this may have to do with the small scale of the poetry community in Canada compared to the US, which might allow for a more coherent collective lexicon, but it is also clearly a function of institutional legitimization. In 2000 the Canada Council for the Arts, Canada's public arts funding agency, launched a grant program aimed at writers performing their own work, now called the Spoken Word and Storytelling Program, and in 2004 The League of Canadian Poets altered its bylaws to allow unpublished spoken word performers to apply for membership. Canada's analog to the National Poetry Slam in the US is an annual event called the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word (in its first year, 2004, it was the Canadian Spoken Wordlympics), which presents not only a national slam but also a wide variety of performance events. In general the Canadian definition of spoken word definitely includes slam poetry, as well as performances of nearly any kind of poetry, and it also encompass many kinds of performance beyond poetry—narrative storytelling, for example, as well as some kinds of solo theatrical performance and performance art.

The term "spoken word" is complicated to define in part because its popular usage has not solidified and depends a great deal on context. Over the last two decades, though, spoken word has not been hard to recognize for those involved. John S. Hall, one of the New York City performers who became a minor star during the late '80s and early

‘90s, has said that spoken word is “a blanket term that cover(s) monologues, poems, stories, rap, etc. I like the term precisely because it is so ambiguous and broad” (quoted in Miazga). But does a term of such ambiguity and breadth provide any useful semantic precision, in the end? What, if any, is the advantage in using it?

Poetry has always been an oral form, and even in the most text-centric circles poetry is often performed by reading it aloud, transforming the text into spoken words. A poetry reading, however, implies a written text to be read; the graphic form of the poem takes priority. Another crucial but complicated distinction to make, then, is between two kinds of poetry performance—traditional poetry readings and performance poetry—although this distinction should be thought of as a continuum rather than a binary. On one end of the continuum would be a writer with page in hand, reading his or her text word-for-word and without inflection or expression, attempting to reproduce the printed language in sound—the performer as vocal copy machine. On the other end would be a performer who uses voice and language (or some imitation of language) but for whom the printed text is either obsolete or nonexistent. In between, there are many possible combinations of various techniques: the text may be memorized or partially memorized, it may be consulted continuously or occasionally, or it may be physically absent. The performance may be faithful to the text or it may be partially or fully improvisational. The performer may imbue the words with expressivity of various kinds: through modulations of volume, tone, or speed; through facial expressions or hand gestures; and through various degrees of self-identification with the narrator of the text (various degrees of acting, in other words). Although I think that both readings and performances

are sometimes open enough to include uses of any of these techniques, in general the two poles of this continuum mark an opposition between reading poetry and performing poetry.

Another way to look at this is that poetry has two parallel but related traditions, oral and graphic, and I have heard many performers say that they are poets who are "working in the oral tradition." Although I think this is a worthwhile concept, I find the locution problematic in several ways, which might boil down to the observation that writers never claim to be "working in the written tradition," and I think this points to an imbalance in perception that may lead people to think of the oral form as traditional, in the sense of historical, and to think of the graphic form, on the other hand, as more modern and more associated with avant-garde work. I use "graphic" here to refer to work "on the page," rather than the more common "written" because of ambiguities in the term *writing* itself. We use *writing* to mean graphic representation of language (handwriting, print, or any other kind of lettering), but we also use it to denote any sort of linguistic composition—which is how it is possible to "write something in your head." In this latter sense, both oral poets and "page poets" are writers; it's more exact, therefore, to divide "writing" into oral and graphic forms.

The term "performance poetry" is more precise than the more general concept of poetry performance, because it refers to a specific variety of poetry, but as a description of the kind of performance that is the object of this study it is inadequate—because it is specific to poetry. Many cases of spoken word involve the performance of poetry, but in many other cases the label poetry seems a stretch, and in any case it ignores the other

significant aspects of spoken word: expository and argumentative elements, narrative elements, theatrical elements, elements of rhetoric, comedy, music and movement. I would argue, in other words, that it is less accurate to say that spoken word is a kind of poetry than it is to say that poetry is a kind of spoken word. This is a point that many spoken word performers have made as a justification for the term. Maggie Estep, for example, became perhaps the best-known star of the spoken word movement in the early '90s, thanks to multiple appearances on MTV and the release of her album "No More Mister Nice Girl," and she often performed in contexts where she was labeled a spoken word *poet*, despite considering herself primarily a writer of prose. In a 1994 profile of her in the *New York Times*, Neil Strauss writes, "Ms. Estep is uncomfortable calling the pieces on 'No More Mister Nice Girl' poems. She prefers to think of them as rants."

Perhaps the term "performance literature," then, is the best choice: it hints at something more performative than a reading, and encompassing a wide range of textual forms, but more text-based and literary than theatre or dance or music. "Text-based performance art" might be another contender, except that it is too firmly rooted in the art world and all the connotations that go along with that. Connotations, in the end, are the deciding factor: the name we use has to capture the sense that what we are talking about is not an abstract taxonomic category but a real-world phenomenon, situated in specific places and times, with a real sense of community. That, ultimately, is the best argument for the use of "spoken word" over any of the other possible terms: it connotes an existing history of performers who are bound together by a common cultural and social context, although the boundaries of that context are capacious and flexible.

That said, I decided to use the term "performance literature" in my title, rather than "spoken word," to avoid the connotations that some people hear in the latter phrase and to circumvent some of the discomfort the phrase evokes (more on this later). Personally, I continue to use the term "spoken word" to describe that part of my artistic practice, mostly because I do not necessarily think of the texts I write as poetry—they are simply performance texts. Many spoken word artists would be puzzled by the suggestion that spoken word is anything but poetry. "Poet" is an identity for many people, in a way that "performer" or "writer" are not. Furthermore, if you see yourself as a poet, you are probably only more likely to insist on that self-identification if other poets challenge it, as is often the case with spoken word. I think that some performers insist on the label poetry as an affectation, for the prestige and mythology attached to it, although when they say "poetry" they likely intend the most liberal possible interpretation, almost a metaphorical interpretation. Ultimately, I'm not advocating any of these usages over any other. One thing that I like about spoken word is its lack of clear rules or definition, and I think it is important to preserve the productive ambiguity of the term, not to label things too precisely or draw too many clear distinctions. Instead, in this project I propose to broaden the field of signification of the term.

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Having spent the first half of this chapter discussing the label, I turn finally to an explanation, or attempted explanation, of spoken word itself: an artistic practice that

combines writing and performance, in which the text has been specifically conceived for performance and is performed by its author. This expedient definition of spoken word leaves out many of its most interesting aspects, however, including many questions that are particularly challenging to answer. Among those questions: isn't there a more precise category than "practice" in which to classify spoken word? I have suggested that it is a kind of text-based performance that can encompass poetry, prose, or drama, but is it possible to define it more precisely in terms of form? Is it a genre or sub-genre? Or in terms of content? Is it political, expressive, parodic, comedic? Or perhaps in terms of social function? Is it folk art, popular art, high art, avant-garde art? Or can it be defined historically? Is it new, old, ancient? And perhaps the most significant definitional question: do these questions even matter?

All of these inquiries can be at least partly satisfied, but one simple yet important point to be made first is that spoken word is, above all, a hybrid form. It draws on techniques from many traditions and incorporates concerns from many genres; it is both timeless—in that performance literature is surely one of the oldest kinds of art—and timely—in that it has become recognized as a specific cultural phenomenon during the last twenty years. This specific phenomenon grew out a particular milieu—a network of local poetry scenes in certain US cities in the 1980s—but as it expanded, it absorbed the styles and ideas and contexts of a vast range of writer-performers in local scenes around the world. There are no formal parameters that would define it the way the epic or the short story or the play can be defined, which means that it depends on local contexts and

communities to interpret it, but also that it has an almost unlimited range of interpretations.

The typical venue for spoken word is a single microphone on a stage in a bar or café; it also happens in theatres, bookstores, lofts, parks, and bowling alleys. In the age of ubiquitous audio recording technology, spoken word is not even purely a live phenomenon; it can also be a recorded performance, whether "live" or recorded in studio. Usually the individual performance happens in a restrictive time frame: fifteen to twenty minutes, or three minutes maximum in poetry slams following the official competition rules. The emphasis is on performing language, so there is seldom reliance on costume or props. On the other hand, the performance is sometimes accompanied by music, movement, or visuals. The audience may not consist of people who read much poetry, and the work can sometimes be virulently anti-elitist or anti-academic. Often it is a vehicle for bluntly expressed political opinions, such as social criticism from a feminist or minority point of view. Of course, the style of the performance depends ultimately on the performer, and some performers produce subtle, abstract, experimental, or unpredictable work. Spoken word, though, is a form that clearly demonstrates how the division between low and high culture persists in these postmodern days. Performers who would rather not be associated with the "low" end of the genre may prefer the label "text-based performance art" to "spoken word". Given all these variables, it is better to define it as an activity or practice—something that one does—rather than as a class of literary product.

I'd like to offer three basic criteria, which create a sort of framework for understanding spoken word, even though they are not universally applicable. The first one I have already mentioned: in spoken word, the performers are the writers. Occasionally a performer may present a text written by someone else, but this would be the rare exception to the rule. This is one indication that spoken word performers are appreciated, first and foremost, for their skill in composing words. Whether or not the text of the performance is ever written on paper, spoken word artists are primarily writers, not actors or singers. Another reason why spoken word performers don't do more "covers" might be that spoken word events often have a cabaret atmosphere, with a relatively long list of participants, so that each performer is limited to a brief window at the microphone—typically five to fifteen minutes. With time so restricted, performers may be reluctant to spend it on the work of another writer. Furthermore, not only do spoken word artists use their own texts, they mostly perform them *as* their own texts: they inhabit themselves on stage—or at least, that is the effect of the performance.

The second criterion echoes my conclusions about the importance of the microphone in the previous chapter: spoken word is a communally interactive activity. In spoken word, there is usually a microphone for the performer to use, whether it is acoustically necessary or not, and if there is no microphone, there may be some other method of indicating that the participants will speak in turns. In most cases, the performers come from the audience when it is their turn and go back to the audience when they have finished, rather than staying in a backstage room separate from the audience, as in theatre. Furthermore, the performer nearly always addresses the audience

directly, giving an introduction or some other informal speech that is ostensibly distinct from the work itself. All of these elements serve to establish that a spoken word performance is a collaboration between all the participants in the room.

If the first two criteria differentiate spoken word performers from actors, the third one differentiates them from writers who simply read their work: in spoken word, the performance is as important as the text. While a traditional reading is a performance, and I have heard it argued that any public reading of poetry should be considered spoken word, I think that these two activities demonstrate a fundamental difference in approach. Poets with more traditional (i.e. text-centric) attitudes towards performance commonly criticize spoken word by disallowing the performance as an evaluative criterion: "it may work in performance, but it doesn't work on the page" (and therefore it's not good poetry). From the point of view of spoken word this doesn't make sense, since good performance is valued in itself—although most participants will agree that good writing is at least equally desirable. In a sense this last criterion presents a counterpoint to the first one: spoken word artists are not simply performers, but they are not simply writers either.

These three identifying characteristics parallel Bob Holman's three rules for the creation of spoken word, which I heard him recite at a talk at the Banff Centre Spoken Word Program. Holman was closely involved in New York City's initial boom in spoken word, but he seems to have concluded that, for him at least, spoken word is just another way of saying poetry, which is the object of all his energies. His rules are: 1. "Write the poem yourself." 2. "Immediacy of our work balances the literature-longevity dynamic."

3. “If you call it a poem, it is.” The second rule is vague but intriguing; I think what he is suggesting is that spoken word happens in the present—somewhat akin to what Nicholas Bourriaud calls “time-specific” works (after “site-specific”)—in other words, it is specific not only to the location but also to the crowd and the moment in which it happens, and this means that it has different aims and uses different tactics than literature that aspires to a long life on the page. The third rule avows an omnidirectional openness in terms of form and content that could be applied to poetry or spoken word—although in the same talk, Holman also suggested a more rigorous test for identifying poems, by quoting William Carlos Williams: “If it ain’t a pleasure, it ain’t a poem.”

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Spoken word is mostly assumed—by the writer-performers, most importantly—to be a literary activity. It is significant, for example, that the Banff program happens under the rubric of literary arts, not performance, and likewise, the Canada Council’s Spoken Word and Storytelling grants program falls under the heading of Writing and Publishing, not under Theatre. Spoken word is, in some respects, close to theatre, albeit a kind of theatre that has been uprooted from theatre culture, in which the role of the writer and performer have been collapsed, and in which the divide between the performer and the audience has been radically deconstructed.

As suggested above, in speaking with Rebecca Singh, a Toronto actor, about the differences between spoken word and theatre, I was able to clarify for myself some of the

performative conventions that distinguish spoken word culture. Rebecca posed me a compelling thought experiment: if you found yourself sitting in a room surrounded by other people, not knowing how you got there or what you were about to see, and then a single performer appeared and began to speak, how could you evaluate whether what you were seeing was theatre or spoken word? Of course, what this scenario does is eliminate the social context, which is all-important. The way we usually accomplish this identification is by knowing where we are: whether we've gone to a show advertised as theatre or as spoken word or as something else. Nevertheless, there are a few simple observations I can imagine someone making in this situation that could serve as a kind of litmus test. You could ask someone, first of all, if the performer is also the author of the text being performed, but let's suppose that the performance has begun, and you don't want to interrupt. You could also ask yourself whether the performer is acting—i.e. inhabiting a fictional persona, speaking with that persona's voice, mannerisms, and emotions—since acting is associated with theatre, but this is a problematic criterion because a) "good" (i.e. verisimilitudinous) acting might not appear to be acting, and b) poets also sometimes inhabit personas, and I think this is a vital, if seldom acknowledged, element of spoken word. Luckily there are some simpler, more objective clues that you could follow.

1) How did the performer appear? Did he or she come through a curtain from backstage? Did the lights go out and then rise with the performer already standing in the spot? Or was the performer seated at a table next to you before taking the stage? In other

words, is there any attempt to demarcate the sphere of the performer and the sphere of the audience, or are they mutually permeable?

2) Does the performer address you directly? Is there any preamble or banter that is marked as separate from the text of the performance per se? Or does the piece being performed begin as soon as the performer opens his or her mouth? In other words, does the performer attempt to connect with the audience as herself or himself, in real life, or only through the medium of the scripted performance?

3) Is the performer wearing a costume or carrying props? Holding a paper? Is the text of the performance present in printed form on the stage? Props are not allowed in poetry slams and rare in other kinds of spoken word (with the exception of musical instruments). And while spoken word performers often memorize their work, they might still have the text in their back pocket just in case; such a practice would be frowned upon in the theatre.[4]

4) Is there a curtain? Scenery? Elaborate lighting? Such apparatus is almost unheard of in spoken word, unless the event is happening on a stage that is already equipped for a theatrical production. On the other hand, in spoken word the lights above the audience (the "house" lights) are often on during the entire performance—another example of how the audience is treated as a part of the performance.

5) Is there a microphone? Microphones are rarely used in theatre as the actors are expected to use their instruments (voices) to make themselves heard—an aspect of the

[4] I was interested to read recently of an incident in which an actor was fired from a theatre production, allegedly for sneaking peeks at his lines, which were taped inside his hat. (Healy)

markedly different attitudes toward voice in acting and spoken word. In spoken word, the microphone is iconic.

6) Does the performer bow? The bow, according to Rebecca, is the moment when actors are allowed to be themselves on stage; it is also a ritual that connects the actor to a long theatrical tradition. In spoken word, performers are expected to "be themselves" at all times, and they rarely bow.

Many of these stereotypical characteristics can be, have been, and are no doubt being invalidated right now in theatre and in spoken word that does not adhere to the conventions or traditions. Rebecca's interest in spoken word, in fact, had arisen in part out of experience with certain theatre companies in Toronto who were experimenting with techniques that made the theatre experience less formal, more interactive: addressing the audience directly, using microphones, performing with the house lights on. If the lights are on, the audience is physically present.

Of course, more in depth comparison would likely yield even more precise differentiations between theatre and spoken word cultures, and these would not be limited to the stage: we also discussed how the social interaction among spoken word performers was different from that among actors. (The recreational use of foreign accents was one custom mentioned in connection with actors; for spoken word performers, it might be swapping CDs and chapbooks.) Ultimately, the defining factor is the culture of the community that produces the work. The only foolproof determinant of what is and what is not spoken word, in other words, is whether the work is being produced and performed within a spoken word culture, by a spoken word artist for a spoken word audience.

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Any attempt to define spoken word must necessarily give up on rigid criteria, and instead aspire to a more permissive and more productive project, that of demonstrating how spoken word transgresses and exposes many of the artificial borders by which literary activity is organized. As a label for categorization, then, *spoken word* is rather spectacularly useless; rather than dispelling ambiguity through its deployment, it seems to create more. The uselessness of *spoken word* as a taxonomic category, however, is also one of its chief values as a frame for exploring how literature and performance intersect in social contexts: its scope is elastic and therefore through it we can examine the interactions of multiple overlapping communities. The term is about as useful to a taxonomic project as the term *postmodern*—so ill-defined and contingent that it can sometimes appear to be useable in virtually any context to mean virtually anything. Somehow, that seems appropriate for a cultural phenomenon that is sometimes credited with transcending the "irony" of postmodernism in favor of a culture of direct connection. Later I will discuss why I am skeptical of that claim, but I also hope to uncover other reasons why spoken word might be said to be "post-"postmodern.

CHAPTER THREE: SPOKEN WORLD

Given the difficulty in settling on a prescriptive definition of spoken word, it is perhaps more useful to define it descriptively. What does a spoken word event look like? In this chapter I will provide fragmentary portraits of specific spoken word events around the world—events, and not texts, since to focus on texts would be to overlook the very qualities that make spoken word unique. The quintessence of spoken word does not lie in any commonality of style or theme, so rather than close analysis of spoken-word poems, is it is more illuminating to read the poets themselves and the milieu of which they are a part—the venues, conventions, histories, influences, and personalities of the form. Who are the performers? Who are the audience? How do they behave? This approach obviously calls for a literary-sociological method and even for an emphasis on the personal and anecdotal, which have always been a part of poetry criticism, but which I advocate embracing as full-fledged methodologies.

Looking at specific examples demonstrates that differences in local histories, economies, demographics, and cultures mean that there is not just one genre called spoken word: there are as many as there are communities who practice it. Because spoken word is a social project, it is very susceptible to the influence of local conditions. My research for this project has focused primarily on four well-established English-language spoken word scenes, in New York, London, Montreal, and Melbourne: I attended performances, I conducted interviews with performers and other participants, and in many cases I was a participant and a performer myself. By taking these four cities

as the primary loci of my research, I do not mean to suggest that they are the most significant or most active sites of spoken word, although they each play important cultural roles in their respective countries, which have the four greatest populations of native speakers of English. Some limits were obviously necessary for this project, but as a result I must leave out accounts of many other spoken word scenes I have glimpsed, in other cities and in other countries, including other places where English is a majority language (like New Zealand) and places where it is a minority language (like South Africa). Although poetry performance is obviously a nearly universal cultural practice and can occur in any language, for the purposes of this study I am treating spoken word specifically as a phenomenon that is tied to the English language (although it is in many cases influenced by, or an influence on, similar practices in other languages). At the same time, by attempting to investigate the multiple facets of multiple scenes within four such culturally and geographically disparate cities, I may have bitten off more than is easily chewable, and my research has been necessarily superficial. It would not be feasible, in fact, to present all my fieldwork here—I am setting it aside for possible future use in more in-depth studies—but for the sake of illustrating the kinds of activities that I include under the broad rubric of spoken word, I offer some brief samples.

In New York City at 308 Bowery is the Bowery Poetry Club, founded by Bob Holman in 2002 when the block still reflected the Bowery's reputation as a kind of haven for social outcasts: along with derelict storefronts and flophouses there was a methadone clinic nearby, and across the street was the fabled (now defunct) punk bar CBGB's. In the last decade the block has changed about as much as any block of the city: a new steel-

and-glass condominium building has risen across the street, on the corner of Bowery and Houston is a new brightly-lit Whole Foods (gourmet grocery beloved of young urban professionals), and a few blocks down the New Museum (of contemporary art) has opened its dazzling new aluminum-mesh-clad building. Occupying a socio-economic twilight of sorts between a seedy bohemia and a shiny bourgeoisie, the Bowery Poetry Club itself symbolizes the dynamicism of the city and of poetry; the window above the door is adorned with the phrase "Everything is Subject to Change." In its brief life, the Club has already become the stuff of poetry legend,[1] and in many ways it is also an emblem of spoken word: its hybrid origins, its ambiguous social status, its diversity and accessibility, its reverence for poetry and embrace of so much more. On the wall above the stage is a Warhol-esque Lite-Brite portrait of Walt Whitman; the programmed events have included poetry slams and many variations thereof, puppet-pirate rock-opera, a weekly monologue by downtown poet Taylor Mead, kora performances by griot-in-residence Papa Susso, book and CD launches of every kind, the experimental-leaning Segue reading series, as well as kids' events, show-and-tell, and bingo happy hour. Everything performed at the Club is also recorded directly to regularly-replaced hard drives, creating a huge archive of digital performances by poets both famous and unknown, which will no doubt have future scholars of performance poetry either praising Bob Holman's foresight or tearing out their hair from its sheer bulk.

[1] The history of its founding is related by Bob Holman himself in Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz's *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*—which is also a great introduction to poetry slams and their rules and functioning.

The NYC-Urbana poetry slam moved into the Bowery Poetry Club as soon as it was usable. It had previously been an "underground" slam, taking place first in the basement of a theatre and then in the basement of CBGB's. Slam poetry in New York up to that point had tended to employ a serious mixture of politics and performance that was the trademark of the Nuyorican Poet's Café, New York's pioneering slam venue. By contrast, the NYC-Urbana slam, originally the offshoot of Bob Holman's Mouth Almighty spoken word recording label, has always had a more irreverent, jocular tone—which fits in well with the informal, high-spirited nature of many events at the Bowery Poetry Club and with the effervescent personality of its founder. One night I attended, the show was run by slam-master Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, three-time member of the NYC-Urbana team at the National Poetry Slam and author of the book *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*. Behind the bar was the poet/bartender Shappy Seasholtz, member of the winning 2002 National Poetry Slam team (the Bowery Poetry Club is staffed mostly by poets), and in the audience was Taylor Mali, one of the most notorious figures in the world of poetry slams, who has competed on seven NPS teams (and won four times), appeared in HBO's *Def Poetry Jam* and in the documentary *SlamNation*, and served as president of Poetry Slam Inc. Mali in particular, but also Aptowicz and Seasholtz and other people associated with the Urbana Slam, such as Beau Sia, are figures who would likely be recognized by a very large audience of slammers across the country and around the world—a larger audience, perhaps, than those of most top-selling poetry books. But what struck me most about this particular night was its friendly intimacy.

The crowd was small in numbers—perhaps 25 people were spread across the rows of green mid-century kitchen chairs and the few tables at the front—but large in spirit, and it seemed as though most participants knew each other. The six or seven competitors themselves were untouched by fame and mostly quite young—some perhaps still in their teens. I don't have very detailed notes about the poems' content, but one was a sort of identity-based political rant that was to a large degree tongue-in-cheek, almost self-parodic, and another was an account of the poet's first experience writing poetry. Between performances Aptowicz took the mic to encourage the performers, coach the judges (who are members of the audience), collect the scores, and elicit applause ("Applaud the poet, not the score"). There was a lot of banter between the audience and the stage, between the host and the judges, and between the host and the bartender (Seasholtz, who is Aptowicz's partner in real life as well as in performance). Although establishing the poetry slam in New York has been one of Bob Holman's most visible contributions to poetry in the city, it is far from being the defining activity at the Bowery Poetry Club, where I have also watched performances by Jackson Mac Low, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Karen Finley, Jerome Rothenberg, Charles Bernstein, and Sapphire, to name just a few. Nevertheless, I use the Urbana slam as an example because I think its small-scale, quasi-familial atmosphere demonstrates one of the most salient aspects of spoken word.

In the UK the poetry slam is taken considerably less seriously than it is in the country where it was invented, yet London's Farrago Slam, founded in 1994, boasts of being Europe's longest-running poetry slam (it is a part of the annual Farrago Festival of

Spoken Word), and it can probably be considered the earliest and most dedicated poetry slam community outside North America. That dedication is largely thanks to the indefatigable John Paul O'Neill, organizer and host, who was the first Briton to compete in the National Poetry Slam in the US and who deserves much of the credit (or blame) for bringing the slam to Europe. Spoken word in the UK has evolved its own range of styles, and some of them are rooted in distinct English poetic traditions, including dub poetry, which began as a poetic use of Jamaican speaking styles but which, it could be argued, is also the product of Caribbean immigration to London. The UK slam is fairly loosely based on the American poetry slam, but it is more free form than the American version, featuring a wider variety of styles and much less attention to the competition. Like contemporary UK poetry in general, the work more often retains traditional verse forms, especially rhyme, and typically features (at least from a North American point of view) irreverent humor that uses sarcasm and self-deprecation as political statement, in sharp contrast to the in-your-face style of the New York slams. In fact, while the term "spoken word" is somewhat less popular in the UK than in North America, another label used by many of the performers I talked to is "stand-up poetry," connecting their work explicitly to comedy.

I visited and took part in the Farrago slam in January 2008, in the foyer bar of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, steps away from the British Museum—an upscale venue compared to the Bowery Poetry Club, with white gallery walls, tile floors, and track lighting. There were featured performances by several regulars and several visiting poets, such as Bohdan Piasecki, a young performance poet from Poland who started a

poetry slam in Warsaw. The slam on this particular night was a rather cursory affair with only one round and a grab bag of prizes (mostly candies) for everyone who took part, regardless of the scores. It was a thoroughly casual, light-hearted take on the poetry slam compared to the intensity of the US National competition. What I found most illuminating, though, was that this anything-goes attitude was also reflected in the diversity of the participants, many of whom were regular, nearly monthly performers at Farrago, for example: Keith Jarrett (not the jazz pianist) and Deanna Rodger, both former slam champions, whose work might be described as New York-style; Niall Spooner-Harvey, another former champion, who often addresses the difficulties of living with cerebral palsy; Fran Landesman, an American-born jazz lyricist now in her '80s; and Rachel Pantechnicon, a drag performer and children's author. O'Neill is a determined promoter and seems quite serious about upholding the pledge on his flyers: "Open to ANY UK-based poet, any subject or style, read or perform." Not surprisingly, he also holds strong opinions about how poetry events should work, to the point of being almost dogmatically anti-dogmatic, and after talking to him for a while in a nearby pub, it was not a shock to learn that he has made enemies among other poetry promoters in London. I mention this as evidence that "community" does not always mean "harmony."

In 2004 I was an invited judge at a poetry slam in Melbourne, Australia, but there the slam was treated as a novelty and a joke by most of the participants, perhaps because the idea of poetry competition had not been accepted and internalized to the degree that it has been in the US; it has since become much more common. The city is home to a tight-knit spoken word community that has sometimes created collaborative shows for the

local Fringe Theatre Festival, and this interpretation of poetry as theatre is typical, I find, of the Australian attitude to spoken word (a term which has somewhat greater currency there). If British poetry can be characterized as having a strong attachment to traditional poetic form, then Australian poetry seems to reflect the country's history of British colonialism mixed with a sort of renegade individualism. This is evident in Melbourne's spoken word, which often walks an easily-blurred line between poetry and rhyming stand-up comedy, as in London, but is often more performative, less focused on the text, than spoken word in the UK.

Shortly after arriving in Melbourne, I performed at an event that was part of the 2004 Overload Poetry Festival, organized by Steve Smart, a series of spoken word events across the city that is presented, in part, as an alternative to the gargantuan Melbourne Writers Festival. I arrived at the venue, a rather decrepit "hotel" (a bar, in North American English) on the outskirts of the city, in the company of spoken word performers Emily Zoë Baker and Sean Whelan. EZB was performing with me that night, and Whelan was the host of the popular performance series Babble, originally started by American expatriate Phil Norton around 1998. These poets, along with Alicia Sometimes, David Prater, and a handful of others, have formed the core of the Melbourne spoken word scene over the years. This particular event, however, was an unwieldy mix of well-known performers (like EZB), visitors (like me), and open mic regulars, some of whom would perform work that, at the time, I couldn't help thinking of as atrocious: journal-entry readings and new-age incantations, or unsubtle and unsuccessful attempts at eroticism involving mangoes. There were problems with the sound system and the show

therefore began late, with the host Steve Smart obviously feeling rather frazzled by the pressures of running a two-week, multi-venue poetry festival. What has stayed with me from that night, though, was the utter lack of response I received from the audience for my own performance, which included pieces that I considered my most crowd-pleasing—pieces that had, at other events, made the crowd roar. It was not a large audience, mostly consisting of open mic participants, and as I looked out from behind the mic (there was no stage) their faces betrayed not a trace of delight or understanding. It sunk in how dependent a poem is on its audience: without them, my texts were meaningless, as much as theirs were to me.

The last city I will mention is also the city where I was first exposed to performance poetry: Montreal, Quebec. Although some of the earliest slams in Canada happened in Montreal, of these four scenes it is perhaps the least influenced by American-style spoken word, in part because of its bilingualism and in part because of the strong influence of a cabaret/performance art scene in the mid '90s. Audiences for spoken word in Montreal seldom have a single first language in common, so non-verbal performance elements are appealing, such as sound poetry, movement, and costume. Le groupe de poésie moderne, for example, is a primarily francophone sound poetry group which became hugely popular among an anglophone crowd. Furthermore, for many poets at the time, especially in the francophone community, the poetry slam was a typically American phenomenon and therefore something to be distrusted if not derided. English-speaking writers in Montreal also benefit from a peculiar position: they are a linguistic minority within a minority, using a language that is globally powerful but locally

marginalized. It might be argued that such a situation makes simply reading poetry in public a political act, an ambiguously defensive or threatening assertion of the identitary power of language. While French may occupy a hegemonic position in Quebec, it is still a renegade language in North America; in this way, French and English in Montreal could be seen as allies with a potential for innovation and subversion that comes from inhabiting the periphery.

The poetry slam was introduced to English Montreal in 1995 by Todd Swift, who dressed in a tuxedo and conducted the events somewhat like a game show; by the end of the decade, however, interest in the regular slam had waned and it was upstaged by the recurring Sham Slam, where the prize was awarded to the performer who did the best (worst) parody of a slam poet. Earlier than that, however, Ian Ferrier and Fortner Anderson had begun recording poetry performances to be played like songs on McGill University's radio station, CKUT. This initiative led to the release of a cassette, which led to the establishment of a spoken-word recording label, Wired on Words. As an extension of this, Ferrier later started Words and Music at the Casa, a monthly performance series.

Casa del Popolo is a small but well-trafficked café and concert venue that opened in 2000 after a series of less successful and less legal music venues in the same space; it is on St-Laurent Boulevard, the central street of the city, but like the Bowery Poetry Club it sits on a block that has transitioned over the last decade from boarded storefronts and cheap rent to new construction and chain stores. I have attended and performed at many shows there; one was in February 2009, in the context of the 8th annual Festival Voix

d'Amériques. Escaping the frigid winter air that night, I stepped through the door and into a packed room, my glasses immediately fogging up. Removing them, I paid a five-dollar cover at the merch table, which also displayed the book/CD that was being launched that night. Then I maneuvered my way to the bar along the left side of the room, where the young hipster staff sell microbrewery beer and vegan sandwiches. Artwork by local cartoonists hung on the walls around the stage. There was nowhere left to sit. Ian Ferrier, in his trademark beard and bandana, was just introducing the show. The first performer would be Ferrier himself, accompanied by a band assembled for the occasion; while he spoke softly into the microphone he played his electric guitar—a surprisingly difficult thing to do. Among the other performers were Victoria Stanton, co-author of *Impure: Reinventing the Word: The Theory, Practice, and Oral History of Spoken Word in Montreal*, who sang surreal a cappella songs (an apt complement to Ferrier's spoken lyrics), and Fortner Anderson, a performer and avid collector of spoken word recordings since the '70s, originally from Tennessee, whose style is a cross between Southern evangelical preacher and anarchist punk. The show was partly in French and partly in English and combined music, poetry, storytelling, and performance art; the result was eclectic but definitely spoken word.

In brief, these are the sorts of performance events I'm talking about when I refer to "spoken word." They are mostly the product of a specific movement within performance poetry in which the poetry slam, as invented in Chicago in the '80s, played an important role, but which also predates and transcends the slam. They are defined more by context than by content. They are enacted locally but networked globally, which

allows them to largely bypass the regional and national levels of identification. They are hybrid, polyphonic, and multivalently marginal. The sense that they exist in opposition to more established, mainstream, measured, codified forms of writing and performance is evident in the names of some of the series: *Babble*. *YAWP!* (from Whitman's "barbaric yawp"). *La Vache Enragée* (The Mad Cow). *Farrago* (meaning a hodgepodge). *Apples and Snakes*. *Unusual Suspects*. *Overload*.

It may be worth reiterating here that, while the development and functioning of community is essential to spoken word, the communities described above are not unified, hermetic, or unproblematic. The NYC-Urbana poetry slam was born out of a controversial split with the Nuyorican Poets' Café, creating a rivalry that would be a source of tension for years. The Farrago Slam has been in several turf wars with other organizations, either over the right to declare the UK Slam champion, or over more practical issues like venue access. Things did not go smoothly, at first, between the organizers of the Overload Festival and the Melbourne Writers' Festival, or between the Overload organizers and many of the featured poets. And in Montreal the ongoing conflict over language, rooted in centuries of colonial oppression, always has the potential to disrupt relations between the English and French scenes. It might seem that the idea of spoken word being a community-based activity starts to break down, because there is so much egoism and antagonism, between practitioners, between different communities, between different factions within communities. But it is important to remember that these antagonisms are as much a part of community as other kinds of interaction. It often seems to me that people go to spoken word events to see the people

they hate as much as the people they like. Community is not necessarily about supportive identification; it is also about counter-identification or disidentification. José Muñoz uses this term to talk about the cultural positioning of queer artists of colour through re-appropriation of oppressive cultural tropes, but it also aptly describes the ways that disempowered groups sometimes use spoken word as a way of constructing and reinforcing identity, establishing not just how they want to be seen but also how they want to be. The concept of community applies to spoken word in nuanced ways; part three of my dissertation explores this further by analyzing how and why people are either drawn to or repulsed by spoken word.

CHAPTER FOUR: "WE HAD NO IDEA"

To this point, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to spoken word—although enough, perhaps, to form the basis of a field of study. Furthermore, enough doctoral dissertations have been written to demonstrate, at least, that the subject is of interest to many emerging scholars, and that therefore in the near future we can expect more in-depth work to appear. Certain theoretical observations are givens: spoken word is a popular form. It is community-oriented, social, collaborative, and relational. It valorizes orality over literacy. It is a hybrid form. It is generically unstable. It is "political": that is, it tends to feature polemical content, often involving identity-based social critique. It is not race-specific, but it is encoded by race. Perhaps less obviously, it is an artistic practice that de-emphasizes aesthetic discrimination, and it is an aspirational activity, in the sense that it appeals to people's sense of what they would like to be. It is largely an art form of, by, and for young people. If spoken word is to have any relationship to literary studies, all of these assumptions need to be re-theorized, or theorized for the first time. That is what this dissertation attempts to do—in tentative, broad but careful, brushstrokes. This chapter, after addressing some of the difficulties involved in situating spoken word within literary studies, provides an overview of the (minimal) extant literature; the following chapter provides an account of various possible theoretical approaches to the study of spoken word.

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Let's return for a moment to the TransCanada Pipeline room at the Banff Centre in 2008, where one afternoon a panel was held featuring a discussion between Bob Holman, Sheri-D Wilson, and me. We were attempting to talk about how spoken word was being theorized, or would be theorized, by institutional and independent scholars, and what the ramifications would be, if any, for spoken word practitioners. The conversation was slow to begin, but quickly transformed from a three-way panel into a chaotic free-for-all involving all the participants in the room. Eventually our attention focused on a then-recently published edition of *Canadian Theatre Review* that had been guest edited by spoken word performer/scholar T. L. Cowan with Rick Knowles, entitled "Spoken Word Performance." There was a general enthusiasm among the participants for the journal issue and what it represented: a serious effort by "academia" to understand spoken word and the initiation of a dialog between theorists from various corners of the academy, the arts, and the continent who may have been previously unacquainted—several of whom were at that moment in the room. It also quickly became clear that maintaining a distinction between artists and theorists was not only misleading and pointless, but also potentially inflammatory: artists theorize their work in their own way, whether they are part of academia or not.

As is often the case, though, those who are not a part of academia are wary of perceived attempts by academics to define or to colonize the field, while, as participant Catherine Kidd pointed out, academics have their own insecurities having to do with the "authenticity" of their knowledge of the field. Despite general approval of the idea that spoken word should be studied academically, a residual nervousness about "academia"

was palpable in the conversation, as evidenced by recurring references to how "academics," or more commonly "the academics," have treated performance poetry. This story from Sheri-D Wilson was a salient example:

> I had a meeting with some academics who had reviewed one of my books, and I just gathered them all together for a little educational session. I said, I'll supply the coffee, the drinks, whatever is needed, but you come for your education. And they were, I think, intrigued. They couldn't believe the gall. And I came with notes, and I explained to them how complex a spoken word poem might be. And how complex it is to read work that is written to orate. And they were stunned. They were like, "We had no idea." They had never been taught to read this form.

I'm not sure whether Wilson was telling this story partly tongue-in-cheek, but the suggestion is that these unnamed poetry critics were completely oblivious to the category of oral poetry as recorded in print.[1] It's true that critics often evaluate published spoken word texts by the same criteria as poetry not intended for performance, which is a bit like reviewing a play based on the script alone. But Wilson's story obviously exaggerates the critics' misapprehension, in a way that perpetuates an imagined antagonism between spoken word poets and scholars and the distrust it generates. On the other hand, Wilson and Bob Holman were both very supportive of the idea that a spoken word performer could, in a sense, infiltrate academia and properly represent spoken word. Bob Holman gave this endorsement of my own efforts: "It's the first time I've ever been in a room

[1] Wilson's remarks were more conciliatory than Allen Ginsberg's in "Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*," 1959: "A word on the Academies: poetry has been attacked by an ignorant and frightened bunch of bores who don't understand how it's made, and the trouble with these creeps is they wouldn't know poetry if it came up and buggered them in broad daylight" (*Deliberate* 232).

where there is that person, the theoretical person—the person who is writing theory, the theoretical person we've been talking about: 'Where is he? When are we gonna get these people?' Well, here he is, he's doing it, so…." At that point the roomful of spoken word performers began to applaud good-naturedly. The final half-joking comment, though, was Holman shouting over the applause: "Don't fuck us over!"

Theorists of spoken word, then, may feel particular pressures from the spoken word community, and my informal discussions with other spoken word theorist-practitioners have confirmed this. T. L. Cowan has said that she has become very aware, through the process of researching spoken word, that "taking a grassroots populist art form and bringing it into the academy is not necessarily a good thing."[2] When I have explained my project to spoken word artists, I have occasionally seen negative reactions, but most are interested, and some seem to feel grateful for the validation; it makes a big difference whether I present myself as a spoken word performer who has decided to pursue an advanced degree, or as an academic who is dabbling in spoken word. The issue is, in part: who will benefit from the theorization (and institutionalization) of spoken word? Cowan says, "I'm not necessarily doing this for spoken word and giving it an academic legitimacy. What I am interested in is what we as academics do and what our responses to spoken word mean and seeing spoken word as a problem in the academy." This is very similar to what I was thinking, and it is difficult to say whether it is an attitude that has been fostered by academia, or whether the two of us are academics because we have that attitude. In any case, academia and spoken word are not mutually

[2] These comments occurred in a 2005 interview conducted by Amy Fung with Cowan and me, before a performance in which we were both taking part.

exclusive cultures; on the contrary, despite certain resentments it seems there is a sort of mutual attraction, not to mention some intermingling. Furthermore, spoken word has proven for the most part resistant to attempts to codify it or define what it is, and I'm not sure I could confidently predict what benefits or detriments might result from its theorization, or in which direction.

In the same interview, Cowan also said, "For me, to write about spoken word academically is to maintain some of the aesthetics of spoken word," and this points to an inverse problem: how are studies of spoken word received within the academy? One obvious difficulty is the impracticality of accurately depicting performance in print: the audience cannot necessarily review the performance independently as they could if the subject were a printed text. This is only a problem, of course, from the point of view of literary studies; anthropologists, for example, routinely take on the task of description as well as that of analysis. Positioning the research work between literature and the social sciences, though, creates other dilemmas. How, for example, should I treat the subjects of my interviews? Are they "native informants" whose identities must be protected by anonymity, or are they culture producers whose contributions must be credited by name? I dealt with this problem by asking the interviewees themselves, who are the best judges of the risk or benefit they may be exposed to.

There are other, more entrenched reasons why institutional literary studies may resist accepting performance and extra-textual behavior as valid objects of study. The next section addresses some of these by looking at recent trends in poetry criticism.

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Making quantitative assessments of spoken word's popularity with audiences is problematic; it should be easier, one would expect, to gauge its popularity as a subject of study in academia. But accounting for the relative importance of spoken word—or poetry performance generally—within literary studies is complicated, partly because the relevant terminology shifts and changes over time (if one title mentions urban oral poetry and another mentions slam poetry, might they be about the same thing?). Another problem has to do with the contradiction inherent in studying oral performance as "literature." The significance of orality to poetry, and the study of poetry, has fluctuated on several levels over various time periods. Theorists of orality and literacy describe a big picture in which societies move gradually from oral culture to literate culture (and, according to some, from there to digital culture), and on this level we have definitely moved far from our oral heritage. On the level of more recent history, there was a decline, from the 19th century to the 20th, in the value of poetry performance as a social activity, but at the same time avant-garde and modernist writers took a greater interest in poetry as an oral form. New Criticism, with its aversion to the embodied author, had a large hand in making poetry criticism turn its back on performance in the early to mid-20th century. Then in the '50s and '60s poetry performance came back as a social phenomenon, but it could be argued that the rise of structuralist theory, and the kind of scholarly criticism it encouraged, ensured that the study of oral poetry would remain mostly unfashionable.

The level of scholarly interest in performance poetry at any given time, in other words, could be seen as waxing or waning, depending on one's point of view.

On the whole, though, the study of poetry performance has been unfairly disregarded in the modern discipline of English studies. Even when poets who perform their work are studied, the focus is normally on the printed text of the work. There are obvious reasons for this: compared to print, a performance is more ephemeral, more prone to variation, and also more collaborative and interactive and therefore less useful to the formation of canons. In the absence of sound recordings from any literary periods except the most recent, and given the traditional reluctance of English scholars to study living authors, studying poetry as it is spoken and heard has for a long time been technically unfeasible. Academic resistance to studying poetry in performance—or to studying it in the way I am proposing here—boils down to two related but distinct scholarly inhibitions: orality and social context. It is much easier to build disciplinary authority around printed texts and single authors than around the messy business of live performances and audience response. Both of these issues, though, are slowly becoming more appealing than they are off-putting.

As poetry readings gradually became a cultural staple through the last half of the 20th century, changing how poets and audiences felt about poetry performance, the attitudes of critics towards orality were also changing, through speech act theory, performance studies, and a renewed interest, inspired in part by postcolonialism, in oral culture. One example of a project that combined interests in orality and social context is ethnopoetics, a mix of discourses named by Jerome Rothenberg in the 1960s that

attempts, among other things, to connect contemporary poetry to its roots in social ritual, and to demonstrate that the verse created and used by so-called primitive cultures is not primitive in the least. New ideas in anthropology—such as Dell Hymes' work, inspired by Kenneth Burke, studying the poetic structures of North American native oral culture—and in sociology—such as Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*—fed into the development of more ethnographic approaches in literary studies as well. The advent of post-structuralism, cultural studies, reader-response theory, and reception theory created a shift from author-centered to audience-centered criticism, which would make study of something like a poetry reading more acceptable.

Recently, it seems this shift has accelerated, and there have been a number of critical works that emphasize the social function of poetry, such as Joan Shelley Rubin's *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* (2007). Her book ends with a quotation that summarizes this new critical attitude: a poetry study-group member (talking to Robert Pinsky, who is then quoted by Rubin), says, "We no longer try to figure out what the poem means, as much as what the poem means to us in our lives now" (404). Two earlier examples would be Christopher Beach's *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry between Community and Institution* (1999), and Joseph Harrington's *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern US Poetics* (2002). This kind of approach is reflected in studies that acknowledge the interdependence of poetry and poetry scenes, such as Daniel Kane's *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (2003). Even more significant for my project has been Maria Damon and Ira Livingston's reframing of cultural studies, in *Poetry and Cultural Studies:*

A Reader (2009), as a range of theoretical approaches that refuse a hierarchical distinction between popular culture/language and poetry in particular. Their reader juxtaposes diverse essays, both historical and current, that nevertheless contribute to a common understanding of the social import of poetry and poetry studies, from Charles Bernstein's "A Blow is Like an Instrument," to Kamau Brathwaite's "History of the Voice, 1979-1981," to Miguel Algarin's "Nuyorican Language" (his introduction to *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*).

This refocus on poetry as a social phenomenon has coincided with a renewed and re-conceptualized critical engagement with the oral performance of poetry, which is perhaps most clearly evident in Charles Bernstein's landmark anthology *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998). The anthology collects a previously unfashionable kind of poetry criticism that discusses the actual real-life performance of poetry (as opposed to sound and breath as abstract qualities of the poem itself). Included are a number of poet-academics who have done important work on poetry and performance, such as Lorenzo Thomas, Steve McCaffery, Dennis Tedlock, and Peter Middleton, whose own book, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (2005), also playfully challenges "close reading" as a critical technique. Middleton's book is a model for my project in that it treats poetry as a cultural practice always rooted in a community and a context, whether spoken or in print. In addition, in 1997 Adalaide Morris published the anthology *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, which, as the title suggests, addresses the impact of audio recording technologies on oral poetry. Finally, Lesley Wheeler's

recent book *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (2008) draws on much of the previously mentioned work to take the concept of voice, formerly used in the rather sterile sense of an abstract quality inherent in the text, and to repurpose it for a more literal usage. This is not a comprehensive list of recent work on oral poetry performance, but these are the works that I have found most useful and that seem to be most in touch with the scholarly trend in this direction.

There have also been, of course, numerous anthologies, histories, and how-to books that directly address spoken word, slam, and hip hop poetry for a popular audience, and some of these have made useful contributions to the serious study of spoken word. Notable examples include *Impure: Reinventing the Word: The Theory, Practice and Oral History of 'Spoken Word' in Montreal* (2001) by Victoria Stanton and Vincent Tinguely; *The Spoken Word Revolution* (2005) and *The Spoken Word Revolution Redux* (2007) by Mark Eleveld; *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* (2008) by Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz; and even *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry* (2004) by Marc K. Smith with Joe Kraynak. However, when it comes to publications from academic presses by trained scholars, there has been very little so far that focuses explicitly on spoken word. Included in *Close Listening* is a very specific and perceptive essay by Maria Damon, "*Was That 'Different', 'Dissident', or 'Dissonant'*?: Poetry (n) the Public Spear: Slams, Open Readings, and Dissident Traditions." Theatre critic Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (2005) has a chapter entitled "Def Poetry Jam: Performance as Public Practice." There are no doubt other essays that deal with specific scenes or aspects of spoken word

in the context of larger studies of poetry or performance.[3] Most strikingly, though, there have been two publications that have embraced the phenomenon of spoken word (or slam poetry more specifically) as a subject of scholarly study in and of itself. One is the aforementioned "Spoken Word Performance" issue of *Canadian Theatre Review*, from 2007. It benefits from the contributions of many Canadian spoken word performers, some of whom are also writing as academics, but it was orchestrated by T. L. Cowan, whose doctoral dissertation on spoken word in Canada will be published as a book in the next year. The other, which I have also already mentioned, is Susan B. A. Somers-Willett's *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, which has a reasonable claim to being the first full-length scholarly study of slam poetry (and by extension, of spoken word).

The beginnings of a major shift in critical engagement with poetry are present in the works I've just cited, but it's not clear whether this will result in an expanded definition of poetry performance or whether spoken word will become a field of its own. To date, spoken word has not become a commonly used term or category within English studies. In a search for the phrase in the MLA bibliography, most of the results by far used it in the context of psycholinguistics, in articles about spoken word recognition and comprehension. Then there were a fair number of books and articles that use "spoken word" in its purely literal, pre-poetry-slam sense, dealing with the use of speech by characters in printed texts ("the power of the spoken word" in Cervantes, Joseph Conrad,

[3] I'd like to note, for example, my own essay, "Eating Our Own Words: Spoken Word in Montreal," in *Language Acts: Anglo-Québec Poetry, 1976 to the 21st Century*, edited by Jason Camlot and Todd Swift.

Jane Austen, or Stephen King), and one interesting article suggesting that Gertrude Stein might be considered the "great great grand MF of rap" (Mills). There was also some attention to orality in folk poetry—oral storytelling in Africa, the Caribbean, or Native cultures. Only a handful of articles about poetry and performance actually use the term, *spoken word*, and then mostly in connection to poetry slams or hip hop, and sometimes as "spoken word poetry"—as a social phenomenon, identity-building strategy, or pedagogical tool. In the last decade, though, a number of new scholars have earned doctoral degrees for research specifically focused on spoken word, and I'd like to think that this foreshadows an inevitable rise in interest in spoken word in English, Performance Studies, or Cultural Studies departments.[4]

[4] These dissertations have included Julie Marie Schmid's "Performance, Poetics, and Place: Public Poetry as a Community Art" (University of Iowa, 2000); Ramon LaVelle Sibley, Jr.'s "Oral Poetry in a Literate Culture: A Performance Ethnography of Poetry Slams" (Louisiana State University, 2001); Bronwen Elisabeth Low's "Spoken Word: Exploring the Language and Poetics of the Hip Hop Popular" (York University, 2001); Susan B. Anthony Somers-Willett's "Authenticating Voices: Performance, Black Identity, and Slam Poetry" (University of Texas, Austin, 2003); Amber Lauren Johnson's "'We Don't Write Just to Write; We Write to Be Free': A Rhetorical Ethnography of Spoken Word in Los Angeles" (Pennsylvania State University, 2006); Jenifer Vernon's "Making Community with the Deep Communication of Popular Live Poetry at the Millennium" (UC San Diego, 2008); T. L. Cowan's "Vox Populi: The Genealogies, Cultures, and Politics of Spoken Word Performance in Canada" (University of Alberta, 2009); and Helen Gregory's "Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S. Poetry Slam Discourses" (Sociology, University of Exeter, 2009).

CHAPTER FIVE: PROBLEMS OF SPOKEN WORD POETICS

I turn now to a brief overview of certain ideas from various traditions within critical theory that I think are essential to consider in any attempt to contextualize the study of spoken word. These theoretical foundations were laid down in performance theory, orality theory, speech-act theory and its spin-offs, sociology, anthropology, and other fields, and though none of them provides a perfectly suitable theoretical framework, together they provide a handy toolbox with which to approach the renovations that are required.

While I assert that spoken word is a form of literature (despite the obvious contradiction involved in using this word for a primarily oral form), it is also a community-oriented relational art practice, and in order to understand how it functions and what it means, it must be studied in its context. Poetry is always rooted in community, and context is important to any critique of literature or art, but spoken word, being performance-oriented, is particularly social, to the point that one can consider the construction and operation of the community as much a part of the art form as the writing itself. Context, in this case, means considering certain details that are often disregarded, and disregarding other details that are often privileged. An example of the former would be considering what happens at the bar just as carefully as what happens on the stage. (Do people heckle or shout encouragement? Do the performers mill around drinking beer before they go on, or do they hide backstage? Do the members of the audience write poems during the show?) An example of the latter would be resisting, or at least

relativizing, any form of canonization. In other words, the goal should not be to nominate any writer-performers as the progenitors or masters of the form, but to show that such categorization is meaningless in the context of a genre inextricably tied to live performance and to the polyphony found in a community of creative participants. Spoken word propagates itself not by the reproduction and transmission of individual talents and particular texts, but through the contagion of the spoken word meme. As open mics and poetry slams proliferate in towns across the country and around the world, spoken word remains an intensely local phenomenon, and there are few artists who attain any sort of widespread recognition. This orientation towards the local community is both and at the same time the condition that allows its production and the condition that allows its self-perpetuation and growth.

Although individual spoken word artists appear in this project, including some well-known figures, my approach has for the most part disregarded the existing spoken word "canon," and any readings of individual works are incidental. Instead I focus on spoken word scenes or communities: not aesthetic schools or movements, but social groupings that seem to provide their own definition of the nature of the genre in a given city. This project has been ethnographical in a sense—I have talked to the people I have met during my involvement in various scenes, regardless of their level of experience, expertise, or notoriety. I do not feel that talking exclusively to established or recognized performers would be any more interesting than talking to "unknowns"—the more experienced performers may have more sophisticated and more self-conscious personal

interpretations of the form, but as the *New Yorker* writer Malcolm Gladwell has put it, "self-consciousness is the enemy of 'interestingness'" (xiv).

I have used Mikhail Bakhtin's term *polyphony* to describe the interaction of voices that is such an important part of spoken word, even though the concept, which Bakhtin introduces in connection to his analysis of the novels of Dostoevsky, is more properly applied to narrative. The related concept of the carnival is included in the later revision of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, but in *Rabelais and His World* it has a wider significance: he sees carnival as an essential societal mechanism that allows distinct voices to mingle and influence one another in a "joyous relativity" by creating environments where the conventions of society are subverted (166). In this sense, spoken word events seem particularly carnivalesque.[1] Spoken word also seems well described by a term that Bakhtin employs in his essay "Discourse in the Novel" (published in *The Dialogic Imagination*), *heteroglossia*. If polyphony and carnival describe the community interaction of a spoken word event, heteroglossia describes the interaction of discourses within the writing itself. Interestingly, Bakhtin insisted that the novel was the ideal location of heteroglossia, rather than poetry (he placed the novel in opposition to epic poetry in particular). If spoken word is as heteroglossic as I think, this might suggest another reason why spoken word's close identification with poetry is misplaced.

One of the areas of knowledge most obviously germane to the theory of spoken word is the study of orality and literacy. Among the best known and most influential works in this field are Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (1960), Eric Havelock's *Preface*

[1] Also particularly relevant in this connection is the work of cultural historian Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*.

to Plato (1963), and Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. The latter was published in 1982 and gives a sort of overview of the development in the 20th century of the received understanding of the differences between orality (that is, purely oral culture) and literacy (culture affected by writing). Ong makes it clear that he thinks the study of language over the last few centuries has had a prejudice against oral culture: written literature has been taken seriously by scholars while oral art forms have been seen as not worth the trouble. He suggests that this is part of a long-standing trend instigated by the historical switch from oral culture to literate culture and perpetuated by the effects the switch has had on the way we think. A fundamental premise of the book is that once a society is literate, it can no longer think in terms of orality, and therefore literate communication takes precedence. It's interesting to apply this to the neglect of poetry performance in literary studies—the fact that this kind of work is a bit of an anomaly in English departments. Ong sets out to rectify this state of affairs, by insisting not just that oral culture is worth study, but that it is primary, more fundamental to humanity than written culture. He wants us to return to our oral roots.

If the idea of orality being primary or fundamental sounds a little vague, it's because Ong is unclear about what he means by this, aside from the fact that historically spoken language precedes written language. It seems to be an article of faith for him that in losing touch with oral culture we lost something that we should be trying to regain. Ong's ideas resonate strongly with Marshall McLuhan's,[2] in the sense that both think of the evolution of communication in a fairly strict diachronic way: first, we made noises

[2] In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* especially, and also in *Understanding Media*. MacLuhan was Ong's mentor at Saint Louis University in 1941.

and gestures. Then we spoke. Then we drew pictures. Then we wrote. Then we had print. Then we had radio, then television, and now other kinds of electronic communication that have engendered a "secondary orality." And in each transition, while we gained many abilities, we also lost certain capacities for thought. McLuhan, however, while he laments these changes, is not overtly judgmental about them, while Ong is somewhat chauvinistic about orality, characterizing it almost as the victim of literate culture. In his introduction to Paul Zumthor's book *Oral Poetry: An Introduction* (1990), Ong uses words like "magical" and "sacred" in talking about the power of the human voice. This reminds me, unfortunately, of certain strains of spoken word in which the performer assumes a fiery shaman persona, attributing to poetry a transcendental potency.

I think it is worthwhile to read Ong's work against Jacques Derrida's assertion (in *Limited inc*. and elsewhere) that the bias actually runs the other way: Derrida's concept of logocentrism is based on phonocentrism, the idea that spoken language is given preferential treatment as a form of communication closer to the true intentions of the sender. Writing therefore is relegated to the status of a parasitic imitation of speech. Derrida goes on to say that writing can not be expected to convey meaning transparently but neither can speech; both are susceptible to—in fact inevitably characterized by—a disconnect between thought and communicated meaning. It would seem that Ong and Derrida are saying opposite things, but in his book Ong manages to suggest that they are actually in agreement. He asks where logocentrism comes from in the first place, and then answers his own question: it's a product of literate culture and the thought processes it creates. It seems, however, that Ong seriously misses the point in some of his analysis

of Derrida; he seems to suggest that Derrida is basically just saying what McLuhan said—"The medium is the message." Ong's theories—especially his basic idea that orality and literacy promote different kinds of thought—are extremely valuable for the study of spoken word, but at the same time his project strikes me as fundamentally conservative. By claiming that literacy has become dominant over orality, he is at the same time asserting the (unacknowledged) primacy of speech, in the very ways that Derrida would identify as logocentric: speech as voice, speech as presence.

Taking orality as the primary characteristic of spoken word is, in any case, less important than examining what spoken word accomplishes socially, and in that regard speech act theory is useful. J. L. Austin's 1955 lectures that established the field, published as *How to Do Things With Words*, are a peculiar and entertaining read, mostly because they utterly fail to do what they set out to do: define "performative" utterances. He initially differentiates between constative and performative: the former type of utterance states something and can be true or false, while the latter makes something happen and can be successful or unsuccessful (he says felicitous or infelicitous): e.g. "With this ring I thee wed." This distinction, though, barely survives the first few chapters. The reasons that the category turns out to be so hard to define are complex and illuminating, and have formed the basis of a lot of theoretical exchange since then. The philosopher John Searle established his reputation by taking speech act theory to distinction-tweezing extremes. He attempts to handle "natural" language—how we speak everyday—with rigorous rules of taxonomy that necessitate outlandish simplifications. He says, for instance, that fictional language is a completely different species from

"serious" language—the difference being that in fiction one is only "pretending" to commit speech acts. Intuitively, this is problematic, but the most obvious difficulty is, where is the line drawn?

This turns out to be a very significant part of the debate, because Austin self-consciously—almost anxiously—excludes fictional language from his study, calling it "parasitic" on ordinary language. A lot of people since have found this rather curious and perturbing,[3] including Derrida. In his essay "Signature Event Context" he critiques Austin's theories, saying that fictional language cannot be subordinated to "serious" language, and that to try to demarcate "use" and "mention" is impossible (*Limited*). While speech on stage or in a poem may be a "citation" of other utterances, citation is essential to the utterances Austin would call "ordinary" as well. Utterances are always an impure repetition of other utterances; language does not work without what Derrida calls "iterability," which is closely related to Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. Derrida also finds fault with the idea that writing can be set aside in this discussion based on the assumption that it comes "after" speech. In the classical view, writing is different from speech because it is based on the potential absence of the sender or the receiver, but this view is misguided, says Derrida. Speech too can only work if is it iterable, capable of being repeated, even in the absence of the speaker. Speech and writing are fundamentally similar in this way; they are both "graphemic." This is of course one of Derrida's big

[3] Other useful—and provocative—interventions in speech act theory include Shoshana Felman's *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* and Mary Louise Pratt's *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*.

ideas, one of the ways he attacks the classical philosophical reliance on a "metaphysics of presence."

All of this is relevant in several ways, the first being that my research echoes speech-act theory by locating meaning not in the words themselves but in the circumstances in which they are uttered. From this point of view, spoken word is performative not only in the sense of being theatrical, but also in the sense of J. L. Austin's original definition of performative utterances, which can not be judged as true or untrue, but rather as felicitous or infelicitous, according to whether they properly perform what they are intended to perform. A slightly shifted version of this formula encapsulates one of the main arguments of this dissertation: that a meaningful evaluation of literature asks not whether it is good or bad, but whether it is happy or unhappy. In addition, the questions of "serious" vs. fictional language and citationality are crucial to understanding what goes on at spoken word events. When someone performs a spoken word piece, are they actually committing speech acts, or simply pretending to? Is the performer really talking to the audience, or simply reciting a previous utterance in quotations? And importantly, is it a performative utterance? Does it accomplish anything? Or does spoken word, like poetry according to Auden, make nothing happen?

In tandem with *How to do Things with Words*, it's quite interesting to read Erving Goffman's classic 1956 work of sociology, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, which uses a theatrical metaphor to look at people's social interactions in terms of performance: a theory of performatives expanded to encompass all social behavior. Interestingly, it is structurally so similar to Austin's work that it is open to the same

critiques that Derrida had for Austin. Goffman relies, not surprisingly, on the same notions of communication as coherent expression of stable feelings and ideas (which can be counterfeited, of course, but the idea of counterfeit expression simply confirms that there is a "true" or original form to whatever is being expressed). He is also careful to explicitly preserve the hierarchical distinction between performance as it happens in the theatre, and performance in real life. But his text is significant in that it creates the beginnings (if only metaphorical) of a blurring between theatre pure and simple and the ways people perform their lives, their rituals. This new way of thinking "performance" laid the groundwork for performance studies, the discipline that evolved out of theatre studies—taking up ritual and ceremony and everyday performance of all types in addition to the traditionally theatrical—partly as a response to the growth of performance art in the 1960s, and partly out of a mixture of influences from linguistics, philosophy, sociology and anthropology (via people like Austin, Goffman, Judith Butler, Victor Turner and Richard Bauman). Richard Schechner's *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985) was a seminal text in the field and championed the kind of hybrid theoretical approach I am using in this dissertation.

The word "performative" has of course accumulated other theoretical meanings and uses in addition to Austin's, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker point out in the introduction to *Performativity and Performance*. Some confusion of these terms lies in the different fundamental meanings of the verb "perform." The first meaning is to perform like an actor: a theatrical performance, a citational utterance, or a "restored behavior," as Richard Schechner calls it. The second meaning is the broader sense of an

act that accomplishes something, such as when we say a car performs well on the highway. While performance studies focuses on the first meaning, speech-act theory is really about the second: how language performs (succeeds) or not. The trick, however, is that on re-examining speech-act theory with a poststructuralist understanding of meaning (accepting, for example, that meaningful utterances are always iterable, ie. unoriginal), we see that in language the performative is always infected by performance. The way Judith Butler used the word in *Gender Trouble* to explain the construction of gender (the performance of gender relies on iterability just as Derrida says speech acts do) could be seen as a combination of these two meanings. Eve Sedgwick's work on performativity, and especially her reading of speech-act theory, is a source of inspiration for exploring how a social formation organized around literary performance may be fundamentally queer, in the sense of being based on what Austin saw as a perversion of ordinary language, and I address this further in part three. All these theoretical projects—speech act theory, performance studies, queer theory—use the word "performative" in intersecting ways, creating what Sedgwick and Parker call a "carnivalesque echolalia of extraordinarily productive cross-purposes" (1).

The issue of how social formations like race, class, and gender get interpreted by, and performed through, spoken word is a part of a larger cluster of theoretical concerns. How does spoken word interact with the public sphere? How is it situated in relation to hegemonic power structures? Is spoken word in opposition to, or a part of, dominant mass culture? Perhaps the most notorious characteristic of spoken word is that its texts are supposedly activist, angry, even accusatory. Spoken word performers often appear to

consider themselves as part of a counterpublic, in the sense introduced by Nancy Fraser when she wrote, in "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy":

> Members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. […] parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. (qtd. in Warner 118)

Is spoken word such a parallel discursive arena? The poetry slam in particular is closely associated with narratives of social struggle, and I think it is not coincidental that a slam is structured as a competition. In the 1998 film *Slam*, starring Saul Williams, the metaphorical struggle of the poet becomes quite literal: the most striking set piece in the film occurs in a prison yard, when the main character Ray, a drug dealer/poet, finds himself having to choose between rival gangs or else face violent reprisal. With the two sides lined up and flexing their muscles on either side of the volleyball court and a confrontation seemingly inevitable, Ray suddenly and incongruously launches into a loud recitation of a poem that condemns gang strife as another form of social control keeping young black men in the cycle of prison and poverty. The audience of inmates around him is dumbstruck, perhaps more by the audacity of his behavior than by the poem itself, and the confrontation is defused. This combative use of poetry takes the premise of the poetry slam to an extreme, asking us how well we could perform a poem if our lives depended on it, and it thereby serves as a kind of retroactive foundational myth for slam poetry. At

the same time, the content of Ray's poetic salvo demonstrates that in saving himself he is also saving others, by opening their eyes to their enslavement in the cycle of violence. Here poetry is represented as a source of both personal improvement and resistance to hegemonic forces. The unmistakable message of the film is that poetry has power: power to redeem, power to fight back, power to change society. This is an inspiring idea, but it is open to a simple critique, which is that the capitalist hierarchy that now structures our society specializes in creating the illusion of empowerment through what Theodor Adorno called a *pseudo-individualization*. What for the slam poet is an expression of individual identity may also, in other words, be the means of his or her interpellation into capitalist hegemony. James Scully, in *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice*, writes that there may be something inherently subversive in the practice of poetry. When I asked his opinion of poetry slams, however, after a reading he gave at the CUNY Graduate Center, he was skeptical, saying, "It's too easy to adopt an attitude, with nothing to back it up."

It is problematic, though, to reduce the socio-political significance of something as diverse and multifarious as spoken word to a simple question of resistant or complicit. A poetry slam is a spectacle, but one that is intended to counteract the distancing of experience via representation decried, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, by Guy Debord (for whom political action and poetic expression were deeply intertwined); it has more in common with a Situationist happening than a television program. Performing a poem on stage or hearing one performed is a more "immediate" experience than many kinds of art, music, or theatre. In some ways, spoken word is an extension of the kind of performance called for by Bertolt Brecht. His concept of alienation (*verfremdungseffekt*) is an essential

component in this theoretical matrix: because the performer addresses the audience directly rather than inhabiting a character, spoken word performance is a means of disrupting passive spectatorship. Furthermore, as a hybrid performative form, spoken word fulfills another principle advanced by Brecht, who wrote in "A Short Organum for the Theatre" that it is beneficial to incorporate the other arts into drama, not with the intent of producing an integrated whole, but to the extent that their interaction will lead to their mutual alienation. Spoken word can also be seen as an effort to re-appropriate the detritus of dominant culture towards more creative ends, in the way that Michel de Certeau describes in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The willingness and ability of spoken word to operate outside mainstream or institutional culture, and to use whatever limited resources are immediately available, puts spoken word performers in the category that de Certeau calls tacticians. I give these ideas a fuller explanation in my final chapter.

In part three, this project draws in particular on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, he outlines how aesthetic taste is motivated by the social and economic manoeuvring that surrounds culture—the struggle for cultural capital. In trying to reconcile the aesthetic and social particularities of spoken word with the tastes and customs of other poetry communities, one comes up against the same fundamental enigma that haunts all criticism: how do we define what is good and what is bad art? How does one account for the fact that art that seems simple, childish, or just plain awful to the uninitiated can seem sophisticated, daring or revelatory to others? You account for it socially, as the result of different criteria growing out of different subcultures. The distinction between language poetry and slam poetry, for

example, is primarily a social difference. Spoken word has been mythologized as a working-class form, but really it is fundamentally a middle-class activity. It may be more popular with those on the lower end of the scale in terms of economic capital, but in terms of cultural capital it is a middle-brow art. In this sense it is aspirational, as middle-class taste is usually aspirational: it combines the ethos of working-class cultural production with the aesthetic of the "cultural aristocracy," claiming an economically and culturally marginal position as its origin while claiming the traditions of high art as its inspiration.

It is difficult to write about spoken word without writing about community, and Bourdieu is extremely helpful in theorizing how community intersects with class; it is important, though, to avoid romanticizing the concept of community. Daniel Kane's *All Poets Welcome* is a superb illustration of how poetry communities come into being: a process involving everything from real estate trends to fashion to philosophy, everything from sexism, racism and homophobia to petty jealousy and mistrust, and everything from fervent dedication to inspired idiocy. It may also involve considerable political and moral compromise. Today, if artists and writers colonize a neighborhood as the poets of the 1960s colonized the Lower East Side, they are most likely playing the role not of revolutionary bohemians but of bourgeois outriders of gentrification. Of course, today poetry communities find themselves on the internet, editing online journals and writing blogs—which is perhaps more efficient, but which also entails new kinds of privilege.

I'm not in a position to decide if the prison yard scene from the film *Slam* is a credible representation of the function of performance poetry in real life. Poetry does

have a kind of power; however, I can't help feeling that, from a poet's point of view, there is something awkwardly embarrassing about the idea that poetry is valuable because of the good it can do for you or for society. As Charles Bernstein has written ("Against National Poetry Month As Such"), the perception of poetry as something healthy, educational or therapeutic, a kind of cultural panacea, is dangerous to the survival of poetry. Returning to Brecht, we might also say that it is dangerous to the survival of critical thought and social struggle, because it creates a fantasy that distracts the oppressed from the real business of reform or revolution. The notion that poetry can provide social justice is ultimately much less powerful than the idea that poetry is essentially useless.

> Is poetry necessary? I know that those who write most violently against it unconsciously desire to endow it with a comfortable perfection, and are working on this project right now; they call this hygienic future. They contemplate the annihilation (always imminent) of art. At this point they desire more artistic art.
>
> (Tristan Tzara, qtd. in Motherwell 87)

On a personal level I maintain a stolid skepticism about the utility of spoken word. I would rather not see it imbued with importance, with sacredness, with history or necessity. I prefer that it remain useless, optional, contingent—as J. L. Austin would put it, parasitic. At the same time, however, I am aware that many spoken word performers strongly feel the opposite: that spoken word has a life-changing power. Such a belief can be self-fulfilling. Spoken word is politically useful, in other words, to the extent that a feeling of political agency is useful.

Ultimately, I find that the most compelling theoretical framework for studying spoken word is the interdisciplinary approach known as cultural studies. As Maria Damon and Ira Livingston explain in the introduction to their aforementioned anthology, cultural studies has since its inception generally focused on popular or "mass" culture and the kinds of human activity that previously would not have been considered appropriate objects of study—posters, pulp fiction, haircuts, vehicles, slang, and so on—as a way of expanding the range of scholarly critique beyond "high culture" and beyond the aesthetic to include social and political concerns. The question of whether "mass" culture has any emancipatory or counter-hegemonic potential is a central distinction between the Frankfurt school (Adorno, Habermas, etc.), who saw value in poetry only to the extent that it was independent of mass culture, and the Birmingham school (Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, etc.), who were less pessimistic about mass culture. Today, of course, "mass culture" is an inaccurate, misleading term, because all kinds of culture have become at once both individualized and participatory while also becoming more thoroughly pervaded by the influence of capitalist power. In the process of broadening the scope of research in the humanities, cultural studies has developed its own peculiar blindspot, by not extending the same post-aesthetic approaches to traditional "high culture" such as poetry.

Cultural studies presents an essential model for the study of spoken word not because spoken word is "popular," but because cultural studies involves a holistic and relational approach to the evaluation of art. Rather than seeing the text or performance as a unitary object of scrutiny that exists independently of its historical moment or the

conditions of its creation, it takes context to be an essential part of the artwork. Moreover, cultural studies permits the discovery not only of new forms of culture, but also new forms of analysis. As Damon and Livingstone put it, "new methods of study have enabled new objects of inquiry to suggest themselves; these new objects in turn have forced a reconsideration of method" (6).

In studying spoken word, I have come to think of my work as not exactly literary and not exactly anthropological. As T. L. Cowan has suggested, an anthropological or sociological approach can serve to further marginalize (within literary studies) an already marginalized literary form, the style and content of which span the popular and the experimental/literary. Rather I aim for the in-between ground, which is the only ground it seems possible for spoken word to occupy. At the same time, I want to avoid reifying the distinction between literary and cultural studies; it seems to me that spoken word is the best demonstration that such a distinction is illusory. Spoken word cannot be categorized within this binary and requires attention as both literature and cultural phenomenon, but the same is true of any text: literary studies are always also cultural studies. A major aim of this project is to demonstrate an important insight that literary studies can learn from spoken word: just as race studies exposes the construct of an unraced dominant white culture, and queer studies has shown us how hegemonic heteronormativity marginalizes queer bodies by marking them as sexualized, the construct of "popular" or "folk" poetry can be interpreted as a means of protecting the cultural authority of canonical forms of poetry—the forms of the dominant culture. Rather than re-inscribing hierarchical classifications of literary forms, spoken word demands a post-aesthetic, post-evaluative

philosophy of literary studies. To once again quote Maria Damon and Ira Livingstone, "If we defer asking how good a poem is, we can begin to ascertain what it is good *for*, and how and for whom" (2).

PART II. AN EPISODIC NATURAL HISTORY OF SPOKEN WORD

CHAPTER SIX: TIMELESS / TIMELY

> The most significant, if not the best by older critical standards, literature in America today is to be found, not in books, or even in the established literary magazines, but in poetry readings, in mimeographed broadsides, in lyrics for rock groups, in protest songs — in direct audience relationships of the sort that prevailed at the very beginnings of literature. The art of reading and writing could vanish from memory in a night and it would not make a great difference to the poetry, or even much of the prose, of the youngest generation of poets and hearers of poetry. This is the new world of youth which so disturbs the oldies. Rightly so, it is a world they never made. In it they are strangers and afraid — totally unable, most of them, to comprehend what is happening.

In the 1957 essay "The Making of the Counterculture," quoted above, Kenneth Rexroth adamantly rejects the conservative notion, which he thought pervaded the '50s, that the age of experimentation in literature and culture was over. Instead, he suggests, the political and aesthetic revolutions that were happening, and would happen, made Modernism look modest by comparison. The literature that really mattered was coming to light not in the academy or in bookstores but in *readings*; furthermore, it was being produced in and dominated by youth culture. It was, in short, primarily *oral* and *social* as opposed to written and individual. When he said that the vital poetry of counter-cultural

readings "has no life beyond the immediate occasion," he could have been discussing spoken word. Rexroth, who has been referred to as the father of the Beat Generation (although he rejected the label), said that the Beats (he applied the label only to Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso) were significant not so much as literature but as social history. Taking up the spirit of Rexroth's essay, this chapter looks at the development of spoken word—which in the late 20th and early 21st century has become one of the most popular forms of literature in English, especially among young people—as an oral form and as a social phenomenon.

If Kenneth Rexroth is considered the father of the Beats, and if the Beats can be considered the direct antecedents of spoken word, then it would perhaps make sense to designate Rexroth the grandfather of spoken word. The problem, of course, with identifying anyone as the parent, grandparent, originator, forerunner, or ancestor of spoken word is that the form has roots that spread in many directions, and, in effect, many histories. The family tree stretches back far enough that there is not just one grandparent but hundreds, many of whom may bear only a very faint family resemblance to their distant descendents. This means that any roster of influences on spoken word will include many artists who are not normally considered to be in the same sphere at all. It becomes even more complicated and demanding if one considers poetry readings not just as a literary activity but as a subculture; it then seems appropriate to investigate parallel developments such as punk and hip hop as well as political activities such as those of the Yippies or the Guerilla Girls or Poets Against the War. The difficulty in defining spoken word as a genre forces one to accept criteria that could point to behavior in countless

categories within society, not just among writers or artists but, for example, among stand-up comedians, political activists, religious figures, and university lecturers. Therefore there can be no simple linear history of spoken word that doesn't focus only on one specific aspect (there have been several histories of the poetry slam, for example) or present a limited or reductive understanding of the form.

Spoken word as a contemporary phenomenon is often closely associated with the poetry slam, and with the style of performance that the poetry slam fosters; one of the goals of this project is to broaden that notion by pointing out the connections between spoken word and other artistic movements of the 20th century. Most spoken word performers recognize a tradition of poetry performance that can trace its recent history through the Harlem Renaissance poets, the Beat poets, and the Black Arts Movement, for example, and they also often invoke a longer tradition, one that includes minstrels, storytellers, and griots from various cultures and eras, including the Homeric bards. However, many other artistic phenomena have converged on, or side-swiped, this poetic tradition to produce a hybrid genre. It is presaged in Futurist, Dadaist, and Surrealist performances, and in the principles of epic theatre and the theatre of cruelty. It was inspired indirectly by Fluxus happenings and performance art more generally. It owes a significant debt to sound poets from Kurt Schwitters to the Four Horsemen. It developed in tandem with dub poetry, the invention of rap, and hip hop culture; poet-performers such as The Last Poets were an important source for the aesthetic of spoken word, and the success of hip hop was a pre-condition for its popularity. The poetry slam would not have come into being without the influence of the punk aesthetic of the late '70s and

early ‘80s. Monologists, storytellers and stand-up comedians are other important precursors, as are performative activists and street theatre troupes. And perhaps most importantly but least obviously, spoken word is a manifestation of a long tradition of popular public poetry that includes everything from 19th-century elocution recitals to a reading of birthday card verse at a party. I do not mean to suggest that all of these things should now retrospectively be considered spoken word, only that spoken word has a richer background than the populist connotations of the phrase suggest. Poetry performance is, of course, as old as poetry itself. I use “performance poetry,” a term modeled on “performance art,” to refer to contemporary practices of performing poetry written expressly for (or during) performance, dating back to the Futurist and Dadaist poets. On the other hand, while it could be considered a development within performance poetry, spoken word as I define it has existed only since the mid-’80s, and it is an American innovation that rapidly spread around the world.

Since the ‘80s, spoken word has actually surfaced into public consciousness and then resurfaced over and over again, often with an amnesiac fanfare; on each occasion there have also been critics of the hype, someone to state the obvious but apparently requisite point that “this is nothing new, people have been performing poetry since Homer.” This line of argument, strangely enough, is used both by poetry conservatives, who seem to suggest that these kids have no right to be excited about what they are doing, since it has been done before, and by proponents of spoken word, as a form of validation through ancient lineage. Of course poetry is oral, and always has been; in fact, insisting on this either to attack or defend spoken word seems inherently conservative in

its own way, the product of a defunct New Critical poetry culture that was obsessed with print. Singing songs, declaiming opinions, telling stories: performing words, in short, is so fundamental an activity for users of language that it really needs no explanation. Trying to justify, explain, or extol one particular manifestation of that activity, such as spoken word, by pointing to other manifestations is beside the point. Yes, there is a connection between Homer and performance poets, but that connection is over such a long distance and so general that it is usually emphasized only by those who feel that performance poetry is in need of legitimization. Therefore, my attempt at genealogy will veer away from the tendency of some commentators to mythologize spoken word as the rebirth of an ancient ritual form. It will not suggest that spoken word fulfills a primal human desire to tell the stories that represent their identities and to hear them told. It will not try to locate the origins of spoken word in religious shamans, preachers, gurus, oracles, orators, cantors, prophets, storytellers, bards, minstrels, jongleurs, troubadours, *trouvères*, scops, skalds, griots, *guslars*, *minnesingers*, balladeers, or singers of tales. Tracing the history of spoken word in any meaningfully specific way only becomes possible if we look at the activities of particular people in terms of how they relate to spoken word today. In this chapter, rather than try to present a single coherent narrative of its pre-history and development, I will discuss a number of flashpoints that serve to reflect the contributions of various writers and artists to the gene pool of spoken word.

Before proceeding, there are two caveats to be noted. In this project I take it as self-evident, as spoken word performers mostly do, that poetry performance has surged in popularity in the last two decades or so relative to poetry in print, but such a claim is hard

to demonstrate conclusively and still somewhat controversial. Furthermore, some might see an attempt to historicize spoken word as proof to the contrary: if interest in the oral aspect of poetry has been present throughout history, to a greater or lesser degree, and if all of these 20th-century artists can be said to have practiced performance poetry in some sense or another, then talking about a resurgence or rebirth in the last two decades might be overstating the case, and the whole concept of a new form called spoken word might be seen as a rather vain flight of fancy. The genealogy outlined below is meant, in part, to show that spoken word is a demonstrable historical phenomenon, a hybrid of diverse artistic forms and social impulses combined to create something new.

Second, it is difficult, in recreating this history, not to be lured into a narrative that simply mythologizes the most visible writers and artists, those who are identified, or identify themselves, as important and have the media visibility to maintain that status. In such an approach, the "biggest" names in spoken word become those who have been most involved in mass media (TV and recording) projects, such as Bob Holman, Maggie Estep, Henry Rollins, and so on, mostly New Yorkers. This is to some degree a self-perpetuating pantheon, since people who want to write about spoken word, whether journalists or academics, need to write about someone—they need a corpus—and so they seize on a few high-profile figures. Spoken word as it really functions, though, is less about individual careers than it is about local communities and the ways people make use of poetry in their daily lives.

CHAPTER SEVEN: NOVEMBER 11TH, 1983

This non-linear history begins, then, in the gymnasium of Kensington Regional High School in Prince Edward Island, Canada, on November 11th, 1983. The event that occurred at this more-or-less random point in time is significant to the history of spoken word only in that it is a typical example of a pervasive activity. Furthermore, there is no documentation of this event that I know of, except in my own memory, but I remember it quite well; it was not the first time I had ever performed in front of a public audience—I had been in a children's choir and various plays—but it may have been the first time I had publicly read my own poetry. I was in the eighth grade, and the text was a poem I had written while I was still in elementary school, and for which I had won a prize sponsored by the local Royal Canadian Legion, a veterans' organization. The theme was remembrance of the sacrifice of soldiers who had died in the World Wars, which were and are generally seen as defining moments in Canadian history, and if I am not mistaken, the title of my poem, which may have been provided by the terms of the contest, was "Why I Wear a Poppy." I had been asked to read this poem in front of the high school's annual Remembrance Day (Veteran's Day in the US) assembly. It is difficult to imagine a more effective way of guaranteeing that I would never be cool in the eyes of my peers. I agreed to do it for reasons that I can comprehend now, but only theoretically, the way I can comprehend the behavior of people on TV game shows without ever imagining myself engaging in such behavior. The reading itself was unremarkable I'm sure, but the salient moment for me—no doubt the reason it has stuck

in my memory—was when my name was called and I began to mount the stairs at the side of the stage. Nervousness and adolescent lankiness combined to make me stumble on the first step, and I was almost completely sprawled on the stairs before I was able to catch myself on the banister. The auditorium burst into applause.

Why was I asked to read my poem at the Remembrance Day event, in front of the student body? Why was the contest created that elicited the poem? Why did I write it? I offer my story as a clear example of how poetry is used, has always been used, to facilitate and accentuate certain social rituals, and in this case how it is used as well to uphold and make routine certain ideologies. Poetry performance—and public poetic oratory more generally—always serves a social function, but it serves a social function most clearly when it has been liberated from the expectation of artistic originality. There were certainly aesthetic standards for my Remembrance Day poem (an obscenity-laced limerick perhaps would have been inappropriate), but the chief purpose of the performance was not to provide aesthetic novelty; rather, the poem was a part of a collective performance of an (ostensibly) collective sentiment: remembrance. The same is true when a person receiving a birthday gift reads the card aloud, in a performance of gratitude, or when the guests at the party sing Happy Birthday, in a performance of camaraderie.

In recent poetry scholarship there has been a turn towards studying the social function of poetry, for example in Joan Shelley Rubin's *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* (2007). Public poetry can be used on a large scale or on very intimate scale, and in ways that are more or less conscious of the poetry's status as art. During the

19th century, as the middle class grew in Western countries, elocution became a standard part of the curriculum in public education, which led to poetry recitals, especially for young people, becoming commonplace as entertainment and social event. Other uses are very formulaic; for example, many popular uses of poetic oratory have specific religious purposes, from prayers and homiletics in Christian tradition to ritual recitations such as the *haggadah* in Judaism or *tajwid* (recitation of the Quran) in Islam. Then there is poetry performance by writers, which can serve as an element in social ritual (such as the poetry reading by Elizabeth Alexander at the 2009 presidential inauguration), but which can also create its own rituals. As Joan Shelley Rubin writes:

> Poetry (in the United States and elsewhere) created its own forms of sociability—ways of talking and commingling—that added to Americans' repertoire of collective behavior. Examples of these include the bohemian or theatrical poetry reading, the speaking choir, and the poetry club. (9)

The best man proposes a toast to the bride. Two kids say a rhyme to determine who goes first in their game. A football coach starts the game by asking the quarterback to say a prayer. These things are not spoken word, but they are a part of the same poetic social matrix as spoken word, the boundaries of which dissolve more easily into the realm of the everyday than those of poetry traditionally defined. If this survey of forms influencing spoken word were to be proportionately representative, the largest part of it would have to be devoted to the kind of poetry performance that usually does not look for the validation of certification as art: there may be a continuum of artistic intention in these multitudinous manifestations of poetic oratory, but in terms of sheer ubiquity the vast

majority are towards the non-artistic end of the spectrum. Spoken word is an in-between form: the emphasis is partly on social function, partly on aesthetics. However, because my main purpose in this chapter is to expand the conventional history of spoken word as an *art form*, the rest of part two will focus, for the most part, on artists.

CHAPTER EIGHT: FEBRUARY 5TH, 1916

Among many possible beginnings, this one is, in some ways, only an example of a familiar recurring event: young poets and artists of different backgrounds drift together in a city, drawn by a university in many cases, or by the promise of a relatively easy lifestyle and freedom of expression. Many of them are fed up with the predominant political mood of the time, and tired of what they see as a stagnant, bourgeois culture. Guided by a strong impulse, they create events that draw people together, that mix genres and audiences, and where the participants can express strong political views, even if those views are angry, artless, or incoherent. Artists of many types are involved, but poets are at the center, and there is an emphasis on performance, because their first priority is communal experience. If their performances are wacky and ephemeral, that also seems appropriate, given the instability of the context and the immediacy of what they have to say. This could be a description of the genesis of many spoken word scenes, but the template was really established nearly a century ago, during the First World War, in the university town of Zurich in neutral Switzerland.

On February 5th, 1916, the first Cabaret Voltaire took place in Zurich, thanks primarily to Hugo Ball, a 29-year-old German poet and actor with anarchist leanings, and his partner Emmy Hennings, another German poet and singer. This was the beginning of a movement that would soon be given the name "Dada." Those early cabarets, much more than anything that had come before, resembled performance poetry events as we know them today. For one thing, they were popular events: the audience consisted of

what might be called ordinary people—mostly university students and curious middle-class youths—and not just literary connoisseurs. This audience, however, was not always entirely sympathetic, and neither were the Dadaists particularly interested in catering to their tastes: Richard Huelsenbeck, a German medical student and poet who was a frequent participant, wrote that "we did not neglect from time to time to tell the fat and utterly uncomprehending Zurich philistines that we regarded them as pigs…" (Motherwell 23). People sat at tables and drank beer and smoked and yelled; the atmosphere was generally participatory and irreverent. But to say that there was a lack of mutual sympathy between performers and audience is not to suggest that they were not well-suited to one another, and in fact one of the most salient characteristics of the Dadaists is that they thrived on the ambivalent reception they received. In the preface to his definitive collection of Dadaist writings, Robert Motherwell opines, "One might say that the public history of modern art is the story of conventional people not knowing what they are dealing with" (xxiv). This confusion on the part of the general audience, I would suggest, is essential not just to the history but to the ontology of avant-garde art. Later, when Tristan Tzara organized a Dada event in Paris for the first time, literary stars André Breton and Jean Cocteau (who read the work of Max Jacob) were well-received by an audience eager to absorb the latest literary trend. Tzara, however, who had announced that he would read a manifesto, instead read a newspaper article while Paul Éluard played bells, and the audience became indignant and unfriendly—which of course pleased Tzara. In the audience's quick shift from approbation to vocal opprobrium one can almost sense the beginnings of a poetry slam.

As for the content of the performances, what stands out is that the main performers, including Ball, Huelsenbeck, the French-German Hans Arp, and two Romanians, Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco, were interested in the poetry of pure sound, in ritual as art, and in the application of art to politics, none of which were widely-accepted ideas at the time. Hugo Ball developed his own version of what he called "poetry without words" or sound poems (*lautgedichte*), and claimed to have invented the form, although the Russian and Italian futurists had already pioneered their own self-conscious attempts to isolate the phonic elements of poetry from the semantic, and according to Huelsenbeck the Dadaists borrowed both the concept and the term "bruitism" or noise music from futurist F.T. Marinetti (Huelsenbeck, 25). For Ball, his poetry without words made a statement about the failures of modern language: "With these sound poems we should renounce the language devastated and made impossible by journalism," he announced at one cabaret (Motherwell xxvi). Led by Tristan Tzara, they also experimented with reciting texts simultaneously, creating choral, aleatory sound performances and foreshadowing another poetic practice that would come into its own later in the century. Despite the renunciation of linguistic sense implied by these methods, Ball and Tzara were conscious that sense could be conveyed in other ways. "The thought is made in the mouth," Tzara wrote in his "manifesto on feeble love and bitter love" (87). The very name of their movement, Dada, which was supposedly picked at random from a French-German dictionary, indicates that the significance of their work lay not in the meaning of the words they performed, but in the performance itself.

In addition to their interest in abstract utterance, Huelsenbeck, who was a drummer, particularly insisted on rhythm, and the cabarets were the scene of invented rituals and what Ball referred to as "negro chants." Huelsenbeck himself, when not drumming, sometimes danced pseudo-African dances in blackface, and he reports that "Tzara ground out Negro verses which he palmed off as accidentally discovered remains of a Bantu or Winnetu culture" (Huelsenbeck, 33). This primitivist bent would not have been unusual in Europe at the time, and it extended to a fetishization of other cultures and times: the use of masks and costumes reminiscent of oriental theatre and the reading of medieval prose were two other popular ritualistic activities among Dadaists. While these white Europeans had only a primitive understanding of the African art and performance that they were emulating, they clearly saw in its rhythms something that was fundamental to their own artistic project. It's interesting to compare their veneration/ appropriation of African forms to the importance of blues, jazz, and hip hop—the art and performance of the African diaspora—in the performance styles of slam poets today, for example, who may be more informed about the history of those forms, if not always cognizant of their pervasive influence.

It has often been implied that credit for the creation of Dada should really go to World War I, with its absurdly large-scale carnage caused by the overlap of 19th-century strategies of warfare and 20th-century weaponry. Hugo Ball, who had been a volunteer in the German army at the beginning of the war, eventually left Germany as a conscientious objector, convinced that the war was premised on the abominable mistake of confusing men with machines. In this context, for the young leftist poets and artists seeking asylum

in Zurich, political opinion must have taken on a quality of urgency, but also of simplicity and clarity, to such a degree that straightforward anti-war statements must have seemed absurdly, obscenely ineffectual themselves—a situation that sometimes seems to have a parallel in the last two decades of American global hegemony and militarism which form the backdrop for the development of contemporary spoken word. Robert Motherwell calls Dada "the first systematic attempt to use the means of *l'art moderne* in relation to political issues" (xviii); as it grew, its political meaning became more contested, and eventually some Dadaists, especially in Germany, attempted to mobilize it for the communist cause, which was one of the characteristics it bequeathed to surrealism. In a broader sense, though, Dada was to some extent the foundational moment for a tradition of political performance poetry in which spoken word often takes part.

Although Dada is often thought of as a artistic movement, its founders were more poets than painters; Dada and surrealism were both practiced more as a kind of writing than anything else—although for Dada, the writing was usually intended for performance. Another similarity of spoken word to Dada, nevertheless, is that both straddle genres: Dada poets were also performers, and in many cases painters and musicians as well. What spoken word practitioners do is perhaps more easily definable, but the commonly applied terms such as poet or performer are not entirely adequate labels for them. Dada was, on the other hand, an avant-garde movement in a way that spoken word today could not be said to be: it was concerned, for example, with defining and controlling its own membership, and it was intensely anti-bourgeois, so it could be argued that in some ways spoken word is antithetical to what Dada stood for.

Aesthetically, Dada was far from the sensibility of spoken word, but from its origins in Zurich in 1915 and 1916, it is possible to trace direct lines through many of the 20th-century artistic developments that ultimately led to spoken word, including sound poetry, performance art, aleatory writing, and political poetry.

Dada's precursor Futurism bore some resemblances to spoken word, for example in its emphasis on iconoclasm. The "courage, audacity and revolt" of F.T. Marinetti's 1909 *Futurist Manifesto* rejects traditional poetry more stridently than spoken word rejects traditional poetry contexts, but it calls for a kind of active, energetic, even violent poetry that is symbolically represented in the poetry slam a century later, although the manifesto's glorification of war and contempt for women stand in grotesque opposition to the liberal ethics of spoken word scenes. Futurism's famous veneration of speed is echoed in the rapid-fire delivery and three-minute limits of the slam. Furthermore, in the futurists' theatrical experiments there was a deliberate attempt to involve the audience in the performance, for example by literally gluing people to their seats or by sprinkling sneezing powder throughout the theatre; traditional theatre was renounced in favor of supposedly tradition-less forms such as vaudeville (Clough). Russian futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky should also be regarded as an important early antecedent for three reasons: he used vernacular, working-class language in his writing and was contemptuous of romanticized or idealized versions of poetry; his work combined poetry and theatre and he was a performer himself; and he also refused to separate art and political activism, despite the scorn it earned him from some of his peers.

Alfred Jarry's infamous play *Ubu Roi*, first performed in 1896, heralded an expanded understanding of theatre that would inspire the Surrealists and set the stage for further experiments in performance. Surrealism itself, while less oriented towards performance, is also of great importance for the influence it had on later movements and writers, including many of the Beat poets, and on theatre, as can be seen in the theatre of the absurd and Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Twentieth-century experiments in theatre often moved it in directions that would become fundamental to spoken word, de-emphasizing dramatic naturalism and creating performances that resisted escapist spectacle, reminding the audience of their presence in the theatre and their participation in the theatrical event. In this respect I would cite Bertolt Brecht as one of the most significant figures in the history of spoken word. Epic theatre was not only a means of re-introducing spectators to the conditions of their own lives and to their own political agency, it also represented an audacious re-purposing of popular culture for political ends. Brecht also shifted the roles of writer and director in theatre by working collaboratively, making the performers writers and treating performance as a collective creative act. In the '60s and '70s, Polish director Jerzy Grotowski would, through his "poor theatre," introduce significant attempts to dissolve the audience-spectator barrier, foregoing the use of props or staging in some cases, and experimenting with "paratheatrical" events that resembled communal rituals. Many of these ideas continue to influence theatre today (in The Living Theatre, for example, or the work of Richard Foreman), and it is through this tradition that spoken word is closely connected to theatre.

One innovative artist-performer who doesn't fit as neatly into this narrative is Kurt Schwitters, who was never fully accepted into the German Dada clique, and wanted to keep his independence from it, and so was compelled to create a sort of movement of his own—*Merz*. Although he is known for his interventions in visual arts, literature, and architecture, in terms of performance poetry his most significant contribution is perhaps his sound poem *Ursonate*, which he performed, developed and expanded over the course of a decade and which consists of about 35 minutes of invented words or non-words. Schwitters was not the first to experiment with sound poetry; various Futurists and Dadaists (notably Raoul Hausmann) deserve recognition as pioneering sound poets, although, like performance poetry more generally, it is almost too natural an activity to have an historical origin. For Schwitters, the only possible reaction to the stale use of language in German poetry between the wars was "a return to the elements of poetry, to noise and articulated sound, which are fundamental to all languages" (Motherwell xxviii).

As explained in Steve McCaffrey's "Sound Poetry: A Survey," the availability of the tape recorder in the 1950s brought about a revolution in sound poetry. Early sound poetry had actually been phonetic poetry—that is, even though the semantic elements of language had been stripped away, the constituent particles were still fragments of words. Starting with the audiopoems of the French poet Henri Chopin, sound poets began to treat the human voice and its technological extensions as raw materials abstracted from language. In the U.K., Bob Cobbing and others removed poetry even further from graphic language by treating natural objects—stones, leaves, cabbages—as texts for their performances. In North America, sound poetry developed later but has had a significant

impact on performance poetry through the work of American poets such as Jackson Mac Low, Jerome Rothenberg, John Giorno, and Michael McClure, and in Canada through the Montreal Automatiste Claude Gavreau, bill bissett, and the 1970s "Toronto school" of performance poetry, including The Four Horsemen (bpNichol, Steve McCaffrey, Paul Dutton, and Rafael Barreto-Rivera), and Owen Sound (Stephen Ross Smith, Richard Truhlar, Michael Dean, David Penhale).

Mac Low in particular, who effectively blurred the distinctions between poet, artist, and performer, affected the evolution of performance poetry by introducing various aleatory techniques in order to empty the influence of the ego from the compositional process. He did this in a way that no one had done before, although the Dada poets had played around with similar ideas, and Mac Low was strongly influenced by John Cage, with whom he studied for a time. His writings often came in two forms: concrete word collage or chaotic sound performance, and it was not necessarily clear if the collage was a score for the performance or if the performance was an interpretation of the collage: neither the oral nor the visual was privileged. Another friend of Mac Low should be mentioned here, because it's hard to imagine where else to put him exactly: David Antin. Best known for originating talk poetry, a genre that few others have attempted, let alone mastered, Antin performs stories that are not planned, but neither are they improvised; in contrast to Mac Low's or Cage's non-intentional writing they are in a sense hyper-intentional, in that Antin can evidently be swayed in his intentions during the actual performance. What he does can perhaps be described as an attempt to dramatize the actual process through which writing becomes imbued with meaning. Watching him

speak, and knowing that he is speaking extemporaneously, one imagines that something is going on in his head that is very similar to what is going on in your head: the process of words igniting ideas that weren't there before. It demonstrates how similar the process of writing is to reading, and speaking to listening, and that performance can foster a state of mind that is remarkably conducive to composition.

Many of the movements I have described so far influenced or led directly to a burst of innovative practices in the 1960s in the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, and Allan Kaprow, who took an even more radical approach to performance. To me, performance art is the single most important precursor to the development of spoken word, and in fact much work by spoken word artists has more in common with that tradition than with poetry. The concepts of Event and Happening that arose out of the Fluxus movement created a frame that would eventually allow for the performance of poetry in ways that de-emphasized the text and highlighted the aesthetic value of context. Allan Kaprow coined the term "Happening" in the context of an experimental musical composition class directed by John Cage, in 1958 at the New School for Social Research in New York (Higgins, 2); the multimedia, immersive form of theatre it denoted was intended to produce a "non-hierarchical density of experience"—this became a central concept within Fluxus, which, if applied to poetry readings, would result in something like spoken word. While the Fluxus movement in most cases produced artwork that was minimalist, surrealist, and avant-garde, some later artists combined influences from the art world with music, poetry, and popular culture to create original and unpredictable works that could be

considered the earliest exemplars of spoken word. John Giorno, for example, who among other things is known as the actor/subject in Warhol's film "Sleep," was a pioneer of poetry recordings, creating the first "Dial-a-Poem" experiment in 1967, featuring writers such as William Burroughs, John Ashbery, and Patti Smith. He also went on tour with Burroughs in the 1970s, reading poetry in rock clubs in a style that foreshadowed slam poetry. His work makes use of various cultural tactics—in Michel de Certeau's sense of the word—depending on context, and this improvisational energy is vital to the spirit of spoken word. Laurie Anderson, who became more famous for her music, and Spalding Gray, primarily known as a monologist, are other performance artists I would include under the rubric of spoken word.

Karen Finley is another interesting example. Her work is related to spoken word not only because she writes and uses spoken text in her performances, but also because there is a close identification between Finley the artist and Finley the performer; this conflation of the conceptual and performative roles separates performance art from traditional theatre. She doesn't always speak autobiographically, and she certainly plays characters, but at a Karen Finley performance it is still Karen Finley on the stage. At the same time, her career demonstrates the blurriness of the line between serious performance art and entertainment. In her book *A Different Kind of Intimacy* she explains that early in her career she took what she did very seriously and had not much of a sense of humor about it—especially when it came to defending her work against censorship. Later on, she still takes it seriously, but she begins to see that it was always a form of entertainment as well—that is, she realizes that her "fuck you" to the audience was also a

kind of seduction. She goes from insisting that if she takes off her clothes and pours chocolate all over herself, that shouldn't be construed as sexual, to making erotic performance central to her work. One of her pieces parodies her entire saga of going to the Supreme Court to challenge the NEA's revocation of her grant under pressure from conservative politicians like Jesse Helms. She portrays the conflict as a long abusive relationship based on Helms' sexual harassment of her, coming to grips in the process with her own complicity in the abuse. I think an awareness of the reciprocal attraction of performer and audience, and of the implications of that for the art as entertainment, is an important insight to be gained from performance artists, something that many poets resist but that spoken word performers often embrace.

The artists and movements I have described in this section belong more to the "performance" side of performance poetry, which is I think the more overlooked aspect of its history. In the next section, I re-begin with what some would see as the obvious place to begin: the poetry side

CHAPTER NINE: OCTOBER 7TH, 1955

> In the fall of 1955 a group of six unknown poets in San Francisco, in a moment of drunken enthusiasm, decided to defy the system of academic poetry, official reviews, New York publishing machinery, national sobriety and generally accepted standards to good taste, by giving a free reading of their poetry in a run down second rate experimental art gallery in the Negro section of San Francisco. (239)

This reading took place on October 7th at the Six Gallery at 3119 Fillmore Street founded by Wally Hedrick, Jack Spicer, and others, and it would of course become an event of great significance in the history of American literature, not least because it was the first time that Allen Ginsberg publicly read his poem *Howl*. The story of how it came about it is somewhat obscured by the conflicting accounts of many of the participants—including the passage above, from "The Literary Revolution in America" by Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg—but it seems it was requested by Hedrick and championed by Kenneth Rexroth, who was a common mentor to the young poet participants, some of whom had never read in public before. Rexroth was the MC, and the readers were Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, and Gary Snyder, as well as Ginsberg. The large and vocal audience consisted of about 150 people, creators and supporters of what would become the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, including Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Neal Cassady, and Jack Kerouac, who reportedly sat on the edge of the stage facing the audience, drinking wine from a jug and punctuating Ginsberg's lines with "Go! Go!" The

moment was emblematic of Beat poetry and jazz poetry and a new sense of the poetry reading as happening that arose gradually through the twentieth century. Since so many spoken word artists consider themselves poets or performance poets—the slam movement for example is almost self-righteous about belonging to the poetic tradition—it makes sense to investigate the development of spoken word through the oral or performed aspects of poetic tradition, bearing in mind that poetry performance is not limited to performance poets. The evolution of poetry performance in the last century happened not in revolutionary leaps and bounds but in the idiosyncratic gestures of many poets at many obscure moments. In this too-brief chapter I will highlight some of the less-celebrated figures who in various ways contributed to what became spoken word.

Many twentieth century poets known for their work on the page were great enthusiasts of performance as well, and a more comprehensive study of poetry performance might examine the work of Basil Bunting, Edna St.Vincent Millay, Louis Zukofsky, Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, or Cid Corman, for example, in terms of their emphasis on sound. The Black Mountain poets must also be mentioned in this context, and in later chapters I will touch on the influence of Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" (which only goes a small way toward explaining the massive influence of Olson himself, but is of particular interest to spoken word). Olson also had strong feelings about the importance of place, and the primacy of the local, feelings shared by Jack Spicer, a poet who is less colossal in reputation but an equally good avatar of the spirit of spoken word. Spicer believed that poetry was an oral form and a local form, involving communication between people—which is why, for example, he dedicates all his poems in *After Lorca* to

someone, to ensure that they have a community/audience of at least one. His *After Lorca* letters are poems rather than serious attempts to theorize his practice, if serious means unambiguous—but Spicer seemed unwilling to distinguish between the poetic and the theoretical. In his lectures, his apparently earnest—albeit apparently intoxicated—attempts to explain his practice continually call on esoteric forces—whether ghosts or Martians, some external force—as the inspirational factor in poetry-writing, reminiscent of what Creeley called poetry by dictation (*The House* 2). This could be interpreted as a sort of mythologization, an attempt to turn writing into a transcendental, inexplicable religious experience. No doubt writing does have that character for many people, but for me the danger is the reification of the exalted aura of the poet. Spicer's philosophy, however, could also be interpreted as undermining the poet-as-spiritual-hero narrative, as a determined attempt to evacuate intentionality from the writing process. This is not so different from the thoroughly post-modern and (I think) progressive aleatory practices of John Cage or Jackson Mac Low, or of the Oulipo writers. It may just be Spicer's way of saying that language is never entirely in our conscious control.

Another poet to mention because of her reputation for performance is Anne Sexton. Her poetry was not very formally experimental, although she pushed the boundaries of what was considered appropriate subject matter for poetry by writing about the real traumas of her life—depression, suicide, abortion. She opened up the possibility for women to write candidly about their lives—something that is vital to the style of much spoken word today. She was also well known for her readings, which were traditional poetry readings for the most part, but which showcased her apparently

impressive stage presence. It is always mentioned, in descriptions of Anne Sexton, that for a time she worked as a model. She was tall, slim, and striking, and had a certain gravitas in reading her work. Mentioning this could be interpreted as either a sexist objectification or an interest in the role of the aura of the performer. In any case, Sexton liked performing and for a time she fronted a jazz-poetry ensemble. Also, for a long period she would workshop her poems with her friend and fellow poet Maxine Kumin over the telephone (she had a second line installed in her house so that they could stay on as long as they wanted). This must have had an effect on the sound of the poems and the construction of her line breaks, as the work evolved in a purely oral medium. I like the idea of thinking of Sexton as a forerunner of spoken word, even if it was in a sense inadvertent.

In the early twentieth century, perhaps no poet did more to influence the popular conception of poetry as a oral art form than William Butler Yeats, who began his career reciting his poems in a London tavern with a group of young poets who called themselves the Rhymers' Club (Hone 34). His early work was heavily based in Irish folklore, and in some ways his poetics recalled the valorization of folk forms by Wordsworth and Coleridge a century earlier. Yeats eventually performed his work in a strikingly rhythmic, solemn, incantatory style, which became notorious perhaps partly because his career happened to correspond with the evolution of audio recording technology—although there had been earlier recordings by poets, including Alfred Lord Tennyson and possibly Walt Whitman. On one recording from 1935, four years before his death, Yeats prefaces his reading of "Lake Isle of Innisfree" with this disclaimer: "I'm going to read my poem

with great emphasis upon the rhythm, and that may seem strange if you are not used to it […] It gave me a devil of a lot of trouble to get into verse the poems that I am going to read, and that is why I will *not* read them as if they were prose."

Yeats' belief in the importance of poetry recitation was reflected in the American poet Vachel Lindsay, especially after the two met at a dinner party given by Harriet Monroe in Chicago in 1914. After a recitation by Lindsay, Yeats suggested that he embodied an American continuation of ancient Greek lyric performance, along with vaudeville acts, which had a similar half-sung, half-spoken delivery (Massa, 244). Lindsay apparently agreed. His interest in musical forms continued to deepen, in particular the forms of African American culture. He famously claimed to have "discovered" Langston Hughes when Hughes was working in the kitchen of a banquet hall where Lindsay was performing and gave Lindsay three of his poems, which were about to appear in Hughes' first book. Evaluations of Lindsay's attitude towards African Americans and jazz are mixed—his self-declared intentions were anti-racist, yet it is easy to see his work as an example of the deep-rooted racism of his day. His most famous poem, "The Congo," uses racist stereotypes to glorify African music and culture—somewhat like other primitivist movements in Modernism—but it's interesting in its use of abstract sound that prefigures sound poetry. Lindsay is sometimes cited as one of the first jazz poets, and he considered himself a sort of modern troubadour, selling his poetry on the streets and insisting on the oral and folk aspects of poetry.

Jazz poetry has been defined either as poetry that alludes to or describes jazz music, or as poetry that enacts jazz in some way (Feinstein 2). The latter definition is

more interesting to me, in that it interprets "jazz" not simply as a genre of music but as a method, a style, a tactic—which can be applied, for example, to poetry as much as to music. For my purposes, the jazz poets I'm most interested in are poets who emulated the improvisational energy of jazz in their performances. The Harlem Renaissance should be thought of as a significant moment in the history of the development of spoken word not only because of jazz poetry, of which Hughes is often considered the founding figure, but also because of how it redefined artistic community.

In 1957, the short-lived poetry-performed-with-live-jazz moment began, with various poets reading to live accompaniment (though both Rexroth and Hughes claimed to have done performances with jazz in the '20s (Feinstein 83)). Kenneth Patchen recorded and released *Kenneth Patchen Reads With Jazz in Canada* in 1959: a seminal jazz poetry performance recording, something Patchen had been doing live for a couple of years already, predating performance efforts by the other Beat poets. Kenneth Patchen's popular appeal hasn't had the longevity of Kerouac's or Ginsberg's or Ferlinghetti's. He was an influential and well-known poet in his lifetime, but he had a Blakean (Patchen sometimes illustrated his own books), out-of-time, world-of-his-own quality that ensured that he never had much of a reputation in academic circles. His career is reminiscent of the status of spoken word today, actually: often political, often schlocky, not taken seriously by some, inspiring to others. Perhaps more immediate in their impact were the famous Rexroth / Ferlinghetti performances in The Cellar in San Francisco, which were followed by a record of the performances. "Only about a hundred could fit into the room, but on the very first night, some five hundred more lined up

outside to get in and a fire marshal had to be called to clear the hallway" (Silesky, qtd in Feinstein 67).

Bob Kaufman, one of the few African American Beat poets, has unfortunately remained a relatively minor figure in the popular history of the Beats, perhaps because his poems were more surrealist, and more spontaneous, than those of some of the major figures, and perhaps because he was widely regarded as somewhat unstable. He was a drug addict, had experienced homelessness, and had been subjected to shock therapy against his will. But Kaufman is interesting not because of the supposed quality of his poetry or his psychological history, but because of the role of the poet in creating the social phenomenon. A pure jazz-poet, Kaufman insisted that poetry was primarily oral and would recite his poems from memory on the streets—and was several times arrested for it, along with other non-conformist behaviour. As David Henderson explains in his excellent introduction to Kaufman's *Cranial Guitar*, it became difficult for Kaufman to be recognized as an important poet, except by those who knew him. As for mainstream society: not only was he a poet, and not only did he act a little crazy, but he was also black, which for some may have been going too far. When Kennedy was assassinated he took a vow of silence that he kept for a decade until the Vietnam War was ended—and then his first words were a poem declaimed in a coffeehouse (Henderson).

The Last Poets say in one of their songs, "Poetry is black." The history of spoken word, too, passes through the work of Black Arts Movement writers such as Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Jayne Cortez, and Ntozake Shange, as well as forerunners of hip

hop such as The Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, The Watts Prophets.[1] From an entirely different corner of the African diaspora, dub poetry, which evolved out of Jamaican speaking patterns and was elevated to an art form by poet-performers such as Linton Kwesi Johnson in the U.K. and later Lillian Allen and Dbi Young in Canada, created a creolised rhythmic style that would have a fundamental influence on hip hop and spoken word poetry. Rap first appeared in the mid-'70s in the South Bronx, part of an already evolving African American youth subculture that included music, dress, breakdancing, and graffitti, and which would come to be known as hip hop. Since the beginnings of contemporary spoken word in the '80s, poets such as Reg E. Gaines and Roger Bonair-Agard have used the hip hop aesthetic in their work, while hip hop artists such as Michael Franti, Talib Kweli, Ursula Rucker, and others have blended hip hop music with spoken word to create a kind of "hip hop poetry." The complicated relationship between spoken word and hip hop has yet to be examined in the depth that is required, but Susan B. A. Somers-Willett's previously-mentioned book, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, features an insightful analysis of the ways in which spoken word is marketed for the consumption of white middle-America as a form rooted in black culture.

Amiri Baraka, in *Blues People*, puts forward the idea that blues music is primarily a verse form, and a form that is not learned, but which anyone can take part in—that is, an expressive form. Whether or not this is true (especially later blues became more technical), it reminds me of spoken word, where at the open mic everyone is encouraged

[1] For more on performance in the Black Arts Movement, see Smethurst.

to express himself or herself—it purports to be a democratic, grass-roots form. From jazz poetry to spoken word, however, certain tensions between white and black culture have been played out in music and poetry movements. In her influential 1994 study of rap music and black culture, *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose points out that

> Black culture in the United States has always had elements that have been at least bifocal—speaking to both a black audience and a larger predominantly white context. Rap music shares this history of interaction with many previous black oral and music traditions. (5)

The story of black music in America is a story of innovation and appropriation occurring in cycles. Just as it has been said that rock and roll was a white version of the blues, it could be argued that Beat poetry was turned into a white version of jazz poetry, and later, spoken word developed into a white version of rap. In fact, Charlie Parker's modernization of jazz in the form of bebop, which changed the nature of live performance, could be thought of as an attempt to reinvent jazz in a way that would less assimilable by white culture. This narrative of cultural transfer seems simplistic, however, especially as an explanation of the development of spoken word. The poetry slam was established primarily as a working-class response to academic poetry on the one hand and punk performance philosophy on the other, which has since been strongly influenced by rap. It is unmistakeble, however, that the culture of spoken word, and slam poetry especially, is unusually preoccupied with the performance of race, and in this way it echoes hip hop, jazz and Beat poetry.

Because of the ways spoken word has been inflected by race, it has also always been characterized by a hyper-awareness of authenticity: among slam poets, there is a tendency to perform black speaking styles whether or not the performer is black, for example, and this is often an intensely scrutinized and criticized element of the performance. One online comment I read from a poet discussing his aversion to spoken word said that it seemed to him like "skinny white teenagers talking like they are 40-year-old black women" (Vermeersch). It is telling that white avant-garde culture seems to accept and revere hip hop because it is an African American form—and therefore, I would argue, is seen by white intellectuals as a folk form, while the same culture is resistant to spoken word, perhaps because of its inauthenticity. But that inauthenticity can also be regarded as a product of hybridity—spoken word is, in many cases, white kids trying to emulate black culture, but the emulation is not entirely unilateral. It often seems to be assumed, as well, that spoken word favors or is rooted in marginalized lives or forms (such as African American vernacular music—jazz, hip hop—or "identity-based" political poetry). There is a sense in which spoken word is an "ethnic" form, but not in the sense that it is dominated by "ethnic" performers: rather, I would argue that the form as a whole is marked as ethnic by its marginal status within literary culture, and that this status allows participants an opportunity to radically reconfigure the terms of their "ethnicity." I will return to this idea later, but the next chapter jumps to the 1980s and the birth of the contemporary spoken word movement.

CHAPTER TEN: JULY 20TH, 1986

On Sunday, July 20th, 1986, the first Uptown Poetry Slam took place at the Green Mill Cocktail Lounge,[1] an historic speakeasy-style club in Chicago's north-side theatre district. Marc Smith had invented a form in which poet-performers compete for prizes, judged by randomly-selected members of the audience, and the "poetry slam" (Smith apparently borrowed the "slam" from the baseball term "grand slam," which is in turn derived from contract bridge) has since become a global cultural phenomenon and one of the most visible, most vilified components of contemporary spoken word. Smith, an iconic figure who sometimes goes by the nickname Slampapi, is a former construction worker who intended the slam as a reaction against "the academic insiders and the hipper-than-thou outsiders" (Smith, 11); he continues to champion working-class, non-institutional poetry and continues to host slams at the Green Mill. The venue itself is a part of the show, with its huge wooden bar and its art deco, prohibition-era décor.[2] The

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[1] There are several sources of poetry slam history, and as a result several versions of its origin story. Smith had already been running events at the Get Me High Jazz Club that had a slam-like atmosphere, and in Kurt Heintz's *An Incomplete History of Slam* some early participants say that although Smith's event at the Green Mill debuted on July 20th, the first actual slam per se didn't happen until a few weeks later. However, in Smith's own book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry*, he cites July 20th,1986 as the beginning of "the original slam."

[2] The club was once owned by "Machine Gun" Jack McGurn, an associate of Al Capone and allegedly one of the planners of the Valentine's Day massacre; it was also the site of McGurn's infamous attempted killing of comedian/singer Joe E. Lewis. It has been proposed that this makes it a symbolically appropriate location for the poetry slam because there is an inherent violence encoded in slam (as its name would suggest). One article on Marc Smith's website, "The Bob Oafham Incident" by B. Dunne Stern, describes an incident in which that violence was made physically manifest over a scoring dispute. This line of thought raises some interesting questions, although it is important to know that "B. Dunne Stern" is actually a pseudonym for Smith himself, and that the incident in question never occurred, as Smith reveals in an 2006 interview with Alan Fox, published in a special issue of *Rattle* devoted to slam poetry (Fox 53).

regular Sunday slam consists normally of an open mic, featured performers, and then the competition. Smith himself is the soul of the event, and numerous traditions have grown up around him: whenever he says, "I'm Marc Smith," for example, the crowd knows that their response is to shout, "So what!"—the idea being "to remind everybody taking the stage, including Marc himself, that they were on an equal footing with everyone else" (Smith, 11). There are the ground rules, repeated at each show like a mantra, including certain variations that are unique to the Green Mill and have nothing to do with the "official" rules of Poetry Slam, Inc. Heckling is encouraged: women who detect too much testosterone in a poem are expected to hiss (whereas men are encouraged to grunt to defend their manhood) and if the rhymes in a poem become too predictable, the audience is encouraged to shout them out before the poet says them.

Although spoken word involves much more than poetry slams, the birth of the slam is a convenient marker for the beginning of the era in which diverse forms of performance poetry melded to become spoken word. The activity itself, performing poetry to a live audience, was far from revolutionary, but in the late '80s and early '90s there was a clear difference in terms of the recognition it was getting, the people who were doing it, and the people who were listening. It was the emergence of a class of writers/performers who thought of themselves, for the first time, as spoken word artists. Marc Smith should be congratulated for his remarkable accomplishment in creating not just a new way of presenting poetry but also a field in which a new style—slam poetry—could emerge. Having caught fire in the U.S., the poetry slam quickly spread to Canada, the U.K., Australia, Germany, New Zealand, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Austria,

Singapore, India, Nepal and many other locations.[3] For its participants, the slam may represent many things: for some, it is an opportunity to develop as poets, to share their work with an audience that extends beyond the usual poetry crowd, and to have the instant gratification of vocal feedback. For others, the slam may be not an outlet but an enticement to engage in poetry-making; they are drawn to it for the sense of collective identity that it offers, or perhaps for the thrill of being momentarily in the spotlight.

In his writings, Smith has always emphasized the anti-commercial nature of the slam, and within "official" poetry slam culture there is a fierce instinctive resistance to commercialization. Poetry Slam, Inc. (PSI), is "the official 501(c)(3) non-profit organization charged with overseeing the international coalition of poetry slams" (from the PSI website); though it is an incorporated organization, the "Inc." is somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Part of the organization's mandate is to certify local slams that adhere to slam's founding philosophies, and it could be argued that an incorporated entity is necessary precisely to prevent the exploitation of the slam by for-profit interests. However, the approach taken by Poetry Slam, Inc., still seems to be inspired more by commerce than by art. The poetry slam movement is very closely aligned with its professional organization, so that rather than a modernist-style manifesto, this movement has a mission statement:

> The mission of Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI) is to promote the performance and creation of poetry while cultivating literary activities and spoken word events in order to build audience participation, stimulate creativity, awaken minds,

[3] On the Poetry Slam, Inc. website (www.poetryslam.com) there is a "slam map" indicating cities with poetry slams around the world.

> foster education, inspire mentoring, encourage artistic statement and engage communities worldwide in the revelry of language.

Following that statement on the PSI website, a text describing the history and activities of the organization explains that it has come to serve "not only as an administrative body to maintain the rules that govern slam, but also as an organization that seeks to grow slam's audience and protect slam's interests." This last phrase in particular has rather blatant capitalist overtones, but perhaps that is simply a sign that the poetry slam is a product of late-20th-century American culture. In any case, the definition, rules, and scope of the poetry slam have remained tightly controlled and this has been a source of some friction between various local scenes,[4] as well as source of resentment for some slam organizers outside the U.S., who see PSI as a cultural analogue of American imperialist tendencies. Furthermore, this controlling impulse has resulted in a certain degree of codification of the history and mythology of the slam. The origin narrative related above is more or less the "official" version, but the complete story of how the slam came into being and evolved is more complicated.

Poetry competitions have existed in many cultures and eras (drama contests in ancient Greece, competitive *renga* in Edo-period Japan, *justas literarias* in 17th-century Spain), but even in the years before the Uptown Poetry Slam, there had been other events that used competition as a framing device for the presentation of poetry. Sometime around 1979, goes one frequently repeated but unsubstantiated story, Ted Berrigan and

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[4] Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz's *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* provides a detailed account of various disputes between, for example, the Chicago and New York approaches to poetry slams, and between the various venues within New York City.

Anne Waldman squared off in a poetry boxing match wearing trunks and gloves, striking blows with words. It seems that this actually struck quite a few people as a good idea. In Kurt Heintz's "An Incomplete History of Slam," poets Jerome Sala and Elaine Equi report that for a couple of years they had been organizing poetry readings in Chicago, mostly for a non-literary crowd, when in 1980 Al Simmons asked Sala to take part in a boxing-style poetry competition. Simmons had come from New York, where he knew Ted Berrigan, and the idea may therefore have been related to the earlier bout. Sala accepted a challenge from poet-musician Jimmy Desmond, and they sparred poetically in a boxing ring, for ten rounds scored by judges; after Sala won, they held a rematch, which he also won. Simmons then went to Taos, New Mexico, with the idea, and in 1982 held the first World Heavyweight Championship of Poetry bout between Chicago poet Terry Jacobus and Gregory Corso (Jacobus won). It was the beginning of the Taos Poetry Circus, which continued for 22 years and featured championship match-ups such as Victor Hernández Cruz vs. André Codrescu, Ed Sanders vs. Anne Waldman, and Wanda Coleman vs. Sherman Alexie.

The inspiration for this rowdy, irreverent kind of poetry event came at least in part from the punk scene, according to Elaine Equi, and it's not hard to see why. Jerome Sala makes the connection explicit: "It was the end of the punk age," he says. "It was a more verbally confrontational time, not just with us on stage but also with the audience, back and forth with the poet." (Heintz) The history of spoken word contains an important thread of influence by punk or punk-inspired poet-performers such as Patti Smith, who has used spoken word in her music since her first major album, *Horses*, in 1975. Other

notable influences include Detroit band MC5, as well as Jello Biafra (originally lead singer of the Dead Kennedys), Henry Rollins (former frontman of Black Flag), Lydia Lunch (founder of Teenage Jesus & the Jerks), and Exene Cervenka (of X), all of whom have become well-known for spoken word performance, and Kathy Acker, who melded a punk attitude and aesthetic with influences from American avant-garde poetry. With its counter-cultural energy and de-emphasis of musical training or virtuosity, punk music definitely had an affinity for spoken word, but more generally the popular music of the '60s, '70s, and '80s—particularly such superstars as Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Leonard Cohen—helped to create a surge of interest in public poetry. The distinction between poet and musician was particularly blurry following the '60s, and definitely performers such as the Fugs (Ed Sanders, Tuli Kupferberg, and Ken Weaver, and later Peter Stampfel and Steve Weber) played a large role in blending the two. The role of recordings and radio should be acknowledged here: Steven Jesse Bernstein, a Seattle poet-performer known for his influence on the grunge music scene, became a cult figure partly through recordings of his live performances; many people were turned on to spoken word by innovative radio performances such as the absurdist monologues of Joe Frank or the "word jazz" of Ken Nordine, who inspired Tom Waits' spoken word recordings.

In the decades before the poetry slam was invented there was another category of performer that I think hugely influenced performance poetry in ways that have yet to be recognized. Two categories, actually, but I propose that they are closely related: radical political-social activists and stand-up comedians. When members of the Lettrist

movement commandeered the pulpit at Notre Dame on Easter Sunday 1950 and delivered an anti-religion manifesto, it was a political act but also a theatrical act, a comedic act, and a poetry performance. Situationist Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* not only introduced critical concepts that are essential to understanding performance poetry; the actions of the Situationist International should also be considered part of the performative tradition that paved the way for spoken word. (Whether spoken word should be considered an element of inauthentic spectacular society or a crucial *détournement* of spectacle is a question that I will address in part four.) In the late '60s in the U.S., activist groups also used public performance to make political points: the group Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers (who took their name from an Amiri Baraka poem) dramatized their rejection of bourgeois art and poetry by staging a fake "assassination" of Kenneth Koch at a reading at St. Mark's Church in 1968 (Kane 171-73); the Yippies (formed in 1967 by Abbie Hoffman, Anita Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and others) scattered hundreds of dollar bills from the mezzanine of the New York Stock Exchange and caused pandemonium on the trading floor. The audacity and comedy of their actions (certainly debatable) make these groups not too far removed from more conventional performers who also used humor to subvert societal norms; the most obvious example would be Lenny Bruce, whom Maria Damon describes as "the stranger who rode into town and said the right thing at the right time in front of the wrong people" ("The Jewish" 2). Bruce's case is remarkable because of the extreme effect his spoken performances had on established power, but stand-up comedy in general is structured in ways that have clearly influenced

spoken word; Lenny Bruce simply demonstrated that comedy, usually seen as an insipid form of entertainment, can have political heft.

Spoken word rapidly became a mass culture phenomenon in its first decade, which began with the invention of the poetry slam and perhaps culminated in the high-profile release of Paul Devlin's film *SlamNation*, which appeared in 1998 but documented the 1996 National Poetry Slam in Portland, Oregon. Along the way, there were a number of significant developments that took performance poetry in directions that it was unaccustomed to—on to rock and roll stages, for example, and on to TV—and an astonishing number of these developments came about thanks to Bob Holman.[5] He had been in New York since 1966, at the heart of the city's poetry culture for decades, including a stint running the reading series at the St. Mark's Poetry Project. In the '80s, he did two things in particular that would have far-reaching ramifications for the development of spoken word: first, he and TV producer Danny O'Neal began to produce "poetry spots" at WNYC, to be played between programs, featuring poets such as Allen Ginsberg, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich. It seemed even to Holman to be a strange undertaking to combine TV and poetry, but he saw it as an opportunity to bring poetry to a new audience, and the idea would catch on in a big way. Second, he and Miguel Algarín re-opened the Nuyorican Poets Café.

The idea for the café had originally grown out of a circle of poets in Algarín's living room around 1973, and it had survived in a few locations as a home for the Lower East Side's Puerto Rican poets. It had been in its present location for two years before

[5] Most of the information about this period comes from an interview with Holman in *Words in Your Face*.

succumbing to the inhospitable socio-economic conditions of inner-city New York in 1982. When one of the co-founders Miguel Piñero died in 1988 and his ashes were scattered across the Lower East Side in a rowdy poetic procession, Algarín and Holman agreed it was time to reopen the café. By getting its roof repaired and starting a new series of readings in 1988, Holman and Algarín launched the Café in an entirely new direction: Holman had read about the Chicago poetry slam in a New York Times article, and had visited the Green Mill, and knew that he wanted to establish a poetry slam in New York. When he did—the first New York slam took place on August 20, 1988—it quickly became a sensation.

The Nuyorican Poets Cafe remains one of the most amazing landmarks of late 20th century poetry. It had always been a place for community—especially the community of New York-born Puerto Ricans—but in the '90s it became something extraordinary, a place that would inspire a wide cross-section of young poets to speak their writing aloud, and that would in the process upset the mainstream paradigm of a dominant white culture and an alternative black culture, replacing it with a more accurate picture of the demographic of the city encompassing mixed cultures: a living subversion of the concept of race. It would also eventually became world-famous as ground zero of slam poetry, making poetry cool and current in a way that it hadn't been for a long time, not even in the Beat era. The movement that the Nuyorican came to represent created a unique blurring of the registers between high and low culture in poetry, a move that was both celebrated and criticized. It was also often bluntly political and angry, direct, sometimes funny. If you attend the long-running Friday night slam now, you'll see it still

attracts a diverse range of people and poets, although the subject matter and styles that come up are usually within a fairly narrow range, perhaps because the problems that people find most important to write about don't change that much, and the mode of expression—suggestive wit, sardonic indignation—is the one that presents itself most obviously or works most quickly.

Holman and Algarín co-edited the anthology *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, which appeared in 1994 and introduced the rest of the country to the Nuyorican slam poets, including many whose reputations expanded well beyond the slam: Regie Cabico, Maggie Estep, Reg E. Gaines, Tracie Morris, Willie Perdomo, Edwin Torres, Wanda Coleman, Sapphire, Patricia Smith, Emily XYZ, Ntozake Shange, Nicole Blackman, and Eileen Myles, to name just a few of the most well-known, whose careers have gone in as many different directions. The book reverently reproduces the democratic immediacy of the Nuyorican open room: it includes MTV and Broadway stars as well as poets with serious academic reputations along with the steadfast personalities of the community, the absolutely local celebrities, along with some of those who were just passing through. Despite the international fame of the Nuyorican, what happens there remains a local phenomenon, the community in discussion with itself.

By the early '90s, what was happening at the Nuyorican had drawn quite a bit of attention in the print media, but the intervention of TV was about to make it even more notorious. It some ways it was inevitable, in such a media-saturated city as New York, that a diverse, youth-oriented underground arts movement would be targeted for TV, but it was also due to some very deliberate promotion by Bob Holman and others. In 1989,

Holman and Josh Blum produced a series of poetry spots that they called *Smokin' Word* and offered them to MTV, who turned them down. They tried again in 1990 with a one-time program called *Words in Your Face* (which inspired the title of Aptowicz's book), which was picked up by Alive TV, and then they expanded their ambitions to *The United States of Poetry,* a series that featured performances by poets across the country and which would be broadcast in 1995. Meanwhile, MTV scouts had visited the Nuyorican at Bob's invitation and they had started their own series of interstitial poetry spots called "Fightin' Wordz" (1993), a follow-up to a series of spots in 1991 that promoted reading. MTV also produced the "Spoken Word Unplugged" show (1993) that featured many of the Nuyorican poets and raised the profile of spoken word to the level of the most popular musicians. Poetry had suddenly become rock-and-roll. Holman and Bill Adler, who had been working with Russell Simmons at Def Jam records, decided to launch their own spoken word recording label: Nuyo records (which in 1995 would become Mouth Almighty records). One of the first and biggest stars they recorded was Maggie Estep. The extent to which spoken word had at that time become a pop phenomenon was evidenced in 1994 when Lollapalooza, the gigantic touring rock concert organized by Perry Farrell, included a spoken word poetry tent, "The Revival Tent of the Rev. Samuel Mudd's Little Spoken-Word Armageddon," with Maggie Estep as the headliner and featuring local poets from each city. It was arguably that summer that spoken word reached the peak of its mainstream appeal. I was living in Montreal at the time, and I was selected by audition to be one of the performers in the Revival Tent when Lollapalooza came through town. It was in effect my first introduction to spoken word performance,

and it seemed astonishing to me that such a thing as performance poetry had suddenly surfaced into the world of rock stars and music videos, where I had never seen it before.

Within a few years of the first poetry slam at the Green Mill, slams had appeared in other cities (Ann Arbor, Michigan, was the first after Chicago), but there was no standard sense of what a poetry slam should look like or sound like, and there was already some friction over differences in interpretation between, for example, New York and Chicago. But in 1990, Gary Glazner in San Francisco organized the first National Poetry Slam, which involved three teams of poets: Chicago, San Francisco, and a one-person team from New York. Glazner did his best to turn the meet into a carnivalesque happening, with a barker at the door and hot dog vendors in the aisles. Marc Smith, who had performed with the winning team from Chicago, decided that in 1991 he would repeat the event in his own city, and then it was passed on to Boston the following year, and since then it has moved to a different city each year; this practice of a migrating national slam worked to plant the seeds of poetry slam scenes all over the country and also created a consensus about what the poetry slam was and what the rules should be. In 1997, Poetry Slam, Inc. was established, giving the slam an official governing body like other sports. The 2009 National Poetry Slam in West Palm Beach, Florida, featured 68 teams from across North America and elsewhere, and over 300 performers. PSI voted to create the Individual World Poetry Slam in 2003, and then the Women of the World Poetry Slam in 2008.

After rising and falling somewhat in popularity during the ‘90s, in 2002 spoken word was again brought to TV on the HBO series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry,*

featuring many successful slam poets; the same year, a live stage show opened on Broadway. Russell Simmons is perhaps the best-known producer of hip hop in the country, so it is not surprising that the HBO series is heavily hip hop influenced, making spoken word cool to an entirely different demographic and perhaps a different generation than the one that it attracted only a decade before. Through the '90s spoken word was also featured in film, most significantly in the poetry slam documentary *SlamNation* (1998) and *Slam* (1998), a drama in which real-life poetry slam champion Saul Williams played a minor drug dealer who reforms his life with poetry. More recently, the film *Fighting Words* (2007) is "A romantic drama set against the world of slam poetry competitions," and 2010 saw the release of *Spoken Word*, a dramatic film directed by Victor Nunez. Furthermore, the slam format has gone viral: in addition to poetry slams, there are now storytelling slams, the Manhattan Monologue Slam, the Literary Death Match, the Poetry Face-Off, and so-on. In other words, the slam seems to have been completely absorbed into mass culture (within which it does not leave much of a trace).

CHAPTER ELEVEN: MAY 12TH, 2009

On the evening of May 12th, 2009, United States President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle Obama hosted a "Poetry Jam" at the White House. They carefully specified to the press that it was not a poetry *slam*—there were no judges, no points. Aside from the fact that it was being held at the White House and was probably attended by a greater-than-usual number of secret service agents, it was in many ways a typical spoken word event: it brought together music, poetry, and performance; it gave equal place to relative newcomers (Jamaica Osorio from Hawaii) and stars (James Earl Jones, who recited a soliloquy from *Othello*); and it represented a diversity of identities. National Poetry Slam champion and Def Poetry veteran Mayda del Valle from Chicago performed a piece about her Puerto Rican grandmother. Joshua Brandon Bennett, a poet from New York, performed a poem using sign language. The half-Kansan, half-Kenyan president did not take the mic, except to introduce his wife, who said that from the day they moved in, she had wanted to have poetry readings and spoken word (obviously she at least doesn't find the phrase problematic) in the White House, and that she "hoped that the work would take audience members out of their comfort zones," as one *New York Times* reporter puts it. He continues somewhat wryly, "It seems unlikely that that happened, unless there were people there who still didn't have cable TV" (Hale).

The White House poetry jam serves as particularly striking evidence of the cultural significance that spoken word has attained at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century and an appropriate frame for an overview of the state of spoken word

today, including its global profile. While spoken word is primarily an American cultural invention, as it has been adopted in other countries it has been re-interpreted and transformed—which is a familiar narrative, but one that doesn't often get applied to poetry, perhaps because of the difficulty poetry often seems to have in crossing national borders. There is little international recognition for particular spoken word performers, but on the other hand the form itself has very successfully sprouted around the world, with interesting results occurring as the global trend intersects with local conditions. This dissemination of the spoken word meme has a clear potential to illuminate the nature of poetry within a globalized culture, especially in terms of how local use poses as much of a challenge to nationalist paradigms as does transnational exchange. It remains unclear, though, if the socio-cultural phenomenon of spoken word should be seen as a response to globalization, or simply as an example, a symptom, or perhaps as a globalized commodity itself.

One attempt to address this question was the "fusion poetry" anthology *Short Fuse*, edited by Canadian Todd Swift and American/Australian Philip Norton, and published in 2002, with a CD, by Rattapallax Press in New York. Both the editors are poets with strong backgrounds in spoken word performance, however their definition of "fusion poetry"—an attempt to avoid generic factionalism, perhaps—was broad enough to include many high-profile "spoken word poets" (Regie Cabico (US), Tug Dumbly (Australia), Catherine Kidd (Canada)) as well as many poets who would not consider themselves to be in that category (Ron Silliman (US), Adeena Karasick (Canada), and Simon Armitage (UK)). There was a lot of excitement around its publication and a series

of launch events in several countries, but ultimately it did not have the influence that *Aloud* did, for example. In an interview, editor Todd Swift confessed that he was disappointed that the term "fusion poetry" did not catch on, as a way of broadening the scope of spoken word and "defusing" the mutual suspicion between performance poets and poets who write primarily for the page. It seems that reconciling the divides within the poetry world(s) cannot be done with one anthology, to say the least.

It would be appropriate here to provide more details about how spoken word has manifested in different scenes in different countries, but for want of space and time I am setting that project aside. This brief history of performance poetry in the twentieth century is obviously meant only to provide an outline of some of the connections there are to be drawn between spoken word and its antecedents, but it may suggest some areas that invite further research and analysis. Let me conclude, then, with a speculation about history yet to be made. It is easy to point to specific writers and performers from the past who had a role in the origins and development of the form, but given its local and ephemeral nature, what will the future history of spoken word look like? In his report on the Banff Spoken Word Summit of 2005, in mentioning Anne Waldman and Quincy Troupe whom he calls "two of the Greatest Living," Bob Holman asks, "can spoken word be other than living?" Spoken word, as a performance art, obviously relies on the presence, the voice, the breath of a living performer—unless it is recorded, which brings up another raft of questions that I will get to in part four. But perhaps Bob's question has another valence: is it possible for spoken word to exist except in the moment, in the room where it is being performed? Is it possible, in other words, to historicize spoken word in

the way that print poetry is continually being historicized? Or should it be treated as a way to experience poetry that is here for the moment, and then gone?

PART III. SPOWOPHOBIA: FEAR AND LOATHING IN PERFORMANCE

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE DEATH OF ART

Who is made uncomfortable by spoken word, and how? I have seen evidence of antipathy to spoken word in at least three different forms. First, despite spoken word's widespread grassroots popularity and modest pop-cultural cachet, the "spoken word artist" is seen in the mass-culture imagination as an object of particular scorn and derision, perhaps even more than the "poet," lumped together with the unique performance style of William Shatner's recording career and Mike Myers's neo-beatnik character in the film "So I Married an Axe Murderer." Second, among literary scholars there has been, so far, a neglect of spoken word which may range from simple ignorance to disinterest to active vilification. And third, among some other poets—usually poets who have a certain amount of personal investment in the traditions and institutions of poetry—spoken word is greeted with a vehement snobbishness bordering on disdain. I will talk more about the mass-culture perception of spoken word later, but in this section I'd like to address some of the resistance to and outright hostility towards spoken word that comes, in particular, from critics and other poets.

For many people who have an opinion about what is and is not poetry, if spoken word meets the criteria at all, it is at best a travesty, and poetry slams are only the worst example of the travesty. No doubt the most infamous example of this attitude is Harold Bloom's comment in the *Paris Review* in 2000 that caused so much indignation in poetry

slam circles. In answering a question about what makes a good poem, he rather flippantly remarks:

> I can't bear these accounts I read in the Times and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other. The whole thing is judged by an applause meter, which is actually not there, but might as well be. This isn't even silly; it is the death of art. ("The Man" 379)

It's ironic that in the paragraph immediately before this one, he says that good poetry, for him, is defined as that which can be easily memorized—because who are the poets today who write poetry intended to be memorized, except for spoken word poets? A similar kerfuffle arose in Canada when then-Poet Laureate George Bowering was quoted in an article in *The Globe and Mail* saying that spoken word artists and slams were "abominations," and that "To treat poetry as performance is crude and extremely revolting" (Gill). There were some indications that Bowering may have been simply trying to stir up a debate, but in clarifying his comments he said that what he really has a problem with is not poets at microphones, but poets with an insufficiently humble mien, who use poetry for self-glorification. Even Amiri Baraka, who has an important place in the history of spoken word, is apparently no fan of spoken word artists: "I don't have much use for them because they make the poetry a carnival," he says. "They will do to the poetry movement what they did to rap: give it a quick shot in the butt, elevate it to commercial showiness, emphasizing the most backward elements" (qtd. in Gates 40). It would not be hard to go on with further examples, both high- and low-profile, of poets

and critics denouncing spoken word for being irreverent, crass, unrefined, or crowd-pleasing (as if popularity itself were to be despised). The argument is long-standing, ubiquitous, and filled with vitriol; here, for example, are the unguarded feelings of one Connecticut poet, from a newspaper column on slams: "The work that gets read, recited or performed at these events tends to be trite, self indulgent, boring, narcissistic, embarrassing, obscene, boorish, coarse, uncultured, unintelligent, uncouth, or all of the above" (Maulucci).

What is the basis of and motivation for such an aggressive critique? Bloom couches his critique in terms of aesthetics, but I don't think it is purely a question of aesthetic standards, since the same complaints are generally not leveled at more traditional but equally amateurish poets. His posture is a cover for a more deep-rooted reservation, which is that spoken word is as much a social and political event as it is a poetry event. For literary critics there are some obvious reasons why one might want to exclude spoken word from the purview of the field: first, since it is an oral form, one might reasonably claim that spoken word is not, technically speaking, *literature*. Unlike print, an oral performance must be interpreted as an activity that is inextricably connected to the messy details of a given moment. The effect of these differences, ultimately, is to complicate the formation of canons, because it becomes problematic to single out one poem or poet over another if there is no lasting record of the performance, no definitive version of the text, and in some cases no clear way to decide if the poem consists of the text written by the poet, or whether it also includes the music, the gestures, the interaction with the audience, and so on. I think that many reservations about the study of spoken

word as literature boil down to this problem: that spoken word must be understood as an event, and also usually as the domain of amateurs, which undermines, to some extent, the romantic ideal of the individual talent.

Much more than critics and scholars, though, it is other poets who fulminate most strenuously against spoken word, especially when referred to as spoken word *poetry*. There are many poets of a more traditional bent who contest spoken word's claim to call itself poetry at all, usually based on the argument that poetry is a written form, and that the writing of spoken word performers does not "work" on the page. (This is a one-way litmus test: performers earn the honorific "poet" only if their work can stand alone on the page, whereas there is no obligation for "page poets" to prove themselves on the stage.) This idea, that poetry is primarily meant to be read from a page, in private, certainly reflects the predominant modern scholarly view of poetry, but it depends on a definition that is extremely narrow in terms of genre and history. Poet David Groff, writing on the Academy of American Poets website Poets.org, critiques not just spoken word but the practice of reading poetry in public at all:

> Attending a poetry reading has as much in common with reading a poem on the page as reading a screenplay has to do with seeing a movie. Only when we acknowledge that a poem performed is no substitute for a poem read in private will we truly advance the cause of the poetic word.

Groff's analogy is particularly interesting, because at first glance he seems to have it backwards: isn't a movie the performance of a screenplay, just as a reading is the performance of a written text? But that's not quite accurate either, and it's not quite what

is wrong with this analogy. A screenplay, first of all, is made of language: it uses words to describe what will happen in the movie, which is made of image and sound. The movie may feature dialogue of course, but its substance can also be perceived directly, without the mediation of language at all. A printed poem and a spoken poem, on the other hand, are both made of language; both of them use systems of abstract symbols (letters or phonemes) to represent images and concepts. A misconception exists in arguments such as Groff's, whereby a dichotomy is presumed between the poem, which is primary and immutable, and the performance, which is incidental and therefore essentially irrelevant. These two concepts should not be in opposition at all, because both the spoken piece and the written text can exist in any number of different performances. I want to make a distinction here that I will reference throughout this dissertation: although the word "performance" is usually used to refer to poetry manifested in sound, and I will mostly use it that way,[1] it could apply equally well to poetry printed in a book. A performance using oral language interprets the poem in terms of voice, volume, rhythm, tone, and so on, while a performance using written language interprets the poem in terms of spelling, spacing, line length, and even font choice. I think it is important to clear up this matter from the start: the language we use has two common manifestations and poetry can exist in either of them, or in any other use of language.[2] Among literate poets, writing is most

[1] In this project, I'm concerned much more with the oral than the print performance, so unless otherwise indicated my use of the word "performance" will invariably mean an oral presentation of literature, whether live or recorded, memorized or not.

[2] Sign language could be considered a third manifestation, but in a different sense: while spoken and written English are the same language, ASL, for example, is linguistically distinct.

often used as the initial composition tool, but this is by no means mandatory, and oral language is by far the older method.

There are a number of other complex and interesting issues that arise when the long-running border dispute flares up between performance poets and (for lack of a better term) page poets. To look at a few points more closely, I want to examine a particular skirmish in the war that took place online in 2008, on the blog of the Toronto poet Paul Vermeesch. It began with a post entitled "Rant: Why I hate 'Spoken Word' poetry," which I will do my best to briefly summarize: spoken word performers are often, if not always, poor writers who hide the ineptness of their compositions (which Vermeesch refuses to label poetry) with exaggerated, stylized vocal performances and hand gestures; the only appreciative audience members for these performances are the performers' friends. Spoken word, he says, "does a disservice to actual poetry by calling itself poetry." Furthermore, he advises that "if you want to read your poem to an audience, read your poem the way it is written." He asserts, in short, that poetry is a written art form first and foremost, and that spoken word is not poetry: "The word 'poetry' means something, and that ain't it," he remarks.

At first this "Rant," and the subsequent pages-long debate in the commentary, appears to be a conflict without any real consequence: it is possible for "poetry" to mean and be many different and contradictory things at the same time, and Vermeesch's conception of poetry is irrelevant to others' decisions about what to call their own writing/performing practices. As such, Vermeesch's chicanery is pretty obvious: he declares that his definition of poetry is objective and universal, and that—guess what—

your poetry doesn't make the grade. This unsupported declaration is not inconsequential, however; it has the intent and the effect of classifying not only poems but also people. Most importantly, this sort of distinction is intended to demonstrate the superior cultural capital of the person making it. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out:

> The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated. This means that the games of artists and aesthetes and their struggles for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they seem. (*Distinction* 57)

Vermeesch's declaration may have a range of artistic or political motivations, but like most such attempts to define poetry in exclusive terms, it also serves, whether consciously or not, to reinforce a hierarchy of privilege, and in this sense it is a fundamentally conservative gesture. In the comments added to the post, including Vermeesch's responses, it gradually becomes clear that what motivates the strong feelings on both sides of the debate is anxiety about the prestige of the brand "poetry"—among those who would like to seize it for themselves, and those who worry that it may be diluted by newcomers. Several participants in the debate demonstrate this anxiety, which is manifested most often in the assertion that the term "poet" must be reserved for those who have paid their dues: "People should not call themselves poets if they haven't devoted themselves to studying the craft"; "people confuse spoken word–slam–Chuck Barris–style–Gong Show ravings with the long humble apprenticeship and sharp longing to make true art that is poetry"; "there is a history and tradition, and skilled techniques

and a studied craftsmanship that today's spoken word ignores." Ultimately the question of what is a poem is less controversial than the question of who is a poet.

The backdrop, of course, is the lament among the page poets that the general public, and in particular spoken word audiences, "don't really read or buy poetry books," which is also repeated almost as a taunt by some of the pro–spoken word respondents: "It just so happens that [spoken word] is a form that is more accessible and interesting to more people than page poetry is"; "In Toronto their [sic] are 3 monthly series averaging audiences of 50-150 bodies … does that sound like any of the 'literary' reading series?" This is a struggle over audience share, in other words, in an audience that is small enough to begin with: much of the enmity arises because spoken word is perceived as an amateur movement in a field where even the professionals do not get much recognition. Or, as the previously quoted Connecticut poet puts it: "the appreciation of serious poetry suffers when it is forced to compete for public attention with this kind of vulgar display of second- or third-rate work" (Maulucci). Cultural capital and social capital are what is at stake, but occasionally they are directly tied to economic capital as well: for example, for several years there was a pitched battle at the gates of the League of Canadian Poets over whether spoken word poets who had not published books could be admitted to the organization, and allowed access to the same funding opportunities as page poets.

Anxiety about labels, and the privilege or disenfranchisement they often represent, is one source of the discomfort I mentioned earlier. To me, it is reminiscent of rhetoric used by some of the more "tolerant" opponents of gay marriage in the US: go ahead and do what you like, they say, but just don't call it marriage, because if that word

is applied to what you do, then it will have less meaning when it is applied to what I do. ("The word 'marriage' means something, and that ain't it.") Social status only has value to the extent that it is exclusive; one couple's declaration of marriage doesn't really prevent another couple from enjoying *their* marriage, but it does lessen the power of marriage as a tool of social exclusion and status accumulation. Similarly, calling spoken word "poetry" doesn't prevent anyone from enjoying other kinds of poetry, but to those for whom poetry is their main signifier of status, it is very frustrating.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE WHATEVER COMMUNITY

While I think that Paul Vermeesch's rant is problematic on a number of levels, I do think that it creates an interesting platform on which to explore the relationship between spoken word and poetry, and he makes some points with which I agree. First of all, he is right when he says that spoken word is not poetry. What I mean is that the two are not coterminous: poetry is not always spoken word, and spoken word is not always poetry. There is, of course, a large area of overlap between them. Spoken word is often interpreted as a sub-genre of poetry, and many spoken word performers would prefer that their work be seen as poetry and nothing else. In many other cases, however, the influences, techniques, and priorities of spoken word situate it to a great extent outside the tradition of poetry.

The second and more salient point that he does not have completely wrong, and that I'd like to unpack a little, is the idea that the only appreciative audience members at a spoken word performance are the performers' friends. This is a fairly standard disparagement of poetry readings and art of all kinds: there is something pathetic, it is implied, about an art that can only be appreciated by those to whom it is familiar,[1] or by those who have been coerced into it by their social relationship to the artist. This critique, however, relies for its sting on the odd assumption that legitimate audiences are outsiders who are drawn to a specific artist or artwork for no other reason than its intrinsic merit. In

[1] Such barbs are most commonly directed at less mainstream forms; the smaller the audience, the more they stick. Poetry regarded as difficult or avant-garde, for example, is susceptible to this line of critique, since its audience consists almost exclusively of people with a high degree of contextual awareness—often other avant-garde poets.

its extreme form, this assumption postulates a completely objective observer with a cultural blank slate—the ideal "true critic" as imagined by David Hume in "Of the Standard of Taste"—when in fact artists produce their work knowing fully and intuitively that no such observer exists. Bourdieu, again, offers a succinct formulation of this intuition: "A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded" (2). Poets write works designed to appeal not just to readers of poetry but to specific readers of specific kinds of poetry, and the more familiar the poet is with the intended audience, in nearly all cases, the more successful the poem will be. This does not preclude the real potential for a poem to speak to people who know nothing about it, who were not the intended audience, and who may or may not even really understand it. But those who respond to the poem on an almost intuitive level do so based on something in their own *habitus*—to use Bourdieu's terminology—that creates the preconditions for such a response. Even the random spectator who walks into a poetry reading off the street will already be in possession of some sort of contextual framework that he or she will use to evaluate the experience. This may be knowledge of the context and conventions of poetry—and therefore a degree of familiarity with the work—or it may be, in extreme cases, a framework that is completely alien to the work. In any case, it is absurd to assume that art can only be legitimately judged by a dispassionate outsider. The implication of Vermeesch's slight against spoken word performance is that its audiences come to it predisposed to approve. I would say this is true, but I do not think it is an insult; the same can not be said of all members of all audiences, of course, but I think it is a standard description of most.

"In my experience, the audience members (at least the enthusiastic ones) are largely the performer's friends," Vermeesch writes. The statement implies that these enthusiastic auditors are only in the audience because they are friends of the performer. There is another valid reading however: they are the friends of the performer because they are in the audience. An audience is a community that revolves, at any given moment, around the performer, and what they share is not strictly an aesthetic affinity (or dis-affinity); it is also a social connection, an identification (or dis-identification). Whether it consists of 97,000 fans who fill the Rose Bowl to see U2, or the poet's roommate and parents in an otherwise empty church basement, an audience is defined by their predisposition toward the performer. Just as the sizes of audiences vary, so does the degree of intimacy of the social connection between audience and performer, with less accessible forms requiring greater intimacy. As Vermeesch himself says in a later post, "Poetry is reflective, dense, wily, and sometimes difficult. It often requires some effort, and patience, on the part of the audience. We have to trust that our audience is at least willing to wade through the depths with us." What is that trust, if not a form of friendship?

Poetry readings of all kinds—and all kinds of poems, for that matter—are the products of communities and serve a function within their community; to suggest that a poetry performance cannot be legitimated by auditors who have a pre-existing social relationship to the poet is to discount the social function of poetry. It is often said that "poetry needs community," as though poetry is an abstract entity that can exist independently of people and their relationships. It is more accurate to say, "A poetry

community needs poetry"—the art form benefits the social structure, not the other way around. I think that the commonplace formulation of "poetry needs community" is rarely examined because the aesthetic judgment of poetry—which is presumed to be natural, as though poetry were a natural phenomenon—is mistaken for an individual pleasure, when aesthetic judgment itself is a social event. Liking a poem is a socially constituted experience.

To say that spoken word is community-oriented, or that it is democratic, is another commonplace; it is also one of the central premises of this dissertation. Although literature and performance are always produced by communities, I would like to suggest that spoken word communities are remarkable in several closely-related ways. First, much more than most other forms of writing or public performance, spoken word breaks down hierarchical distinctions within the community, both on the level of the individual performance (there is often direct interaction between the audience and the performer), and on the structural level (it is very easy for an audience member to become a performer, for example). This means that the newest community members are relatively close in status to the most established community members. There are some well-known and respected figures within spoken word—often recognized as much for community-building activities as for their writing or performance.[2] For the most part, however, the

[2] In the US, poetry slam organizers—Marc Smith, Bob Holman, Patricia Smith, or Gary Glazner, for example, all of whom are also performers—often have more notoriety than artists who focus more exclusively on their own work. Other spoken word performers well known in the US have usually won fame at the National Poetry Slam (Lisa Buscani, Mayda del Valle, Shane Koyczan), through music-industry recordings (Henry Rollins, John S. Hall, Maggie Estep), theatre (Sarah Jones, Reg E. Gaines, Tracie Morris), or TV (HBO's *Def Poetry*: Suheir Hammad, Taylor Mali, Jessica Care Moore), or some combination of these channels.

popularity of spoken word spreads not by the reproduction and transmission of individual talents and particular texts, but through the contagion of the spoken word meme. As open mics and poetry slams proliferate in towns across the country and around the world, spoken word remains an intensely local phenomenon and few artists attain any sort of widespread recognition. In his essay "On Television," Bourdieu notes that "there is a basic, fundamental contradiction between the conditions that allow one to do cutting-edge math or avant-garde poetry, and so on, and the conditions necessary to transmit these things to everybody else" (37). According to him this problem haunts every area of cultural production, but spoken word tries, in at least one sense, to reconcile this contradiction, mainly by shifting what it means to transmit poetry to everyone else. Spoken word's orientation towards the local community is both the condition that allows its production and the condition that allows its self-perpetuation and growth.

The other way that spoken word communities stand out is that their borders are much less controlled than the borders of other artistic communities, because spoken word aesthetics are so loosely defined in terms of style and level of refinement. On the surface, it would seem that poetry slams, for example, are the most strictly evaluative kind of poetry practice, in that individual performances are judged and ranked. In most other communities of writers, however, evaluation is a pre-condition of entry; if one's work is not judged to meet the standards of the scene, one is not considered a member of that scene. Poetry slams, by comparison, generally invite anyone to slam who cares to. Qualitative evaluation occurs on the stage, as a part of the performance, but it does not (in most cases, at least) determine one's status as a member of the community. "Applaud the

poet, not the score," is one of the universal mantras of poetry slams, underlining that while the audience is encouraged to be ruthless in evaluating the performance, their support of the performer should be unconditional. I think that spoken word is actually more radically accessible and egalitarian than its practitioners even realize or are willing to admit, in that it encourages a de-prioritization of aesthetic distinction. Other scenes espouse a "tolerant," segregationist model of aesthetics that says, "This is the kind of work we create; if you don't like it, you can make your own scene": separate but equal. Spoken word, on the other hand, says, "This is the kind of work I create; it's different from yours (and as far as I'm concerned it's better than / not as good as yours), but we both get the same three minutes on the mic." It encourages diversity and it eschews discrimination (based on race, sex, age … or aesthetic standards). This, of course, is exactly why many people find spoken word events horrifying, and I have more to say on that topic later.

First, though, I want to examine a bit more closely the concept of community. I have been using the terms "community" and "scene" interchangeably, but it may be useful to treat them more exactly. "Community" is an exceedingly vague term, as it can denote a group of any size, joined by any combination of identity traits, and here I have been using it to mean something broad—social interaction with people of similar interests and aims—and something more specific—the set of people involved in the production and reception of a given art practice. The first meaning, as broad as it is, depends on a specific commonality of identity, whereas the second meaning, while narrower in scope, depends only on a common activity. My usage of the word "scene" is close to this second

meaning but still narrower in scope: it denotes a social formation centered on a specific time and place and sphere of cultural activity. Therefore we can talk about the spoken word scene at the Nuyorican Poets' Café in the early '90s, or the Beat poetry scene in North Beach in the mid-'50s, but it would be unhelpful to talk about the New York City poetry scene—unless in the plural. Used in this way, the word partially reverts to its original theatrical meaning: a scene is a brief slice of the action—characters enter, exchange something, exit, and the scene ends, to be replaced by the next scene.

There are several conceptual dangers in using the term "community" to describe the members of an audience at a spoken word event. It happens to be very popular to do so among spoken word participants, and it usually suggests that people go to spoken word events because they in some sense belong to the community already, and therefore understand the "code" of the community, and therefore are able to enjoy the experience in a way that other people do not or would not. This train of logic is based on several unexamined assumptions: the first is that an affinity for spoken word can be an element of identity, natural and *a priori*, when induction into the community is a social process like entry into any other group. This does not mean, however, that it is open to anyone. People do not necessarily have the same baseline potential for engaging with one experience or another—they do not have the same *habitus*. A second assumption is that participants go to spoken word events *because* of their community allegiance and not for some other reason—some identification or disidentification with the event that is unrelated to spoken word. Third, there is the assumption of a common "code" or language within the community; there may instead be multiple idiolects or personal

interpretations of the performance. Finally, there is the assumption that people who go to the event actually are enjoying themselves. Terms such as "enjoy," "like," or "appreciate" are hopelessly imprecise in this context: they do not necessarily describe straightforward states of being. A participant may be clapping, smiling, listening intently, but their reasons for being there should not and can not be reduced to "enjoyment"; there may be many other factors, not all of them conscious. In short, it is important to remember that a spoken word event is not just a performance but a performative activity, and the superficial narratives of performer and audience interaction—the rules of participation—do not always tell the whole story.

As Miranda Joseph has pointed out in *Against the Romance of Community*, the word "community" is often deployed as a kind of thought-terminating cliché, representing a vague ideal seen as an almost universal good, when in fact it may be invoked to support a range of oppressions. Joseph bases her argument on the observation (made by many of the scholars she cites, such as Etienne Balibar and Judith Butler) that "communities seem inevitably to be constructed in relation to internal and external enemies and that these defining others are then elided, excluded, or actively repressed" (xix). Poetry communities are notoriously factional in ways that illustrate this process: fearing that the greater society has no love for poets, they tend to become territorial, as seen in the blog post I talked about earlier, and they tend to mark their territories according to various protocols of style, politics, or lineage. In other words, they generate identities, and there is always a certain identitary violence involved in that project. When poets complain to one another of the strife between and among poetry communities, it is

often a cue to invoke a broader community, the society of poets, and to call for a kind of poetic nationalist unity, through which traditionalists will read experimentalists, lyric poets will read language poets, performance poets will read page poets, and so on. Such a move, however, only re-inscribes identity on a larger scale, and entails its own exclusionary violence.

One possible exit from the loop of community-building, identity-construction, exclusion, and oppression is proposed by Giorgio Agamben in *The Coming Community*. In dialog with work by Jean-Luc Nancy, Agamben advocates the abandonment of community-building projects based on identity in favor of a quality Agamben calls "whateverness," which is not apathy or indifference but a kind of anti-Aristotelian, existentialist refusal to submit to essentialist categorization:

> What could be the politics of whatever singularity, that is, of a being whose community is mediated not by any condition of belonging (being red, being Italian, being Communist) nor by the simple absence of conditions … but by belonging itself? (84)

Spoken word poetry has often been criticized as being too intent on expression of identity as a political stance, which would be an impediment to the formation of a non-identitary community if the multitudinous identities expressed by spoken word poets had any coherence or authority. On the contrary, I think spoken word scenes demonstrate a distinct relationship to community in that they exhibit precisely that quality of whatever-ness: the conditions of membership are indefinable except as simple belonging—maddeningly indefinable to some. Agamben describes the whatever-being as a threat to

State power, but it could also be read as a threat to institutional authority: "What the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging" (85). Whatever-ness is at the heart of the discomfort caused by spoken word, because it allows the enactment of a community that, while perhaps not without an identity, accommodates multiple identities and is generally undiscriminating about the criteria of membership.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE HUMBLE LISTENER

> All of us, so far as we are Barbarians, Philistines, or Populace, imagine happiness to consist in doing what one's ordinary self likes. What one's ordinary self likes differs according to the class to which one belongs, and has its severer and its lighter side; always, however, remaining machinery, and nothing more.
>
> (Matthew Arnold, "Culture and Anarchy" 109)

If spoken word is a public, communal experience, we still perceive it individually, and it is necessarily made up of private interpretive experiences. Many times I have sat, or stood, with a few other people, or in a huge crowd, as we listened quietly, or applauded loudly, as writers read, or recited from memory, their own words, or the words of others. And sometimes while I listened, not always but quite often, something peculiar has happened to me, or to my way of thinking. It has happened at events advertised as poetry readings, and also at events advertised as spoken word shows, and at poetry slams, cabaret shows, book or CD launches, lectures, sermons, panel discussions, anti-war rallies, and plenty of other events where single voices addressed a crowd. It has happened in bars, lounges, theatres, and galleries, in bookstores, malls, hotels and restaurants, in classrooms, auditoriums, libraries, churches and community centers, in apartments and lofts and suburban living rooms, in basements and on roofs, on street corners, on the lawn in parks, in tents, and once on a barge. And it has happened to me around the world, in big cities and in small towns.

What happens, when I listen to a voice addressing me as part of a crowd, is that my synapses start to spark: my mind begins to look for and draw connections, to wander in tangential directions, to churn productively. There is something about being spoken to without any expectation that I will respond—without even any necessity that I understand—that produces this lucid mental state in me. Or perhaps, when someone is speaking to me, my mind instinctively manufactures a response even if it is a non-sequitur that I keep to myself. This phenomenon—let's call it "productive listening"—seems to me to be induced most frequently by performances of poetry, but then, my bias is that I have been studying performance poetry for some time, and it would make sense for me to become inspired while watching it. Still, I think it is a real effect, and I think I am not alone in feeling it. It is something quite different from the effect of being impressed by the work of a particular performer. David Groff, whom I quoted earlier saying that "a poem performed is no substitute for a poem read," had this much positive to say about poetry readings in the same article: "there is undeniable power in simply having to listen to words that are measured out at a specific pace, don't always make marketable sense, require you to sit still, summon only your ear and not your eye, and unfold, fleetingly, in the company of others." It is hard to say whether this "power" might originate in the speech itself, or in the writing of the speech, or in the situation: perhaps simply sitting in a quiet crowd listening to any kind of white noise would have the same effect. I suspect, though, that it is a combination of the situation and the words. A spoken word performance differs from a movie, a play, an opera, or a concert, in that there is no effort to immerse me in the spectacle, to make me forget that I am there. The performer is

speaking to me, acknowledging, even emphasizing, that I am there. The lights are on; I can even take notes if I want. It is not unlike being in a classroom, where one is expected to be thinking and listening productively. Groff argues, essentially, that one of the most valuable things about poetry is the intimacy of our interaction with it. This is no doubt true in some sense, but I would simply suggest that such a personal contemplative response can happen in public just as easily as in private and be inspired by performance just as easily as by text on a page.

More interestingly, the intensity of productive listening does not seem to depend on my judgment of what the voice is saying. It happens when I listen to texts that I find brilliant and fascinating, but it also happens when I listen to texts that I otherwise find banal, obtuse, confusing, boring or objectionable. Perhaps this only means that I have a short attention span and an active imagination; my intent here is not to analyze the workings of my own mind. Rather, what I want to ask is this: what exactly are the advantages in listening to performances of texts that we find appealing, and might there be benefits in listening to performances of unappealing texts? What are the differences between them? I want to weigh the value of listening to what you do not understand, what you do not enjoy, and most importantly, what cannot be easily laundered in the markets of cultural capital.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, for many people, at all cultural, educational, and economic levels, spoken word (and poetry readings in general, but particularly spoken word) falls squarely in the category of "unappealing." Such anti-fans are often vocal about their dislike of spoken word, although when asked to explain it they

may have a hard time. Typically, these are the words they use to describe it: Boring. Predictable. Formulaic. Cliché. Clique-y. Pretentious. Self-indulgent. Self-righteous. Unrefined. Juvenile. Hokey. Forced to attend a spoken word event, they roll their eyes, they fidget, they grit their teeth. I'm particularly fascinated by the intensity of this almost visceral reaction, and by the vehemence of aesthetic judgments generally. Is it really so painful to listen to spoken words? There is something peculiar about it, especially considering that in our daily lives we manage to put up with a constant barrage of spoken noise in the form of advertisements, announcements, sidewalk solicitations, sermons, speeches, and spiels.

It seems, in fact, that the disgust—for the more tolerant, it may be closer to embarrassment—produced by hearing a bad performance far outweighs the joy produced by a good performance. This makes sense in light of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's well-known theory of taste introduced in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. "Tastes," he writes, "are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgusts provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others" (56). Bourdieu describes tastes as the product of social influences: an individual's *habitus*—the sum of the economic and cultural contexts in which the individual has become socialized—guides aesthetic choices within the boundaries of cultural *fields*. The real revelation of Bourdieu's theory, though, is that tastes are not simply dictated by social status; they are also vital tools in our efforts to gain, maintain, and enhance social status. Rather than simply expressing natural preferences, our aesthetic judgments serve to identify us as belonging to certain status groups and not others. As he puts it, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (6).

Vehemently expressed aesthetic judgments, such as those often pronounced with regards to spoken word, cannot be explained in terms of individual preference, but they can be explained as attempts to dis-identify with a certain cultural class. This is not to say that spoken word, for example, represents an inherently lesser status; the value of cultural capital is determined relative to the field in which it will be accumulated and spent. For a young, urban, working class college student, involvement in spoken word may represent an opportunity to gain considerable cultural capital, whereas for an upper-middle-class professional, it might put some cultural capital at risk. For an academic, spoken word could either enhance or diminish cultural capital, depending on its perceived "authenticity," the academic's credibility, and other factors. For many poets, it is seen as more of a threat than an opportunity.

This concept of taste as a tool of social distinction also explains our anxiety over how our tastes are perceived. Music critic Carl Wilson has written an excellent book that undertakes a critical project similar to this one in many ways, except that his topic is a pop music icon he loathes. In *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, Wilson writes about his struggle to understand his distaste for Celine Dion, drawing on Bourdieu's *Distinction* among other sources to explore the idea of individual "taste biographies" and communal "taste worlds" within the "taste universe." He relates his discomfort with listening to Dion's album in his thin-walled apartment, where he knows his neighbors will hear. "It's a minor voyage of self-discovery," he says: "it turns out that I am not so bothered by having strangers hear me have sex, compared to how embarrassed I am by having them hear me play *Let's Talk About Love* over and over"

(135). A poetry performance event is capable of producing a similar social anxiety, and this is particularly true of spoken word because its cultural status is so indefinite. The participant becomes interpellated into a social structure where the lines of cultural capital are indistinct and shifting, and the result may be resentment and fear – fear that one's status might be jeopardized, or that one's identity might be dismantled or commandeered.

Of course, this anxiety is also based on the idea that attending a particular event or listening to certain kinds of texts can be taken to signify approval. It is assumed, in other words, that a participant's primary relationship to an aesthetic experience is evaluative judgment. Carl Wilson worries that his neighbors will assume that he is an avid fan of Celine Dion, rather than a music critic doing research for a book. Other people worry, on some level, that if they attend a spoken word event, others will assume that they are there because it's their "thing"—they like it, and therefore it somehow defines them. However, part of the argument I'm making about spoken word is that it tends to undermine the assumption that evaluative judgment is the natural primary relationship to the performance: as I have said, spoken word de-prioritizes aesthetic judgment in favor of accessibility and diversity.

Generally, spoken word performances are much more diverse than other poetry readings. Many critics may disagree with this statement, suggesting that the problem with spoken word is actually that it all sounds the same, that it is too conformist. "Before long," predicts Paul Vermeesch, "I suspect all of this kind of spoken word artists [sic] will be performing the same composition, likely the very same way, and no one in their audience will bother to notice." The explanation, of course, is that conformity and

diversity are in the eye of the beholder, depending largely on where you look for differentiation and what kinds of conformity you are willing to ignore. An observer with little interest or investment in spoken word will of course hear in it mostly similarities, just as an uninitiated observer at a reading of language poetry, say, will likely also perceive an overwhelming sameness. (My intention is not to put these two poetic sub-cultures in opposition, but they are far enough estranged in practice that they are useful counter-examples.) At either a spoken word event or a language poetry reading, engaged audiences will hear substantial differences, and they will like some poems more than others. At the spoken word event, though, the liked and disliked performances are bound to be much farther apart stylistically. The language poetry reading may produce two stylistically similar readings, one of which is "better" (more nuanced, more polished, more memorable, more original) than the other, and people may talk about how they loved one and hated the other, but this preference is fine-grained. And the more refined the distinctions become, the more generally uniform the work becomes. At a spoken word event there are broader distinctions—spoken word has a less finely-tuned method of evaluation. I do not mean to legitimize one at the expense of the other; I only mean to show that aesthetically, stylistically, as well as in terms of race and ethnicity, spoken word events are more diverse. As a hybrid, polyphonic form, one could say that spoken word is premised on diversity.

It is no doubt horrifying to some writers and critics to contemplate the idea of a literary community that does not make aesthetic evaluation its highest priority. Doesn't everything get reduced to a kind of lowest-common-denominator slush pile? Won't the

work always remain amateurish, jejune, unrefined? A couple of answers to this: first of all, a de-prioritization of aesthetic judgment does not mean that there are no standards—it just means that the standards are relational and contingent, with no pretense of universality, and it means that our engagement with the work does not have to revolve around evaluative approbation or disapprobation, but can occur on other levels, recognizing the social, political, communicative, and ritualistic functions of art, for example. Second, a lapse in aesthetic discrimination does not necessarily imply a lapse in aesthetic development. An individual writer-performer may improve his or her own work without narrowing the range of work they surround themselves with. The assumption that an artist only improves by exposure to more advanced like-minded artists implies that influence is always positive and emulative. It is just as commonly positive and non-emulative, or negative and non-emulative, or even negative and emulative. At a spoken word event, with its teeming aesthetic diversity, poets are more likely to hear other poets read something that makes them cringe. Yet they may hear something in that utterly unappealing poem that they want to keep, something that may, in a different context, be the key to an entirely new aesthetic. In this rain-forest-like aesthetic climate, the abilities of individual poets do evolve, but they may end up evolving in remarkably disparate ways.

This, I think, is one of the most significant things that spoken word has to offer: by juxtaposing work of so many different styles and artists at many different levels of ability, spoken word helps to disabuse us of the notion that the only way to interact with a poem or artwork is by classifying it according to taste. I think that Bourdieu's work

accurately describes the function of taste within a socially, culturally, and economically stratified society, and it is true that "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (7). However, I also think it is important to recognize that art has other powerful effects besides social classification, and that our relationships to it can be rich, multifarious, and sometimes contradictory.

I think that there is something uniquely valuable in exposure to forms that lie outside one's usual aesthetic criteria. It is worthwhile, in other words, to hear "bad" poetry—or to hear poetry read "badly." Is spoken word sometimes boring, cliché, pretentious, painful, absurd? Yes, it is, and the same can be said of most if not all poetry readings, because what we find to be "good" or "bad" poetry is dependent on context, on our level of engagement, and on the communities we belong to. The ability to listen productively to both appealing and unappealing texts requires a certain kind of humility, a suspension of disbelief in other people's versions of aesthetic reality. It is somewhat analogous to John Keats' notion of Negative Capability, "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Wu 1351).

It is interesting to me that many critics of spoken word have accused its practitioners of lacking humility. Earlier I mentioned George Bowering's condemnation of those who use poetry for personal glorification, and in the debate around Paul Vermeesch's essay it was suggested that entry into the world of poetry required a "humble apprenticeship" that spoken word artists seemed to want to bypass. I, too, am

arguing in favor of humility, on the part of all participants in the project of poetry, but I think that these two versions of humility are markedly different. Both points of view emphasize community: it is commonly suggested and widely accepted that there is much to gain from knowing and understanding the context—the historical conditions—in which a given poetry is produced. The discrepancy lies in which poets are recognized as a part of that context: to which poets do we owe our humility? The phrase, "humble apprenticeship," suggests that the poets we study and emulate should be those predecessors who have superior cultural legitimacy; it does not require the same humility towards poets of lower status. The phrase implies an expectation of reverence on the part of the apprentice toward the master, and it validates a system of heredity for the maintenance and distribution of cultural capital. There is a certain religious overtone to the use of the word humility in this context: Poetry itself is held up as a kind of idol, to which we can not gain access unless we have spent a certain time as novices and followed the rules. Spoken word, on the other hand, represents a kind of poetic Reformation: the institutional hierarchy and the spiritual mediation of the clergy are done away with, in favor of a personal relationship to Poetry. Spoken word says, in essence, "Poetry is in all of us."

All aesthetic appreciation is driven by a tension between two somewhat contradictory expectations for the aesthetic experience: first, that it conform to certain standards, making it recognizable and giving it legitimacy within its field; second, that it transcend those standards, making it unfamiliar and exciting. Relaxing the first expectation doesn't necessarily makes the second expectation more easily attainable, but

it may make it more diversely attainable. Ideally, though, the exercise of humble listening teaches us to disregard these expectations as much as possible: to grant legitimacy to the unconventional and to find excitement in the familiar and cliché, thereby clearing the way for other approaches to knowing and understanding poetry.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: DIFFICULTY AND BOREDOM

From the list of critiques commonly leveled at spoken word, I want to focus for a moment on one adjective in particular: boring. In popular culture, "boring" is usually reserved for aesthetic experiences that are relatively quiet, slow-paced, minimally stimulating and requiring persistent concentration—like the experience of reading poetry silently to oneself, for example—so it is with a degree of irony that the label is applied to spoken word, which is often loud, accelerated, short and snappy, and is always at least aloud and kinetic. Opinions may vary about whether spoken word is necessarily intended to be "entertaining," but I think that when critics call it "boring," they are reacting to it as failed entertainment. The implication is that the most attention-getting performative elements of spoken word—the musicality, the expressiveness, the "flash"—are in fact so cliché and so lacking in substance that they are devoid of interest for a connoisseur of language itself; hence, boring. Work that is less flashy and less eager-to-please, that requires a greater investment of concentration from its audience, is on the other hand referred to as "difficult" work, which among those same connoisseurs of language is generally used as an honorific term. It seems to me that the relationship between these two rather glib terms—boring and difficult—invites some examination.

In terms of boringness, no spoken word piece measures up to the work of Kenneth Goldsmith, the self-described "most boring writer that ever lived." His "uncreative writing" has consisted, for example, of copying text from a newspaper (*Day)*, transcribing his own daily utterances (*Soliloquy*), or describing his every movement in

minute detail (*Fidget*). Yet a sizable contingent of critics[1] sees his work—with good reason—as some of the most interesting writing happening today. It is hard to imagine, furthermore, that Goldsmith would continue with his practice if he didn't also find it interesting in some way. In his essay "Being Boring," he draws a distinction between "boring boring," which means doing something we don't want to do or watching something we don't want to watch (such as "having to endure someone's self-indulgent poetry reading"), and "unboring boring," which is a conceptual boredom with quite a few precedents in 20th-century art. John Cage, for example, famously had this to say about boredom: "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all." What this suggests, of course, is a voluntary surrender to boredom, and that is the significant difference for Goldsmith: the boring can become the unboring when we are not being forced to endure it.

The same attitude is also present in David Antin's talk poems. While his practice of composing rambling personal stories on the spot is both innovative and daring, he seems to anticipate that sooner or later his texts become boring—and even to encourage it as an important part of his process. His stories are drawn out, constantly interrupted, and often essentially pointless: the definition of "bad" storytelling. In "The Noise of Time," Antin says that "because what im doing is entertaining ideas not people im quite happy for people to feel free to get up and leave whenever they stop finding this entertaining and that's how i know im a poet not an entertainer […] in my case i always imagine i

[1] See, for example, *Open Letter* 12.7, Fall 2005: "Kenneth Goldsmith and Conceptual Poetics" ("Kenneth").

should put a sign over the door that reads ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE" (61-62). His declared indifference to entertaining the audience is hard to accept at face value, however. Many of his talk pieces make reference to particular people and scenes—often the same people and scenes for whom the piece was conceived—so his unique process actually makes it possible for him to tailor the "writing" to the audience, which would seem the opposite of the conceptual autonomy he wants to claim.

What makes "boring boredom" into "unboring boredom," then, is the reader/spectator's level of engagement; making something "unboring" simply requires that a bit more voluntary effort be expended. Another common way of saying this is that "unboring" work is more *difficult*. Usually, when poetry is described as "difficult," it implies that the work is at a higher level of sophistication than the speaker can easily process; work lacking in sophistication is more likely to be called "boring." But what the "unboring" work of Goldsmith, Cage, and Antin shows us is that even the most unsophisticated, the most semantically impoverished texts, can be transformed by a sufficient level of engagement. Kenneth Goldsmith's uncreative writing, for example, is about as unoriginal, unsophisticated, and ungenerous to the reader as it gets; it can be considered both "boring" and "difficult." These two terms, in other words, are not as far apart as they first seem: they are both categories of poetry that require a significant input from the reader.

Poetry is considered either boring or difficult when people don't "get it." Which label it receives, though, depends on the attitude of the reader/spectator more than on the inherent qualities of the text. When the speaker is engaged, the poem is "difficult"; when

the speaker is not engaged, it is "boring." Furthermore, the terms operate in opposition to one another, as tools of social distinction. Saying that a work is boring functions as a class disidentification ("I do not belong to the cultural class that would be interested in this kind of art"); it effectively dismisses the validity of the criteria by which the work is valued in a different cultural context. Calling a work difficult, on the other hand, functions as a claim to identification and engagement, but also as a claim to cultural superiority. It says, "This kind of art can only be appreciated by the elite class to which I belong." A poem is unlikely to be labeled "difficult" by those who actually find it difficult (they would more likely consider it "boring"); rather, the term "difficult" implies that the poem is difficult for others, those who do not enjoy the same level of cultural capital. A relational approach to criticism reveals that these two categories, like "sophisticated" and "unsophisticated," have no empirical reality in the text; rather they are social constructs that reinforce a hierarchy of relationships to culture.

From this point of view, a criticism of spoken word as "boring" can be seen for what it is: an attempt to validate the evaluative criteria of one cultural community by invalidating those of another. My main point here is this: a spoken word performance perceived as "boring" is actually a source of unacknowledged difficulty, and the boringness may even be a form of difficulty itself, in the same sense that extreme length, arcane diction, or complicated syntax are commonly valued as forms of difficulty in traditional poetry criticism. What we call boredom is sometimes only an evasion of difficulty. Of course, literature, by nature of being composed of abstract symbols (whether letters or sounds), is inherently difficult: before we can get anything from it, we

need to put in the work of deciphering the language. The only exceptions to this may be concrete poetry and sound poetry; in this sense, these avant-garde forms are the most "accessible," least "difficult" forms of literature, although I suspect that few mainstream readers or auditors would say so. Performance implies spectacle, but when the performance is primarily text-based, it becomes a uniquely unspectacular spectacle. When we go to a reading or literary performance, on some level we anticipate difficulty; we are volunteering to be bored.

Boredom, furthermore, may serve a social purpose. In the same way that Bertolt Brecht theorized the necessity of alienating his audience from the narrative occurring on the stage (what he called *Verfremdungseffekt*) in order to re-emphasize its commentary on real social conditions, Andy Warhol, another master of boringness, thought it important to redirect the attention of his film audience from the screen to each other. Goldsmith explains what Andy Warhol said about his own extremely boring films, such as *Sleep* (six hours of a sleeping John Giorno) or *Empire* (eight hours of the Empire State Building):

> … the films were catalysts for other types of actions: conversation that took place in the theatre during the screening, the audience walking in and out, and thoughts that happened in the heads of the moviegoers. Warhol conceived of his films as a staging for a performance, in which the audience were the Superstars, not the actors or objects on the screen. ("Being Boring")

Boredom, after all, demands distraction. If a spoken word performance is boring (which is always a matter of perspective, but certainly happens no more and no less often than it does at any poetry reading), then our thoughts are directed to our fellow audience

members, to the performance space, to the performances before and after, and to the ongoing interior performance of our own thoughts. In other words, boredom is a catalyst of productive listening and contextual awareness. I think that spoken word is particularly well suited to foster this experience of boredom, not because spoken word performances are particularly boring, but because their context is particularly interesting.

Another claimant to the title "most boring writer" was the avant-garde sound poet Jackson Mac Low, as Kenneth Goldsmith writes in "The King of Boredom." Mac Low himself was "unborable," according to Goldsmith, but used boringness as a political statement: it was a reaction to the bland, mass-produced "entertainment" of the mid-century. What is interesting about Mac Low's work, though, is its emphasis on the inherent appeal of language itself, in its spoken and written forms, apart from its semantic weight; it reminds us that to judge a work as boring merely on the basis of its meaning is to miss out entirely on the physical beauty of the sound or its printed representations. In a personal letter that Kenneth Goldsmith quotes, Mac Low compliments Goldsmith on his ability to perform his admittedly boring texts in an entertaining way, saying, "You can perform any strings of words and make them interesting," and suggesting that it is possible, on the other hand, to make even wonderful poetry boring by performing it "in a low, expressionless monotone" (which he accuses John Ashbery of doing). This faith in the ability of good performance to make words interesting, and the ability of bad performance to make them boring, is axiomatic among both spoken word performers and spoken word detractors; for one group, it justifies attention to performance quality, but

for the other it indicates negligence of writing quality. For Jackson Mac Low, at least, his interest lay not in the composition but in the sound of the performed language itself:

> I have the conviction that anything a person says—any sound any sentient being produces—is willy-nilly meaningful. And when strings of words that are also intrinsically meaningful—even though not in themselves necessarily meaningful in the sense of "significant" or the like to many people who hear them—are spoken both rapidly and with many nuances of tone, etc., they can't help being interesting—that is, "not boring." (qtd. in Goldsmith, "The King")

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: SUCCESS AND FAILURE

> Infelicity, or failure, is not for Austin an accident of the performative, it is inherent in it, essential to it. In other words …Austin conceives of failure not as external but as internal to the promise, as what actually constitutes it. (45)
>
> —Shoshana Felman

No matter how engaged the audience is, not every text has the same potential to be interesting. Boring texts can be made unboring, but some texts offer a rich vein of thoughts and experiences to the reader who is willing to make an effort, whereas other texts simply pander to the reader without offering any challenge, providing only what is recognizable, digestible, and entertaining, nothing more. I think this is a valid point, but it is important to remember that even the criteria by which we judge what is "rich" are socially constructed. We have criteria, but they are contingent and could be replaced with other criteria. The value of reading/hearing "bad" poetry is that we are challenged to instantaneously revise our criteria. Moreover, while each of us may feel that we get more excitement, enjoyment, satisfaction, edification, from a particular kind of poetry—and this may be true—can we assume that the degree of satisfaction we get from our preferred forms is higher than the degree of satisfaction attained by fans of the poetry we do not like? Labeling the respective poems "good" or "bad" really only makes sense relative to the labeler. Calling on J. L. Austin, it might make more sense to use categories like felicitous or infelicitous. The poem is then judged not according to its presumed

objective merit, but according to how it functions in its given context, whether it performs what it was intended to perform—remembering that it is not the intent of the author that matters but the intent of the audience.

The question of whether or not spoken word performs what it is intended to perform, however, is exactly the point on which it has been criticized, as evidenced in earlier chapters. The spoken word performer, goes the criticism, is a failed poet. Is there any truth to this assertion, and what should we make of it if there is? Is failure necessarily to be avoided? In what ways does spoken word overturn and dismantle this binary? I would like to consult Jean-Paul Sartre on this point.

In *Literature and Existentialism* (*Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*), Sartre writes about the importance of political engagement for writers, but an idea that seems to play a recurring role in the argument of the book, even though it is only mentioned obliquely, is the idea that in writing, failure can be success. The first part of Sartre's book, which purports to be an answer to the question "What is literature?", makes much of a distinction between poetry, which he categorizes with painting and music as an art form that creates rather than signifies, and prose, which necessarily has something to say. Because of their respective fundamental natures, poetry cannot be "engaged" to serve a political end, while prose must be. At the end of his explanation of why we should not look to "engage" poetry, Sartre appends a long footnote in which he specifies another way of seeing this distinction (35-37). This footnote strikes me as having much more significance for the underlying thesis of the book than its presentation would suggest. In it, he gives a brief synopsis of the history of the evolution of poetry—saying that poetry

was a form essential to the construction of communal myths up until the rise of bourgeois society, when it became a means to critique and disrupt the organizing principles of society. With this shift, the strategies employed by poetry shifted as well: no longer interested in the success of the dominant social project, poetry became interested in social defeat, and therefore in its own defeat. "Human enterprise has two aspects," says Sartre, "it is both success and failure" (36). Prose is the form of writing which seeks to succeed: it seeks to express its message to its audience accurately and effectively, and it wants the success of the community as well. To achieve this it uses words. Contemporary poetry, on the other hand, is done "in the name of the hidden defeat which every victory conceals": its use of language is always faulty and superfluous, if the purpose of language is to communicate (37). It doesn't use words but rather serves them. It fails to tell us what it means, and this failure is symbolic of the larger failure of humankind.

If a poet never says what she means, this is one sense in which she fails. It's not that the poet is trying to say something and is unable; neither is she being deliberately misleading; it's that poetry itself, by focusing the reader's attention on language, forfeits the ability to "mean." Sartre quotes André Breton on the misguided-ness of efforts to establish what a poet "means" in a poem: "If he had meant it, he would have said it" (18). The poet's failure, then, is more than simply an unsuccessful attempt at communication; it is a transcendent failure in that it places the poet "on the other side of the human condition, on the side of God" (18). Poetry permits and demands that its reader stop seeing the world of cause and effect, the world that the poem may be talking about, the world of human essences, and instead see the poem itself, see the existence of the poem.

We might extrapolate from this the idea that spoken word demands that the spectator stop seeing the text—perhaps stop seeing "poetry" at all—and see the performance itself. Sartre understands this detachment as a kind of human divinity. It is a failure of humanity in the sense that it bypasses human engagement, but also in the sense that the poet is, as an individual, only representative of the failure (here the word should be understood as somewhat ironic, in that this "failure" is serendipitous) in which we all share.

For Sartre, though, prose writing makes use of language intact, unlike the broken language of poetry; he establishes the success/failure dichotomy and aligns its two terms with prose and poetry respectively in order to make the argument that prose, as a direct form that achieves its goals, must be hitched to a political purpose. He does, in the subsequent footnote, affirm that prose and poetry are not strictly demarcated categories—there is success in poetry and defeat in prose—but nevertheless insists that they are distinct, and that prose is inherently utilitarian. By his definition, prose is that writing which we don't see; instead we see the message it conveys. This makes it different from other art forms and uniquely suited for political action; because it is characterized by a drive to succeed in its linguistic endeavor, prose is also inherently utopian in its themes. However, I think that this insistence on the difference between poetry and prose may miss out on an opportunity to recognize the importance of failure in all writing, and in addition, to recognize performance as a kind of failed writing.

One of the ways this is true relates to the ultimate failure, death. Sartre speaks of the literal death of the author as the prerequisite for literary recognition, since critics are uninterested in anything having to do with the real world (29). But in the figurative sense

established by Roland Barthes, the death of the author is the prerequisite for writing anything at all. It is only when the author's agency within a text has expired that it can be taken up by the reader. Though it may not seem intuitive, this is just as true of a spoken word performance: the author is present and presumably alive, but the language is not.

Inadvertent linguistic failure is often a source of innovation and beauty, just as biological mutations can be an unexpected aid to survival. "Poetic language rises out of the ruins of prose," says Sartre (36). We see this, for example, in the products of those writers not considered "good" by the experts: speakers of foreign languages, children, the semi-literate—and yes, in "bad" poetry. In this sense, what makes language useful to us is not its ability to convey meanings clearly and fully, the way a telescope conveys a scene—does it even have this ability?—but its ability to transform meanings. If linguistic communication were foolproof, I doubt that we would care about it as much as we do, because we would not learn from it as much as we do. It is the grammatical solecism, the mistranslation, the Freudian slip, the malapropism, the stutter, the garbled syntax, the typo that is revealing to us. Turbid abstractions, jargony periphrasis, terminological slippages, hiccups of register or of diction, and sentences that accidentally say exactly the opposite of what the author intended: those are the real gems dug up by a writer's labor, as much as they are reviled and discouraged. By the same token, how would we learn to appreciate the artistic use of language if every poem were to our liking? How would we think if every poem effortlessly convinced us—of its beauty, of its conviction, of our obligation? Judith Butler has written about the possibility of failure in performative utterances as the "political promise of the performative"(*Excitable* 5): because

performatives can only succeed under the proper conditions, those conditions must be continually reiterated—meaning, in other words, that conventions are not fixed. That reiteration, that constant performance, allows the potential of political change. Spoken word performance is not strictly a performative utterance in the sense that Butler means, but nevertheless it is the possibility of failure in performance that fortifies it with political vitality.

PART IV. SPOKEN WORD AND ITS OTHERS

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: COMMUNION-ICATION

Montreal in the mid-nineties is where I grew the necessary mental appendages to write. This budding was not entirely spontaneous but was engendered by seemingly chance encounters with some exciting texts (exciting to me, for reasons that aren't always evident in retrospect, and spanning the gamut from the experimental to corn), by the encouragement of certain key mentors, and by the curve of the circles in which I was traveling, which were elliptical and eccentric but which centered on foci of publishing and performance. In fact, we generally lived performance and publishing as the same experience, one that was intimately tied to writing: if one of us made a chapbook, for instance, the book launch could also be a stapling party, so that the audience was involved in production and distribution as well as reception. Publications were excuses to have events, and events morphed into publications.

Some of us theorized these connections, in an excited, herky-jerky, masters-student sort of way, in our cheap Plateau Mont-Royal apartments which we could never have afforded in a different city, lounging on wrought-iron balconies in the summer or huddled around tea at melamine kitchen tables in the winter. Some of us (the same ones who appeared at the stapling parties and launches) gathered for weekly writing workshops which served equally well as impromptu performative happenings, and which we eventually transformed into a sort of *écriture-en-directe* show, collapsing the whole

process of thought-writing-publication-performance into a single act. We would organize an appearance at small and breezy Bistro 4 on St. Laurent, or at one of the many cabaret shows where we might be scheduled between a butoh piece and francophone sound poetry, and then we would write and read on stage, taking lines and direction from the audience. Sometimes the audience became part of the show themselves and it worked brilliantly, and sometimes I think we forgot the audience was there.

"Ouma seeks Ouzo" was the name of that particular configuration, and most of the writers involved in it were also coerced in one way or another to participate in *index magazine*, which was a publication about performance and therefore blurry in its categories and dear to our hearts. In my mind at least it was an attempt to cross-breed the freshly-acquired critical abilities that were making my friends and me quite giddy just then with the pure rock-and-roll thrill—or maybe it was more punk or hip hop—of the performance styles that were drifting into the city from somewhere to the south. *Index* was our reaction, in part, to the rise of spoken word, which was embodied for us in fairly mainstream phenomena like Lollapalooza's 1994 poetry stage, but creating the magazine also lured our collective concept of spoken word (and its potential, ideal form) in a critical, experimental direction.

In the early nineties, there was no coherent spoken word "scene" in Montreal, in English or in French. Between the city's French majority and the English minority there is always a tense symbiosis, but its dancers, artists, and musicians are not nearly as territorial as its writers, whose raw material happens to be the very source of the friction. Therefore anglophone writers—with some open-minded exceptions—tended to be

oblivious to the diverse and often more experimental currents of Québecois writing, and a reciprocal blind spot existed on the francophone side (although it didn't have to be as wide to obscure the little anglo scene). The development of the spoken word scene was different. When it started to burgeon, it burgeoned in both English and French, although at first it was an anglophone activity that the francophones saw as distinctly American—and therefore, perhaps, as something to be suspicious of. As it seeped into French, it metamorphosed, and then filtered back into anglophone events, and soon the events became bilingual, something previously unheard of in more literary circles. Cabarets were in vogue, so writers in both languages shared the stage with musicians, dancers, and performance artists. Choreographed sound poetry became one method of choice for reaching anglo-, franco-, and allophones alike. This eclecticism, and this linguistic cross-pollination, had an effect on the direction of "spoken word" in our minds. Since it was—for all intents and purposes—a new form to us, there were no dominant figures or styles to be intimidated by. Those of us who got involved—many of us prose writers more than poets; ex-thespians rather than rock stars; conceptual artists and not songwriters—found ourselves part of an inchoate scene with a very malleable form which became, I think, more focussed on narrative, concept, experiment, and perversion than the form generally was elsewhere.[1] For this reason it may be that my feelings about "spoken word" are somewhat more generous than those of many experimental writers elsewhere, who often see it as too indulgent, too predictable, too *pop*, or even as an outdated fad.

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[1] I've written more about this in "The Text Has Been Eaten: 'Spoken Word' performance in Montreal," published in Jason Camlot and Todd Swift's anthology *Language Acts: Anglo-Québec Poetry 1976 to the 21st Century*. A more comprehensive version of the story can be found in Vincent Tinguely and Victoria Stanton's *Impure: Reinventing the Word*.

A decade after my writing practice became a writing-performance practice, I started my doctoral studies, and my theorization of the connection began to catch up. One of the reasons for my improved understanding is that I'm no longer living in Montreal, my first writing community, and I'm feeling the lived reality of an axiom that I've been glib about for years, that spoken word is an inherently community-based form. It's a case of the neighborhood talking to itself, and repeating itself too. Even when the writer-performer works alone it seems like a collaborative activity, since a good performer will create a work that is not complete without its audience. In another sense, writing for performance creates a stronger sense of community among writers, who end up sharing stages and green rooms and audiences and, inevitably, ideas and approaches and inspirations. Everything about my writing, including its style, content, volume, and frequency, has been shaped by the gravitational fields of the other performers in the community. It is hard to imagine the effect being the same for a writer who doesn't perform or doesn't go to performances. This experience seems commonplace among poets. Jack Spicer famously held the opinion that San Francisco poets should only publish their work in San Francisco—and his social understanding of poetry was also evidenced in his own general aversion to book publishing. I suspect that this concept of poetry as a local phenomenon applies particularly well to spoken word writers, whose primary means of sharing their work requires being within earshot.

That writers would thrive by creating community with other writers is quite obvious, but in some cases the community also extends to the audience. A spectator at a spoken word event is engaged by the performer, and vice versa, in a way that is different

from theatre, for example, because the performer addresses the audience directly from the stage. In theatre, the performance with an audience of two people should theoretically be the same as the performance with an audience of two thousand; with spoken word this would be inconceivable. Furthermore, spoken word audiences, like those at poetry readings in general, tend to be writers themselves. This leads to an tension that is difficult to resolve: on the one hand, many participants value the intimacy and reciprocity of an audience of fellow participants; on the other, some performers aspire to larger audiences and a clearer distinction between the work's producer and its consumer.[2] This tension can also be understood as a manifestation of two complementary but in some ways competing aspects of spoken word, communication and communion.

Jed Rasula, in *The Amercian Poetry Wax Museum*, points to a distinction made by Allen Tate in a 1952 address, "The Man of Letters in the Modern World." Essentially, Tate argued that communication treats language as a tool, one designed to effect results, change people's minds, make them feel, believe, or do things. If that is the only way we conceive of and use language, he argues, then it is ultimately mechanistic, dehumanizing, and controlling. On the other hand, language is also used for *communion*, and in that sense it is something we participate in, rather than something we use—or something that uses us. Rasula summarizes: "The error, in Tate's view, is to regard literature as a form of communication, for that is to condemn it in advance to the ineffectual pantomime of the mass media, which substitute control for communion" (Rasula 93).

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[2] This desire for distance from the audience will be examined more closely in chapter twenty-one, "Presence in Absence."

For many spoken word enthusiasts, though, communication is the attraction. When the media first became interested in spoken word in the '90s, and human-interest stories began to appear in newspapers about how odd it was that groups of people were getting together in bars to recite poetry to one another, the writers grasped at various explanations for this unconventional behavior. One common theory, which was often assisted in its promotion by breathless participant interviewees, went along these lines: "Well, everyone's raised on television, and now computers, and people don't read books anymore, and it's hard to get the truth from television, and we're not getting it from literature anymore either." The suggestion was that people were craving a more direct form, a venue where people could speak their true thoughts and other people could hear them: true communication. This tied into an unspoken conception of spoken word as a working-class form, a gateway to poetry for those who were turned away from the more heavily guarded institutional gates. The idea was that spoken word was about unadorned expression, created by people who turned to poetry primarily because they had something that needed to be said. A little etymology seems germane here. All three words—community, communication, and communion—come from the same roots: Latin *communis* (in common, public), and possibly before that from Proto-Indo-European *ko-moin-i-*, held in common, shared by all. The Greek word *koinos*, meaning "common, ordinary," is related; in English, we are reminded of the connection between *community* and the *common* people.

It is this supposed directness—that is, the "un-theatrical" nature of the performance—that makes spoken word appealing to many audiences (and appalling to

others). Perhaps because of this, spoken word has often been used as a medium for explicit social critique and for confessional or accusatory writing. This quality of directness also provides something in the live performance that is not reproduced in the recording. Having said that, I want to point out that the idea of directness is a false lead: it would be naïve to suppose that spoken word artists provide a pure, unmediated glimpse of themselves when they perform. It is as if the popularity of spoken word is due to nostalgia for a mythical time when people could "tell it like it is," when our lives were not dominated by the virtual image, when there was still faith in the logocentric construct of the author as source of truth. People like to believe in the sincerity of speaking one's opinion, and they want to believe that the value of that act—its truth, even—somehow lies in that sincerity. Spoken word artist Fortner Anderson has said, "Spoken word is one of the only art forms that still allows people to communicate truth in a world destroyed by the filth, lies, and disease that pass for truth in our deeply sick society" (qtd. in Waters). These harsh words have a certain ring of plausibility when one compares the raw irreverence of some spoken word with, say, television, but that longed-for ideal of "directness" and truth-based-in-sincerity is hardly realistic, or even desirable. (And furthermore, it becomes implausible to attribute to spoken word that elusive ability to speak truth when it collides with capitalism and is combined with television, as happened with MTV and Much Music's poetry videos and more recently with the HBO series *Def Poetry Jam*.)

In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner quotes John Stuart Mill: "Eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard" (81). By "eloquence" he was referring to

public speech, as opposed to the private-in-public character of lyric poetry—suggesting, perhaps, that poetry can never be *direct* communication. But Warner refines the aphorism by asserting that poetry is not just overheard but read as overheard, while public speech is not just heard, but read as heard, meaning, in essence, that there is a degree of performance in hearing. In the case of lyric, Warner says "we regard the event not as communication but as our silent insertion in the self-communion of the speaker, constructing both an ideal self-presence for the speaking voice and an ideal intimacy between that voice and ourselves" (81). Within this paradigm, however, it is possible to see spoken word as a post-lyric form, a means of exposing that act of pseudo-private eavesdropping, bringing it out into the open. The spoken word event encourages us to create an intimacy not just between the speaking voice and ourselves, but among all the people in the room, creating not just a self-communion, but a public one.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: VOCAL KNOWLEDGE

> What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice …
>
> —Charles Olson, "Projective Verse" (245)

> Thought is formed in the mouth.
>
> —Tristan Tzara, "Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love" (87)

The Spoken Word Voice

Some of the harshest critiques of spoken word come from performers mocking other performers for using the dreaded "spoken word voice." Anyone who frequents performance poetry events will sooner or later become familiar with this voice: loud and staccato, with pauses in odd places, and often with a rising intonation at the end of lines to make them sound like questions, even if they are actually statements. This often-parodied performance style is itself reminiscent of—and may even be unconsciously inspired by—the lampoons of Beat poets from '60s beatnik-exploitation films. What critics seem to find most objectionable in the spoken word voice is that the same rhythm, tone, and cadence is applied indiscriminately to all texts, rather than adjusting to the content and structure of the poem as written. Paul Vermeesch, for example, whose critique of spoken word I addressed in chapter twelve, claims that a typical spoken word performance exhibits a metre that is over-exaggerated and contrived, a "hodgepodge of

forced iambics and something that is trying desperately to resemble hip hop, but isn't." He continues:

> Now, when I say the meters and rhythms are forced and contrived, I mean that if you could see the words written out on a page, and if you applied the most basic principles of English scansion to the composition (I'm loathe to call it a poem), you would find that almost all of the stresses in the delivery of the composition are not naturally there in the writing. In short, the rhythm of the piece *as performed* is quite different to the rhythm of the piece *as written*, thus, the rhythms, while over-exaggerated, are also forced and contrived, probably because the author lacks the skills required to get the meter of his own writing the way he wants it.

Vermeesch's observation has some truth to it, but it relies on two conservative assumptions: first, it priortizes the written form of the poem over the oral form. Second, it seems to imply that only rhythms that are "naturally there in the writing" have aesthetic merit. Vermeesch may prefer a naturalistic performance style, but the rhythm of conventional English speech is obviously not the only way to vocalize words, and it is disingenuous to justify an aesthetic choice by saying it is "natural," whether it is representational art, melodic singing, or natural-language speaking rhythms. If there is a typical spoken word voice, its conventions are definitely different from those of natural speech, and different from the speech conventions of a traditional poetry reading as well.

Speech conventions also differ in the theatre, where it is assumed that different texts require different ways of speaking, although in the theatre world as well, some performances are becoming more like spoken word, by having the performers use mics

and hold papers, or by leaving the house lights on. Training for the theatre usually involves "connecting to the voice"—which fosters a certain kind of use of voice. Both spoken word and theatre, then, have stereotypical voice affectations, which could be thought of as sub-cultural accents: the former, in an obnoxious way, emphasizes the language and rhythm. It is undramatized but exaggerated. The latter is an extreme dramatization. Its awareness of language is about enunciation; it treats the language as transparent as much as possible. Sounds like: William Burroughs vs. Lawrence Olivier. As Rebecca Singh explained in an interview, there are only certain things you can train in theatre, and voice is one of them.

The Mumbled Voice

> Spoken word texts should come with instructions: 'This work is to be read aloud.' —Kirk Ramdath
>
> I write my poems for the mumbled voice. —George Murray

In "Projective Verse," first published in 1950, Charles Olson writes that verse must "put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings" (239). The ear and the breath, for him, are the building blocks of poetry. Ironically, he argues that the typewriter is the best way for a poet to record the breath: the typewriter must be as a scoring device, like the musical

staff. This way of thinking about voice in poetry is perhaps the dominant one since Olson, and while it is essentially a call for an awareness of sound, it strangely does not always lead to an enthusiasm for performance, for actual vocalization out loud and in earshot of an audience. Rather, one could say that breath in poetry is often interpreted as just a sound under one's breath, the mumbled voice. This is reminiscent of rooms of medieval scholars reading books in whispers, before the practice of silent reading had become commonplace. Vocalizing to oneself is a strangely private use for a communicative linguistic mode, but there is pleasure to be had in doing things alone that one normally does with other people. Conversely, perhaps some of the pleasure of poetry performance events comes from doing something in public that we most often do by ourselves.

The Embodied Voice

> This is an interior landscape. It is inside. It is private. Respect the privacy of the material. These pieces were written in silence. The courage of the play is to speak them. The discipline of the play is not to violate them. Let the audience feel your love of privacy even though there is no privacy. […] You are students of discipline. Do not act out the words. The words die when you act them out, they wither, and we are left with nothing but your ambition.
>
> (Leonard Cohen, "How to Speak Poetry")

Charles Bernstein calls poetry performance one of the most "unspectacular" forms of live art in our culture (*Close* 10). It is, in other words, physically contained, cerebral. In some spoken word performances this quality is emphasized by eschewing the kinds of physical expressivity that is commonplace in the theatre. In a play, even characters who don't require a particular kind of dress are costumed, whereas in spoken word it is difficult to decide what to wear on stage, and even thinking about it at all risks pushing the performance from unspectacular to self-consciously spectacular. Some spoken word performances, on the other hand, bring more theatrical elements to the stage than one would ever see in a traditional poetry reading, and to some this is the *sine qua non* of spoken word. One stereotypical example of this is the gestures some performers make with their hands while speaking, as if to demonstrate that the poem suffuses the entire body. Yet it never crosses the line into theatre, and this has to do with whether the performer inhabits his or her own body on stage. In theatre, the bow (along with curtain speeches and some other rare moments) is the moment when the actor gets to "be themselves," to inhabit their own bodies. This is an indulgence that spoken word performers do not need, because they are, in theory at least, themselves on stage.

This is not to say that there is no role-playing involved in spoken word. One symptom is the tendency to foreground the writer's personality. Because author and performer are combined, and because the most personable writers tend to please audiences regardless of the quality of their writing, there is a large potential for the fetishization of the performer, a valorization of the aura of the artist rather than the work. In fact, it is impossible to separate the artist from the work. Those who desire to do so (to

evaluate the writing separately from the delivery) may imagine a dichotomy between performance poetry, where the writing is supposed to be the substance of the show, and performance art, with its attention to the overall aesthetic. In "An Incomplete History of Slam," performance artist Anna Brown is quoted as saying, "a lot of performance poets are basically so happy to be reading their work in front of an audience that they tend to pander a little bit [in terms of the performance.] For the poets, the aesthetic is in the word." She continues, "Performance art is an extensive concept based in theoretical work, whereas to me a lot of the good performance poets have great theatric personalities and happen to be great writers" (Heintz). What this means to me is that the poets Brown speaks of don't realize that they are engaged in performance art when on stage, that they are the show. The performer, in other words, is not simply a transparent medium for the work; rather, the performer herself becomes the performance.

Allen Ginsberg wrote in 1965: "Feeling, and rhythm, which is concomitant bodily potential of feeling, take place in the *whole* body, not just the larynx. The voice cometh from the whole body, when the voice is full, when feeling is full" (*Deliberate* 258). This attitude toward poetry performance would find agreement among many spoken word artists. According to Catherine Kidd, the major difference between a reading and a performance is that, in a performance, "the text has been eaten, it's been sort of re-absorbed and I feel much more comfortable that way. Because if the words have sort of sunk down to gut-level and dispersed into the bloodstream, then I just have to plug into that and the piece leads me around by the nose" (qtd. in Stanton, "Reinventing" 16). There is a profound metaphorical importance in eating the text. If the text has been

incorporated into the body, the physical presence of the performer becomes the performance. When you watch a live spoken word performance what you see and hear is a text of sorts, but while it is a text—that entity which we have come to think of as authorless—it is a text embodied in the person of the writer herself, so in a sense the author is extremely present. We could say that spoken word skirts the displacement involved in writing, in a way that a simple reading can not. Another Montreal writer, Heather O'Neill, says: "When I started performing my poetry, I thought I'd be more comfortable with it, because I'd done theater for so long. But spoken word—all of a sudden, when I was first reading, I realized that I was there with myself. I was completely vulnerable and nervous" (qtd. in Stanton, "Reinventing" 16).

The Visual Voice

> A friend asked me the other day if I didn't think that the printing of a poem helped to complete it, to make it actual when before it was only potential. I answered no, that to me print was irrelevant, that it was merely an inefficient way of recording the sound of the poem and that, if I had my choice, I would publish my poems alone by tape recording.
>
> (Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* 448)

If the text has been eaten, then what is the symbolic importance of the printed text? Performers who memorize often feel that holding a paper on stage is a barrier to direct communication, whereas those who insist on using the page often feel that the

presence of the text they wrote symbolizes that they are poets. Sound is the currency of a poetry performance—in a discussion of how to represent oral poetry in print, Ian Ferrier suggested that the ideal notation would be an exact depiction of the sound: like the sound waveforms that are used to represent sonic phrases in sound editing software. Yet the text can not be discounted, and one reason for this is that poetry, over the centuries of its migration into print, has taken on a visual form. Poetry is often differentiated from other kinds of writing simply by its line breaks: it matters how the words are arranged on the page. And if that arrangement does not correspond to clearly audible rhythms and patterns, it is very difficult to convey on the stage. For this reason, it seems to make sense to think of ways that graphic content can be performed. In the online essay I quoted earlier, poet David Groff had this suggestion: "Maybe poems in performance should be surtitled, like the libretti of foreign-language opera, the words snaking across the back of the seat in front of you as the poet utters them." In fact, as I write this, a new poetry "reading" series has recently begun in New York: called the P||R||O||J||E||C||T||I||O||N||S series, it features poets performing as the text of their work is projected on a screen behind them.

I tend to regard spoken word performances and more literary readings as belonging to the same general category; both are performances, after all: dynamic interpretations of a text that create new, ephemeral works of art. Spoken word happens when the performer elects to take advantage of performance possibilities that are unavailable to a writer on the page. The absence of the page itself, although not strictly necessary, is important: it removes the artifact of the text from the scene and replaces it

with a new artifact, the performance. One of the major differences between spoken word in English and in French in Montreal is that French performers are much more reluctant to abandon the page while performing. In English spoken word memorization is the norm, but in the French scene many writer-performers—but not all—see the page as symbolically important in distinguishing their work as literature, not theatre, and themselves as writers, not actors. When a poet reads a poem from a book or page, it is really a performance. It is only a "reading" when the audience is actually reading. But a reading in this sense is also a performance.

If the spoken word piece is performed by saying it out loud in a context where someone might hear it, printed text is performed by editing it and designing it and placing it in a context where someone might read it. Looked at this way, both page and stage are situational manifestations of the creative work, and should be given equal attention. Catherine Kidd's description of the eaten text suggests that there are two artistic moments involved: first the expulsion of words on to the page in writing, and then the re-absorption and re-expulsion of the words during performance. Two creative personas have worked on the text: the writer and the performer. This suggests an affinity between spoken word performance and chapbook or writing-as-artifact publishing. The main similarity is that in each, the text is interpreted somehow after the writer is finished with it and before the audience receives it. The audiotext of a spoken word performance does not really exist until it is interpreted in this way; before that, it is only either a piece of writing on a page or a thought in the performer's head.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: MNEMOTECHNIQUE

> In my early years I used to work on a purely pragmatic test: anything that I really care for—Milton, Blake, Shakespeare, Crane, Yeats, Stevens, and all the others—just memorizes itself instantly. To this day, anything that I really care for, I can always recite. Memorability is an element of the test. […] If you can't remember it, if the phrasing does not seem, to use a grand old word, inevitable, then why should it profess to be poetry? I don't know if this is affective or cognitive—John Hollander might say it is purely a mnemonic thing. But exactly the right word in exactly the right context is always what we went to poetry for. And that, I assume, is what we still look for. (378)

The Harold Bloom quotation above is from the same passage in the *Paris Review* in which he answers the question "What is good poetry?" by calling slam poetry "the death of art." His endorsement of memorization is striking, and seemingly at odds with his assessment of slam, given that slam poetry is the primary 21st-century inheritor of the long tradition of memorized poetry—if anything, the mythologized poetry that Bloom seems to be nostalgic for was poetry designed to be committed to memory and performed aloud: that is, spoken word poetry.

Spoken word is not always memorized, but a memorized performance is a purer form of oral communication than a scripted reading, in which the performer reads from a paper and is reliant on the written language. Both are valid as performance choices—I don't intend to valorize one format over the other—but I think that there are important

effects produced by the memorization of a text which alter the performance, from the point of view of both the performer and the audience. The question of whether or not to memorize also creates an important distinction for many performers, a possible criterion by which spoken word is defined and differentiated from readings. Most performers I have interviewed prefer memorization, and spoken word purists insist that it is all-important. Holding a piece of paper in one's hand is seen as a throwback to traditional text-centric literary practice in that it shifts the focus of the audience from the performance, which only exists while it is happening, to the text, which it is assumed will still be available to consult later. Symbolically, the paper interrupts the cherished directness of spoken word performance. Performance artist Leah Vineberg says, "If I hold this paper between you and I, this *is* between you and I" (72).

That quotation and those in the next few paragraphs are taken from *Impure*, a book of interviews with well-established spoken-word performers from Montreal and Toronto, compiled by Victoria Stanton and Vincent Tinguely, dealing with the history and practice of spoken word in Montreal. Not all the performers interviewed in the book memorize their work, but there is a consensus on the aesthetic benefits of memorization among those who do. Mental absorption of the text allows, first of all, freedom from the physical restraints of books and papers. This opens up the possibility of movement and gesture on stage, eye contact with the audience, and the freedom to improvise. Poetry performer Trish Salah says that when performing without paper "I just have that much more autonomy to play with what my voice sounds like, to raise the pitch, to drop it a

little bit […] It's not that I employ props or anything much like that, but I find that my body is a better instrument if I'm not focused on reading" (74).

Many performers also agree that memorization can lend power and a sense of urgency to the piece, that the piece somehow becomes an autonomous entity that leads the performance. In the words of Catherine Kidd, "The writer writes the story, but when it's performed, the story writes the writer." Kidd is a staunch advocate of the visceral power of memorization:

> One big difference between doing a reading from the page and doing a performance piece is that the text has been eaten, it's been sort of re-absorbed and I feel much more comfortable that way. [When memorizing a piece] It really does feel like I have to turn off conscious censors and editoral boards, to absorb it… It's not like I read a line, close my eyes, say it to myself. It's osmotic, memorization is osmotic, which again I trust, because it's not just my head that's gonna be up there on stage (laughs). I trust the way a story will inhabit my feet and my hands, and how it will make them move too. (65)

This approach emphasizes that the performer is not simply a transparent medium for the work; rather, the performer herself becomes the performance.

There are also suggestions among the interviewees that memorization has a role in the editing and revision of a piece. During the constant re-iteration that memorization requires, the piece may take on permutations that it wouldn't otherwise have. Julie Crysler: "The work that it takes to actually memorize the text brings it to another level. The process of memorizing it helps you to understand what you've written even more. I'll notice connections that I didn't really make while I was writing the piece" (73).

Furthermore, if the job of memorization is done thoroughly enough, then a large degree of improvisation can occur as well. Alexis O'Hara: "I don't worry so much about forgetting things, because you can always just make it up or jump to somewhere else. In that sense I'm more of a performer than a writer, I guess. It's more important for me to give a good performance than to say exactly the words that I wrote because my work is constantly in progress anyway" (73). In this sense the piece is not complete until it is performed. Although it may start off on paper, its evolution continues in performance.

In that context, writing becomes a fixative for the end product rather than the plan on which the performance is modeled. This way of doing things, which reverses the trajectory that the poem follows in traditional poetry readings, allows not just the evolution of the poem over time, but also the coexistence of unlimited variant readings or versions. For this reason, some spoken word performers have actually objected to publication, because it represents a sort of foreclosure on the open-endedness of the unwritten text.

Mnemotechnique and the Oral Tradition

There is an interesting analogy to be drawn here between contemporary spoken word performers and the ancient singers of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. In his study *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*, Gregory Nagy demonstrates how in oral traditions such as that of the Homeric poets, textual variance does not represent a deviation from a fixed original but rather a constant re-creation in which every performance is an

original—a custom that arises from the necessity of memorizing and improvising enormous swathes of detailed poetry.

We know very little about Homer, if such a person actually existed, but up until the mid-eighteenth century it was mostly taken for granted that he was a writer—that is, his compositions were written down. How else would one devise a poem as long and complex as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*? There were, however, dissenters to this view, and with the rise of Romanticism—when poets and scholars became eager to revive any and all oral and vernacular poetry traditions—there arose a heated debate over whether these poems were written or oral. The best reason to favour the illiterate Homer theory was that no solid evidence existed that writing was in use at all during the period of Greek history when the poems were believed to have come into being. Still, it seemed a bit of a stretch to suppose that the singers of the poems, including Homer himself, could have performed such a lengthy text from memory.

There are several features of the Homeric poems, of course, that would make memorization easier. The epic hexameter line is a very strict form consisting of only dactylic (long-short-short) or spondaic (long-long) feet, ending always with a dactyl followed by a spondee, which gives the lines their hypnotic rhythm. The rigours of accommodating this form, which would exclude so many possible words and phrases, are dealt with in part by the repeated use of certain formulaic epithets that describe the heroes and their environments. For example, the hero of the Odyssey is often referred to as "much-enduring Odysseus" or "the man of many schemes," while the theatre for his adventures is famously known as "the wine-dark sea." These are more than just

picturesque nicknames, because they allow the name of the person or place to be fit into a line no matter what the shape of the space; a different formula exists for each possible metric combination. It had been recognized for a long time that these formulae assisted the poet in respecting the meter of the poem, but it wasn't until the early twentieth century that they were identified as mnemonic devices.

In the 1920s, Milman Parry drew attention to these formulae and demonstrated that their use in the poems was far more extensive and systematic than anyone had thought. Based on this insight, he theorized the Homeric bard as a talented improvisational poet drawing on a long oral tradition. By learning a repertoire of stock phrases and a number of key fixed lines, the performer of the poem could then improvise endlessly, telling the same story over and over, but with unlimited variations every time it was told. Parry and his collaborator/successor Albert Lord had studied illiterate oral storytellers in Yugoslavia who operated in exactly that fashion. This would mean, of course, that the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* would have gelled in the forms we know now only later in their history, perhaps when the improvisational performances had already ceased.

One thing that makes the research of Parry and Lord significant to the study of contemporary spoken word is the relationship it seems to reveal between orality and writing. In his book Gregory Nagy argues that a song—such as the Homeric poems or the stories of medieval Provençal troubadours—cannot be fixed in a definitive form so long as the oral tradition survives. Albert Lord, in fact, went even further in his version of that opinion, saying that the two techniques, writing and orality, are mutually exclusive—that they cannot exist within the same literary culture. He based this belief on his experience

of what had happened to the Yugoslavian bards when they learned to read and write: once exposed to the corrupting influence of modern print culture—books, newspapers, etc.—they stopped performing and started writing, losing their improvisational skills entirely.

Lord's theory does not lend much importance to secondary orality—the spoken communication of texts that have already been written—but given the popularity of oral performance in literate societies such as our own, it seems to be a significant part of our linguistic culture. It is also entirely possible that writing had some role in the composition of Homer's works. After all, what would be the point, for an oral improvisational storyteller, of composing a work so long that it would take days to recite? It may be that the work evolved through performance, gaining different nuances and stock lines as it was repeated in whole or in part, and that along the way parts of it were committed to papyrus or skin, and then perhaps lifted from the page again by later performers to undergo another gradual transformation, eventually accreting into the lengthy text we have inherited. This conception of the life of the text would be comparable to the evolution of a spoken word piece: it passes through stages of its life on paper like other poems, but when memorized for performance it metamorphoses, becomes changeable, a sculpture in wet clay. As long as the piece continues to be performed from memory, continues to be exposed to the possibility of improvisation, the printed text cannot be considered final.

Of course, even works that are read from a page become embodied in sound; they exist in time rather than space; they become mutable. Charles Bernstein formulates

another version of this idea when he says in the introduction to *Close Listening* that "the poetry reading is a public tuning" (6). Reading aloud offers the poet the opportunity to re-evaluate his words, which may lead to revisions of the text. But even if none of the words change, the piece is altered every time it is read. Details such as how loudly or softly the performer reads, how passionately or calmly, where the pauses occur, how the audience reacts, even what the performer is wearing: these are alterations not just to the incidental circumstances of the performance, but alterations to the piece itself. However, the fact of reading from a page necessarily limits the extent of textual variance, and tends to preserve the semantic priority of the printed word. Memorization shifts that priority to the performance.

Mnemotechnique as Writing Technique

Actors have always memorized their lines, but actors are not usually the authors of their texts. On the other hand, at traditional readings it is the author behind the mic, but memorization is rare, and especially with prose. What is valuable and more-or-less original about spoken word, then, is that it has encouraged writers to memorize their work. Memorization is a performance technique, obviously, but it's also a writing technique—accessible to any writer, but usually overlooked. As a performer, I often wish I could properly convey to my audiences the sheer satisfaction that it kindles in me. As an activity it's similar to running: it can be painful at first; it can seem like a long, impossible task; you don't want to read the piece over and over again; your eyes and your head get tired; and you just want to stop. The first few times, you probably don't get very

far, but you build up your stamina, and you make it farther through the text. At a certain point in the memorization process (when you get good at it, this happens fairly quickly) you break through the wall, to borrow the horrible jargon of athletes. It goes from being hard to being effortless, almost joyous. Your reiterations become not a way of getting somewhere but an end in themselves. The sentences cease being sentences and become something more pliable, like warm putty for your mind.

With poetry, the most effective mnemotechnique is in the use of rhyme and meter. The impressive feats of recitation attributed to the Homeric bards could never have been possible without epic hexameter. Narrative prose, though, is even better suited to memorization than most poetry, because of its sequential nature. Everyone knows it is easier to memorize a story than it is to memorize a grocery list or a page from the phone book. It's so easy usually that we don't even call it memorization; most people don't need to rehearse, for example, to tell a joke that they've heard once. An excellent writing exercise, whether for performance or not, is to take a story or a prose poem, the more dense and fragmented the better, four or five pages, or even ten or twenty, and to memorize it, word for word, punctuation mark for punctuation mark. It's not as difficult to do as it sounds, because there are always hooks to hang the next line on, mnemonic signposts.

Even avant-garde prose that interferes with traditional narrative sequences has its own sort of mnemonic hooks. In some jokes, the more surreal and unexpected the punch line, the easier it is to remember. While a story with a recognizable and predictable plot may be easier to memorize at first than non-narrative prose, once the text has been

learned, the linkages that form the mnemonic glue, the shady mental connections that allow one phrase to be associated with the next, end up being the same whether the text is linear or chaotic. As Gertrude Stein said, narrative is any two things put one after the other. The elements of a memorized story become associated not by the apparent surface narrative but by a second layer of entirely more esoteric narrative structure, a structure that calls on bits of imaginary Velcro that may have to do with the story, or the sounds of words, or personal connotations, or the images they evoke, or even something completely unrelated, like where you were when you memorized it. Memorization works, in other words, as a kind of fragmentation or analysis more than it does as amalgamation or synthesis. In effect, it opens up the linearity of the story to infinite possibilities for distraction and detour.

I've been talking about things that go on backstage in the mind, in the tenebrous world of neurons and synapses, but ultimately of course those cerebral events will alter the text itself. The process of memorization affects the text in both substantial and esoteric ways. In performance it happens automatically: the little changes in intonation and speed that make one reading different from another, the quiddity of the live performance, are the result of the mnemotechnique's synaptic revisions. However, the text can also be rewritten based on what comes to mind during the performance or during the memorization process itself, making it a bit looser, more prone to tangent and upheaval. The exigencies of memorization encourage the writer/performer to cultivate a more fluid conception of text, paving the way for a less conclusive, more interactive writing practice, a sculptural practice. In other words, the memorized performance can be

an effective tactic for the author in creating, as Bernstein phrases it, "a space of authorial resistance to textual authority"—and perhaps a constructive re-channeling of the narrative impulse (10). For the audience, it can be an opportunity to rediscover the fluidity and power of oral literature, but perhaps also—if the author takes advantage of these tactics—an exposure to a completely idiosyncratic narrative structure based not on story but on mnemonic leaps of faith.

CHAPTER TWENTY: BETTER SOUND THROUGH SCIENCE

> By being set down at a microphone, especially if this happens at all regularly, the poet is brought into a new relationship with his work.
>
> —George Orwell, "Poetry and the Microphone" (329)

In some ways, the question of how poetry should be experienced—on the page, the stage, or the airwaves—is a constantly recurring one, even as the technology available for experiencing it evolves. In the 1945 essay quoted above, Orwell deals with many of the same preoccupations that I am dealing with here: the relationship of poetry to community via performance. Indeed, the entire essay, in which Orwell considers the unpopularity of poetry and the potential of the radio broadcast in popularizing it, could be interpreted as a call for exactly the kind of public relationship to poetry that caused or was caused by spoken word around 50 years later. He also indirectly quotes T.S. Eliot as suggesting that poetry "might be brought back into the consciousness of ordinary people through the medium of the music hall" (334). Orwell prefers the "wireless," though, because its audience is presumably sympathetic, by virtue of being self-selected, and yet completely imaginary from the point of view of the performer. The radio performer is essentially speaking to him- or herself, with possibly millions listening in. The radio was obviously a significant technological development in the history of sound-based art, and it had a huge effect on the music industry for example, but the ability to record and play back sound was arguably even more influential that the ability to broadcast it. In

analyzing the relationship of spoken word performance to sound recording, it becomes clear that this relatively new technology is not only a factor in the growth of spoken word, but possibly the fundamental cause for its appearance at this time: the current revival of oral poetry seems inevitable, in fact, when placed within the history of audio recording technology,

In trying to define the boundaries of spoken word as a genre, it would be tempting to invoke the "you had to be there" argument and to emphasize the live, ephemeral nature of the form, but spoken word is not purely a live phenomenon. In spoken word's two decades, there has been a flurry—not quite a blizzard, perhaps—of CDs (and more recently, mp3s) produced by both experienced and new spoken word artists. The causes, ramifications, and results of this trend, and the way performers feel about recordings, all speak volumes about the nature of the genre itself.

Audio recordings are only a late development in the long history leading to spoken word, but in that context they are hugely significant. A schematic version of the well-known narrative: poetry performance originally relied on the human voice and memory without technological aid, but the desire to address an absent or future audience led to the use of the first poetry-recording technology—writing—which would not be seriously challenged by a rival technology until some 5000 years later, when Edison invented the wax cylinder phonograph. Writing was such a successful technology, however, and had such a pervasive effect on cultural and social practices, that by the time sound recording came along, poetry was being defined in such a way that writing had all but supplanted speech as its primary medium. The page has remained the predominant

way for poets to reach larger or absent audiences, even though audio recordings are inarguably better at capturing poetry as a vocal phenomenon. From this point of view, one might say that spoken word artists are among the first writers to embrace this alternative to writing, this technological shift that, in theory, could make the last five millennia of writing poetry look like a temporary inconvenience.

It's interesting to consider the reasons why this will probably never completely happen. Print and recorded audio have as complex a relationship as literacy and orality; furthermore, as McLuhan would have it, new media absorb old media, rather than replace them. (A practical example of this interdependence is that a recording is almost always accompanied by text—covers, labels, track listings. In many cases, a sound recording would be meaningless if not framed by textual discourse.) Jason Camlot, writing about the early reception of audio recordings in "Early Talking Books: Spoken Recordings and Recitation Anthologies, 1880-1920," observes that the new technology came to represent a fantasy of immediacy which ignored the ways in which both book and recording are mediated. The written and the oral ultimately serve a similar purpose: conveying the artistic use of language to absent audiences. From this point of view perhaps it makes sense to shift our conceptual hierarchy from something like this,

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">LANGUAGE ARTS</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">ORAL</td><td rowspan="2">WRITTEN</td></tr>
<tr><td>Live</td><td>Recorded</td></tr>
</table>

which makes written language equivalent to spoken language, to something like this,

LANGUAGE ARTS		
LIVE	RECORDED	
	Audio	Graphic

which classifies language as either immediate (spoken) or mediated, with the mediated versions using either audio or graphic recording tools.

Publishing Sound

There have of course been exceptions to the predominance of writing; some poets have made use of audio technology over the years as a recording tool and also as tool for composition. The Beat poets are well-known for their experiments in recorded audio, as are Canada's sound poets: the work of one stand-out poetry recordist, bpNichol, can be heard on the PennSound bpNichol webpage edited by Lori Emerson. Another significant touchstone would be Montreal's Véhicule poets—Endre Farkas, Ken Norris, et al.—who put out an album in 1980 called *Sounds Like*. But even as far back as Tennyson and Browning poets have been recorded reading their work. One early wax cylinder contains what may be the attenuated, avuncular voice of Walt Whitman, although the authenticity of that recording is speculative. All three of the latter are included in the anthology *Poetry Speaks*.

In the '80s and early '90s—when the concept of spoken word came into being as it exists today—spoken word artists who wanted to reach an audience beyond the range of the microphone amplifier had a few options: most simply, they could publish their work on the page, as poets have done since the Renaissance. Often, though, spoken word

performers did not publish until they were already well-known, in some cases because they felt the work would lose something in being translated to print, but sometimes because they felt out of place in, or ignored by, the publishing world. Some sympathetic publishers did produce—and many are now producing—books that come with audio recordings, which is a much more performance-friendly sort of publication. Performer Catherine Kidd, for example, has published three books with Montreal's conundrum press; the first came with a cassette, the second with a CD, and the most recent with a DVD. Calgary's Red Deer Press has published three CDs by bill bissett as well as the CD anthology *Carnivocal: A Celebration of Sound Poetry*, edited by Stephen Scobie.

Most visibly, and most significantly for the development of the "spoken-word artist" meme, a few writer-performers were able to use the music industry (unless it was the other way around) to broadcast their work. Writer/singer/performance artist Meryn Cadell, for example, had one of Canada's biggest spoken word radio hits in 1992 with "The Sweater," from the 1991 album *Angel Food for Thought*, which was released with Intrepid records and featured performances by musicians from the Canadian pop groups the Barenaked Ladies, Blue Rodeo, and the Rheostatics. This coincided with a sudden and mostly fleeting surge of mainstream popularity for a certain kind of spoken word that led, for example, to a series of poetry videos on TV. In the early to mid-nineties, MTV led a brief craze for spoken word in the music world. Poet-performer Maggie Estep released her first CD, "No More Mr. Nice Girl," in 1994 with the Nuyorican Poets' Café's spoken word label Nuyo records (later Mouth Almighty), but after an MTV scout saw her perform, she was signed to appear on the music-video station and on tour; her

second album was released with the much larger Mercury Records. Another high-profile spoken word artist who made his way in the music world is Henry Rollins, whose spoken word albums have been mostly released on his own label, but who became well-known first as singer for the punk band Black Flag. There were also musicians who crossed over to spoken word, as with Ian Stephens (1954-1996), who fronted several bands before publishing a book and releasing a solo spoken word cassette, both entitled Diary of a Trademark. This sort of recording blurs the line between music and literature, or music and performance art, as in the case of artists such as Laurie Anderson and Karen Finley, who have each released work on major music labels (Warner and Rykodisc, respectively).

Since the peak of the mid-nineties, however, for a mixture of reasons, the bloom of the music/pop culture industry's infatuation with spoken word has faded—although, this depends on how "spoken word" is defined. The kind of attention that MTV showed to poetry in the mid-nineties was always underscored by the popularity of hip hop culture, and that hasn't waned. The continued importance of spoken word in hip hop is evidenced, for example, by the success of Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam on HBO and on Broadway, hosted by rapper Mos Def and including appearances by such well-known hip hop artists as Kanye West, Talib Kweli, and Common, not to mention pop-culture luminaries as diverse as David Chapelle and Ani Difranco. At the same time, sound-editing and CD-burning have become possible on nearly any computer, making the recording and production process much more accessible. As a result, independent spoken word recordings have proliferated, in an echo of the small-publishing explosion sparked

by photocopiers and design software. The first anthology recording from Wired on Words, an independent Montreal spoken-word label started by Ian Ferrier and Fortner Anderson, was released in 1994 as a cassette, when it was still expensive to have CDs duplicated. Furthermore, the recording owed its existence in great part to the use of the studios at McGill University's CKUT, where the Wired on Words project had begun as poetry singles played on self-rewinding cartridges. Since then, it has become possible to digitally record and edit sound virtually anywhere, and to produce CDs on demand from a laptop, so unsurprisingly it has become much more common for spoken word artists to use a CD as a kind of sampler of their work, the way poets sometimes use chapbooks. This ability to independently produce audio recordings, rather than relying on print publishers or record labels to disseminate the work, makes it easier for more performers to reach new audiences in different places, and makes "spoken word artist" a more viable artistic identity, independent of the publishing and music worlds.

It is easier, in other words, to become a spoken word professional. Even though it is barely recognized as a genre, spoken word has already evolved through several distinct phases, and has cultivated the emergence of experienced writers who make spoken word their main artistic endeavor; this in turn is another reason for the increasing number of recordings available. Another factor has been the availability of funding: the Canada Council's Spoken Word and Storytelling program, which started in 1999 (as the Spoken Word and Multimedia program) has a component specifically intended for funding spoken word recordings. In order to be eligible for these grants, of course, applicants must already be "professional spoken word artists or storytellers," and attaining this

professional status will often involve, at some point, producing recordings. So, if you are a spoken word artist thinking about producing a CD, since the turn of the millennium it is more likely that you will have the motivation, the technology, and (at least in Canada) the funds to do it.

Performance Capture

So far, I have skirted the issue of what artistic value there is in recording a performance. Spoken word, like theatre, is both performance and text. However, spoken word is more focused on the aural than most theatre—visual theatrical appurtenances such as costumes, sets, props, lighting, or movement may play a part in spoken word, but are not vital—so it can usually work as an audio recording in a way that a theatrical stage production wouldn't. This is one way to define an essential difference between the forms: if you keep your eyes closed at a play, you will likely miss something; with spoken word you may actually gain something. Recordings privilege this aural intensity, and can also create a sense of intimacy through private audition. When one hears frogs croaking, birds chirping, dogs barking, and thunder rolling behind Hilary Peach's half-sung, half-spoken words on *Poems Only Dogs Can Hear*, one may be transported in a way that would be difficult to experience in a crowded club or cabaret.

By leaving the stage and entering the studio, the spoken word artist also encounters a whole new range of possibilities that could in some ways redefine the genre: unlimited musical tracks, sound effects, found-sound collage, voice effects. Especially in the era of digital editing, a performer's spoken words, once recorded, can transcend the

limits of human vocal anatomy. As Steve McCaffrey put it in 1978, "The tape recorder […] allows speech—for the first time in its history—a separation from voice" (11). Performers like Alexis O'Hara or Swifty Lazarus (Todd Swift and Tom Walsh) push the envelope in the direction of sound art or text-based musique actuelle. The Swifty Lazarus CD *The Envelope, Please* creates an aural collage of original and sampled music, audio clips from TV and movies, half-heard answering machine messages, the static between stations on the radio dial and, especially, frequent use of effects that make Todd Swift's voice sound distant and mediated, as though heard through a phone line or an intercom. This kind of texturing of the performance dramatizes a critique of the notion that the voice, either live or recorded, is a guarantee of directness or authorial presence. In a private email Todd Swift explained, "For me, recording spoken word is a chance to avoid the naïve presumption of self-expression and sincerity that dogs so much performance poetry; […] with Swifty Lazarus I wanted to create a more opaque, displaced series of voices. Rather than being a centrist, I-obsessed poetics, Swifty Lazarus represents a discordant, multilingual sound-text."

Recordings also foster collaboration and promote interdisciplinarity, especially between writers and musicians. A good example is Clive Holden's 2001 CD *Trains of Winnipeg*, which features music by members of Winnipeg band The Weakerthans, including Christine Fellows, John K. Samson, and Jason Tait; this project has since morphed into an even more collaborative series of short films. Fortner Anderson's *Six Silk Purses*, released in 2005, is an interesting exploration of what it means for a poet to collaborate with musicians on a recording. He invited six well-known Montreal sound

artists to take his recorded poems and create new compositions out of them in whatever way they wanted, and the result not only challenges the transparency of recorded speech but in some cases completely strips it of linguistic comprehensibility. The piece by Alexandre St-Onge, for example, used a kind of non-intentional editing: he applied an algorithm of digital transformations to the recordings, producing a wordless but evocative poem of scratches and clicks. Christof Migone's striking arrangement of Anderson's poem "Vegas" mainly consists of the vowel "a" from that word, layered and extended for five minutes, followed by a one-minute peroration of "s" sounds; the composition is re-titled "Vegass." The poem "There is a Quiet," as re-imagined by Chantal Dumas to focus on the quiet spaces between the words, is a strange but familiar soundscape of breath, air, and background noise. By diversifying the artistic agency affecting the poems, Anderson also increases the scope of their potential artistic reception; at the same time, the recordings highlight the text/sound relationship, since the listener who wants to reconstruct the original meaning must read the poems in the accompanying booklet. When I interviewed him about the project, Anderson spoke of the poem-text as something that exists independently of the interpretation: "This project provides new and enhanced readings of the texts, […] but the words remain, available for other readings, other transformations."

Six Silk Purses and other recent CDs encourage the listener to consider the fundamental issue of whether the recording should attempt to faithfully represent the live performance, or aspire to something altogether different. (Once the performance has been committed to polycarbonate plastic, there is also the reciprocal issue of whether the

performance will emulate the recording, which may be seen as a definitive version.) Furthermore, what relationship should this artifact have to print versions of the work? Should the words be printed in the liner, and if so do they need to be accurate and complete? These questions are only a sample of the choices that confront the producer of a spoken word recording. Some performers like to work with music, while some like to preserve the naked dignity of the words, or to interpose music tracks between a cappella performances. In some cases the recording is highly collaborative; in others it is an idiosyncratic solitary creation. The choices do not end once the product is finished, either. Will it be sold in bookstores, music stores, at shows, or exclusively on the internet? Can it be designed in such a way that store managers will know where to put it? When NYC spoken word label Mouth Almighty first began distributing recordings in the early '90s, they suggested classifying spoken word according to the musical genre of the background tracks, essentially making the argument that spoken word was not a separate genre but simply another kind of vocal performance.[1] Is the CD a product in itself at all? Or is it, like concert t-shirts, basically advertising, and, if so, then what exactly is being advertised? Each of these decisions will be determined by, and may also shape, the artist's conception of what spoken word is.

Of course, only a few years from now I expect that some of these concerns, perspectives, and terms may seem quaint; it seems likely, for example, that CDs will soon go the way of cassettes and then the way of vinyl discs and wax cylinders, and that our audio artifacts will be virtual: mp3s or some other form of bits and bytes. The technology

[1] Bob Holman told me this while at the Banff Spoken Word Program, April 2008.

adapts to better deliver its content, and the content also slowly adapts to suit its technology. The next two chapters touch on ways in which a still newer technology, the internet, has shaped spoken word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: PRESENCE IN ABSENCE

Studio recording, because it allows for many takes and meticulous editing of the results, can sometimes cause a performer's inner perfectionist to take over from the outer exhibitionist. When I interviewed poet-performer Todd Swift about his work in the studio on *The Envelope, Please*, he told me, "For the kind of work that Swifty Lazarus represents, my model was Glenn Gould, when he left live performance for in-studio perfectionism." It's hard to ignore the connotations attached to that image: the great pianist was notoriously anti-social, allegedly afraid of being touched, and was accused of onanistically turning his back on live audiences. Embedded in such an accusation, of course, is the assumption that a live performance is inherently more social than a recording. This brings us back once again to questions about the role of community. The public demand for spoken word CDs is rather faint, to put it mildly—even fainter than the demand for most books of poetry—but this is hardly a definitive indicator of spoken word's popularity, any more than the sales of video or audio recordings of a stage production would be taken as a measure of the vitality of theatre. As with theatre, audiences of spoken word most often hear it from a stage rather than from a pair of headphones: spoken word seems to thrive best in a large room full of people. In fact, purists may see this as a reason to eschew recordings or publications of any kind, because they fix in permanent (dead) form what should be ephemeral (live). Does the simultaneous presence of performer and audience in a room build community in a way that listening to a recording—or reading a book, for that matter—does not? Even if in

theory a recording reaches a larger audience than a live performance does, that audience is made up of isolated individuals listening from their armchairs in their private earbud existences. If you believe that a social context is an important part of the activity, the question then becomes, do recordings inhibit or expand community?

Listening to headphones may seem an antisocial activity, but the production of audio recordings for individual listening can create community in a variety of ways. Take, for example, the spoken word anthology books and recordings that have appeared beginning in the early-'90s with *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, or later the *Short Fuse* anthology, which came with a CD. Such collections are sometimes the documents necessary to convince the community of its own existence. Jill Battson's 1995 release *Word Up*, which appeared at the crest of spoken word's popularity in the '90s, had an enormous influence in building and solidifying the scene in Canada. Wired on Words' *Millennium Cabaret*, produced by Ian Ferrier, profiled the thriving Montreal scene of the mid-'90s, which was obvious to those involved in it, but a revelation to many outside the city. The 1999 CD *Wordlife: Tales of the Underground Griots*, produced by Anthony Bansfield, drew connections between dub poetry and hip hop and the griot tradition in a compilation of black spoken word performers from Montreal, Toronto, and Ottawa. More recently, the anthology *Coastal Tongue*, produced by Laurie Bricker and T. L. Cowan, presented a selection of women performing in the Vancouver scene from 1998 to 2004. On the other side of Canada's linguistic divide, the francophone spoken word scene in Montreal has its own spoken word label in Planète rebelle; the publisher has focused on storytelling in recent years, but at its beginnings in 1998 it released a bilingual

spoken word anthology CD produced by Mitsiko Miller, *La Vache Enragée*, which basically documented the popular cabaret series of the same name. These recordings all served to cement, not dissolve, the social aspect of spoken word.

Furthermore, a so-called live recording, as opposed to a studio recording, can obviously capture a significant part of the context—including introductions, applause, laughter, slips and asides, ambient noise—along with the performance. If more detail is provided, through photos, accompanying text, or video, or if the audio recording is of a well-known author at a recognized venue, then the audience can imaginatively fill in for themselves the missing physicality of the performance, so that the performer remains in some sense present, only displaced in time and place. This kind of recording attempts, in essence, to expand the walls of the room and to perpetuate the event. The re-presented experience, however, no matter how detailed, is not interactive, so it's not the same as being there.

Anthologies, by providing context, have the power to create as well as document a writing scene. Juxtaposition of texts on a page or a CD is not the same as bodies jostling at an event, but the shift is less about social vs. individual than it is about immediate vs. networked community. Audio archives can also serve to reify the existence of a community, especially when they are available online. The archivist defines community much more directly than the typical participant, by deciding who is included and who is not. In an archive of recordings from a particular reading series, the decisions about inclusion are based on real-life decisions about who will be invited to read. But since performers on different nights, possibly years apart, may find themselves side by

side in the archive, this is a form of networked sociality. The ensemble of recordings from a series may, in turn, be juxtaposed with other reading series in other cities. The audio archive not only documents and not only creates a scene by creating its online analogue: as Derrida points out in *Archive Fever*, "The technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event" (17). By offering a venue for the distribution of sound files, and by specifying such things as the length of clips and the threshold of sound quality, the sound archive brings into being a category to be occupied by future spoken word performances. It can even change the poems of the past in subtle ways to fit its categories. There is a line from a Swifty Lazarus piece: "Who knew? Historians, the people who took everything that happened in the recorded past, and re-recorded it for the present, using new technology in order to change, to control, the future" ("History"). Online audio archives give a new meaning to the phrase "the recorded past."

Some of the recordings mentioned above were drawn from a website I created, called Wax to Bits: Spoken Word Recordings in Canada.[1] At this point it is not an archive but a catalogue, the goal being to provide information on all the spoken word recordings that have been produced and marketed in Canada from the earliest wax to the most recent bits. For poets whose work is available primarily in print, a commercial audio recording is likely to be seen as a novelty at best. But for those poets who consider sound to be their primary medium, putting out CDs instead of books makes sense, and this database

[1] The site can be accessed at <https://wfs.gc.cuny.edu/CFrost/www/waxtobitsindex.html>.

demonstrates that. For me it also demonstrates that the very process of assembling an online sound archive is a collaborative effort: recordings need to be gathered, permissions obtained, and so on. Contacting spoken word artists across Canada for information on their recordings has been a process of zig-zagging through a network of connections that become more established with each crossing, like neurons.

It becomes more and more evident in what I've said, though, that recordings of performances, whether studio or "live," whether on CD or in audio archives, have the potential to create community between artists, and not necessarily within an audience. In a live performance the audience is present and implicated, whereas a recording exists independently of the audience. Online archives may compensate for this by incorporating interactive discussion threads, blogs, and so on, and by allowing listeners to download and pass recordings on to other sites and other ears. Nevertheless, hearing poetry live from a stage still offers something that hearing it from a pair of headphones does not—which is not to say that the community of live performance is better than the community of the online archive, or that community is better than privacy, for that matter.

PennSound is a preeminent example of what an online audio poetry archive can accomplish. In the site's fifth podcast, director Al Filreis talks about the pedagogical uses of poetry sound files with Steve Evans, who says at one point that his students often tell him that hearing the recording "humanizes" the poem for them. Evans audibly puts the word in quotation marks, as have I. The human voice may be a good emblem of humanity, but it's not a prerequisite for human poetry. Perhaps, though, what Steve Evans' students are drawn to in the recording is not the voice itself but what it represents:

the physical presence of an actual person. This presence-absence problem is at the heart of many writers' ambivalence about recordings specifically and performance generally. In terms of poetry performance, obviously the live event depends on presence while recordings depend on absence, but the binary is not really so stable. For one thing, in a live performance the physical presence of the writer-performer does not remedy the structural absence inherent to linguistic production. Even when the author is there, the author is not really there; it may be the author's lungs and lips creating airwaves we hear as words, the meanings of those words live only in our minds. On the other hand, in a recording the physical absence of the performer does not preclude the kind of social contextualization I mentioned earlier, through photos, credits, or "live" recordings at recognized venues, such that the performer remains present, somewhere.

On a more practical level, absence is what confers status on the writer-performer. As a spoken word scene establishes itself, it tends to evolve through two phases: first, it is a primarily local phenomenon interested in specific venues or events at which the commitment of the performers is less important than the continuity of the community. Then, it gradually develops into a larger-scale enterprise—not an industry, by far, but a networked community on the national level that fosters the long-term development of individual talents. In the first phase, presence is all-important: the presence of the audience and the performer in the same room, which ensures that the performer remains an audience member too. In the second phase, serious performers need to differentiate themselves from the audience and become "professionals," and absence becomes

indispensable. It becomes necessary to create a public persona, and a persona is in a sense always absent, even when the person is present.

As more and more spoken word recordings are released, it signals a sea-change in the nature of spoken word: away from an emphasis on presence at the local level to a dependence on absence—the loneliness of the long-distance poet. This shift can be seen in the success of national and international annual events such as the National Poetry Slam, the Individual World Poetry Slam, the Festival Voix d'Amériques in Montreal and the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word, which takes place in a different city each year, as well as in the creation of Poetry Slam, Inc., or the Spoken Word Arts Network, a sort of genre-promotion alliance. More and more, spoken word audiences and performers are aware of performances that aren't happening in the same room or even necessarily in the same country. To paraphrase Roland Barthes, the international spoken word community is experiencing the metaphoric death of the performer, thereby facilitating the survival of the performance. The current proliferation of recordings, and their appearance in online archives from PennSound to YouTube, is a part of this absention, and it may be symptomatic of a desire for less community and more absence.

I have an ambivalent reaction to this shift. I think that the evolutionary advance that recordings and online audio archives represent will extend the reach and the longevity of the genre, and probably have little effect on the survival of more local, grassroots spoken word phenomena. However, I also think that a large part of the cultural value of spoken word is that it usually lacks a mass audience and is therefore nearly impervious to commodification. In attempting to transmit itself through media to a larger

audience, spoken word risks sacrificing part of what makes it unique: its live, communal, event-oriented roots. It does gain aesthetic possibilities and the potential for a different kind of community, but in any case it is ineluctably altered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: EARBUD AUDIENCES

Performing Genre

This chapter concerns itself with the way spoken word is performed as a genre via the World Wide Web. The intent, however, is not to treat online media as radically discontinuous with "old" media but rather to suggest that the unique ability of the internet to facilitate connections between disparate texts and audiences creates new modalities for existing genres, ways that they may be inflected by and reflected in other genres. The internet also provides particular tools for the establishment of new genres (although spoken word pre-dates the World Wide Web) or new kinds of genre—hybrid, ill-defined, or unrecognized. Much of the work by which spoken word, or performance poetry, or slam poetry, has been defined, enacted, or created, has been accomplished or is being accomplished on the web through the textual and visual performance of that becoming.

Zoa Smith's website Spoken Oak: The Roots and Branches of Amerikan Spoken Arts is an interesting example of a personal site that engages not only with an individual art practice but with the performance of the genre itself and the terminology by which it might be recognized. The site describes itself as "a source of information about Spoken Word performance in the US and Canada. Our goal is to inspire & promote performance poetry & storytelling, to celebrate the diversity of oral traditions, and to champion the search for a clear and all-inclusive definition of the term 'Spoken Word'." A central feature of the site is the "genre tree," which offers an arboriform abecedary of names for oral literature, including categories such as "Telling Roots" (Evangelist, Griot, Balladeer,

etc.), "Early Traditions" (Snake Oil Seller, Traditional Storyteller, Circus Barker), "Industriots" (Imagist, Modernist, Jazz Poet), "Sound Waves" (Stand-up, Beat Poet, Talk Poet), "Postmodern" (Sound Poet, Performance Poet, Slam Poet), "Rap Music" (Emcee, Deejay, Hybrid), and even "Futurwurds," containing such imagined future forms as Hyperstory, Faunalyrix, and RoboBeat—many of which are not so far-fetched. The author of this taxonomic tree also includes on the "Postmodern" branch her own coinage, Talkapella™ , to describe her own work, thereby clearly carving her initials into spoken word's genealogical trunk. The performance and re-performance of spoken word as a genre often seems motivated by a desire to establish the reputations of specific poets. Of course, there are likely as many versions of the genre tree as there are poets: I think that I shall never see a genre as uncontested as a tree. Still, this sort of grassroots genre activism is especially important for a form that has received little in the way of institutional legitimization, and it contributes to the proliferation of terms and definitions that makes spoken word so generically unstable and protean.

Self-Created Celebrity

If one is casually Googling about the internet in search of information about spoken word practitioners or about the form itself, it quickly becomes apparent that spoken word is an aspirational art-form. It is used to express, in many cases, what the performer wants to be; this expression may be located in the writing and performance, but it is just as evident in the ways performers present themselves and their art. The internet is rife with self-aggrandizing personal websites, overblown descriptions of the

importance of particular venues, and odd attempts to rewrite or re-weight the history of performance art. Wikipedia is of course vulnerable to self-mythologization, but the distortions of the current entry for performance poetry are particularly symptomatic: judging from relative emphasis, a reader otherwise uninformed would conclude that performance poetry was primarily the product of Austin, TX, and the invention of a single poet, Hedwig Gorski.

More generally, there is a tendency towards hyperbole in online advertising for spoken word events that is often reminiscent of, and no doubt consciously or unconsciously echoes, mass media advertising. For example, the site for Urbintel, a NYC-based poetry production company, opens with a flash animation earnestly claiming the status of "The largest spoken word organization in America; first in theatre, first in e-commerce." Online self-representation by spoken word performers seems driven by a narrative of upward social mobility, and in this way spoken word is similar to certain strains of hip hop in which aesthetics is tied strictly to economics. "External blingers is all we can be, 'cause on the inside we've been given nothing to shine on," says rapper/poet Black Ice on HBO's Def Poetry Jam. The "bling" that is a symbol of socio-economic struggle in hip hop is paralleled in spoken word by the bluster of self-promotion and flashy websites.

Imperial Slamtroopers

Embedded in the American Slam Poetry industry is a culturally colonialist enterprise. While the slam began in Chicago in 1986, it has spread around the globe like a

contagious meme, and as it spreads it is altered to suit local sensibilities. As is to be expected, what happens at the Farrago UK Slam in London is not exactly the same in spirit or in detail as what happens at the Green Mill in Chicago. However, at least since the establishment of Poetry Slam, Inc., in 1997, it seems as though there has been a simultaneous effort to promote slam as a global art-sport, and yet to preserve its identity as an essentially American phenomenon. These seemingly contradictory endeavors have largely been conducted online. On the PSI website there is a map of slams around the world, but at the same time there are sentences like this one: "Because of slam's exponential growth as an art form, PSI has emerged not only as an administrative body to maintain the rules that govern slam, but also as an organization that seeks to grow slam's audience and protect slam's interests." Furthermore, one of the major functions of PSI is the certification of slam venues, which is a requisite for participation in the PSI-sponsored National Poetry Slam; in conversations with people running slams in the UK and in Australia, it's clear that PSI's self-appointed role as global administrator of slam orthodoxy does not always win over hearts and minds.

The Spoken Word Binary Code

In online representations of spoken word, we see two opposing conceptions of its social and economic significance. One positions spoken word as countercultural and marginal, resistant to capitalism and its aesthetic apparatus, void of economic value because of its essential unscalability. The other treats spoken word itself or a specific brand of spoken word as a product with mass appeal, nationally or internationally

recognized, the next big thing, an enterprise in constant search of greater market share, inherently covetable because infinitely scalable. The first view values spoken word for being local, intimate, virtually private; in the other view, it is global, promiscuous, public. Sometimes one or the other of these conceptions will dominate in the way a particular spoken word scene is represented on the web, but often they are combined. An uneven and sometimes symbiotic equilibrium exists between these two visions of what we might call spoken word's social destiny.

Scalable Intimacy

In my first chapter I talked about how, when a sound source is extremely close to a directional microphone, the frequency response shifts toward the bass. It's therefore possible to make one's voice seem suddenly much deeper by whispering directly into the mic—this is known to sound technicians as the proximity effect. The proximity effect would also be a good term to describe the importance in spoken word of the closeness of performer and listener. They are often close in a physical sense, with the performer on a small stage and the listener sitting a few feet away, but just as importantly, in spoken word there is little structural distance between the role of the performer and the role of the audience member, as is most clearly dramatized at the open mic or the slam, where in theory any audience member can take the stage. This closeness is public, communal, a group embrace, but it is also intimate, because a poem is still something we perceive individually and interpret privately. It is always, on some level, for your ears only. Paradoxically, experiencing spoken word—or a performance of any kind—through the

internet provides and in fact enhances that individual immediacy, while at the same time allowing global accessibility. Spoken word on the internet has a scalable intimacy, in other words. It is a marketer's dream, a way to firmly shake the hand and look squarely in the eyes of a billion people at once. The look and the handshake only go in one direction, of course: the audience of a Youtube video cannot shout encouragement or leap on to the stage and take the mic. They can post a response, however, or they can get their own mic, and their own camera, and make their own video.

The Virtual Stadium

What happens when a quintessentially small-scale form like spoken word is staged in a mass-culture venue? Can spoken word survive exposure on TV? Can there be such a thing as a spoken word performance in a packed stadium? When Canadian poet and performer Shayne Koyczan appeared on a gigantic pedestal during the opening ceremony of the Vancouver Olympics and was heard by 60,000 attendees and more than a billion television viewers worldwide, was it the largest audience ever for a spoken word performance? Or did he, at that moment, cease to be a spoken word performer, becoming instead a part of a different kind of ritual, something virtual in more ways than one? And after the Olympics, when his poem "We Are More" took on a new life on the internet, through Google searches and YouTube views, how was the nature of the audience changed? Is the earbud audience a one-person crowd, recreating the intimacy of a small venue in their own bedroom, or is it more akin in number and diversity to a virtual

stadium, with a retractable roof the size of the planet? Does the online performance manage to reproduce a bit of both? Or fail to do either?

Networked Aesthetics

Spoken word and the internet have an imperfect interface. A "network" is a spatial metaphor, and the World Wide Web itself is a visual spatial metaphor for multiple linear streams of data. Spoken word performances, however, are time-specific artworks, to borrow a phrase from Nicolas Bourriaud: not only do they primarily rely on speech, which is a time-based medium of communication, but they are often regarded as specific to one location and one crowd and one moment, as I have argued in earlier chapters. Therefore when spoken word is presented online, in addition to being encoded as zeros and ones, it must be recoded in a static textual frame, so that it can be presented spatially. The use of video and audio recordings does not obviate the need for text: in order to be represented on a webpage, each recording must be given a spatial dimension, usually a hyperlinked title or description. It is of course possible to use an image or symbol as a hyperlink, but it is much more difficult to attach a hyperlink to a spoken word. There is a reason why the internet is primarily built on hypertext, rather than hyperspeech.[1] The translation of oral performance into spatially organized text has the side effect, however, of underlining the ways that every text is a performance. What really differentiates spoken word from the online performance of text, then, is not the distinction between oral

[1] This may not always be the case, as systems of hyperspeech code have already been developed that allow users to "surf" the web using only aural cues and commands. Not only does this make the web more accessible to the seeing-impaired, it opens up possibilities for hyperlinked oral communication.

and literate communication, but rather that between spontaneous and scripted. The text of a poem can be presented on stage or on a page or in electronic forms ranging from image to animation to video, but spoken word performers have the capacity to speak outside the text, to talk and listen directly to the audience, to improvise and explain. In other words, it is the asides that make a text spoken word; going by this definition, we might conclude that spoken word is not necessarily spoken. It can't be a static written text on its own, but it could be a written text that is somehow presented in a time-based performance and introduced or elaborated upon in paratextual asides; it could also be a hypertext. The projected (projective?) verse series I mentioned earlier could be an opportunity for poets to explore the possibility of performing visual spoken word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: POETS OF THEIR OWN ACTIONS

Spoken word will never be as revolutionary as some of its practitioners would like to believe it is, and the oppositional narratives that have been constructed around it are as susceptible to appropriation by the dominant culture as any popular cultural form. I do think, however, that spoken word has certain unique characteristics that make it a kind of stronghold of irreconcilable difference, whatever-ness, and unprofitability. Although spoken word is a widespread, popular activity, it nevertheless remains for the most part useless and unappealing to capitalism. And unlike a "national" or official poetry, spoken word, by organizing itself primary around the local, presents an implicit critique of the myths of national identity that are a staple in the rhetoric of globalization, at least in its traditional forms. More and more, globalization operates through the attachments and movements of affinity groups like the one represented by spoken word performers.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau looks at the ways so-called consumers of culture are actually users, or unrecognized producers, who create new things from the materials disseminated by the more established producers of culture and commodities. There are many possible examples of this; de Certeau mentions cooking as an activity that uses mass-produced goods but is nearly always improvisational and idiosyncratic, and suggests that watching TV or reading a book can entail similar processes of turning the given materials to one's own ends. More fundamentally, language itself involves the construction of sentences, conversations, stories, and discourses from a pre-fabricated grammar and vocabulary.

When a subject has power, an agenda, and a platform from which to pursue it, de Certeau says, that subject's ways of operating will be what he calls strategies—governments, corporations and institutions, for instance, rely on strategies. They must use their considerable size and resources to plan how they will exert their will. On the other hand are those subjects who are not in a position to define an other on which they could exert their will, and who have neither power nor resources nor a stable platform from which to deploy them; their ways of operating will be what he calls tactics. The tactician must make do with what is provided, adapting it to constantly shifting purposes, and the results are not necessarily manifested in discourse or in artifacts but in the actions themselves and the style with which they are undertaken. Each of these actions, from wearing a hat to watching a film to eating an avocado, can be seen as a kind of poësis or making; in de Certeau's memorable phrase, tacticians of everyday life are poets of their own actions.

Although spoken word is a form of artistic production rather than an everyday activity, it is more tactic than strategy. Furthermore, and this is perhaps a more invidious suggestion, contemporary "literary" poetry, which in order to be visible must often be affiliated with an institution or publication or "school," is served better by strategies that make use of its long traditions and cultural prestige, and must necessarily have different cultural modalities and different aims than spoken word, which is, with some exceptions, an activity without institutional sanction or economic resources—falling into the category that Maria Damon has referred to as "micropoetries" (12).

Spoken word, precisely because it is less able to establish a fixed place for itself, is better able to shift its meanings and relations to the institutions of culture. This is not to say that other kinds of poetry cannot be tactical, because after all it would be a fantasy to say that institutional poetry is the voice of the hegemonic monoculture; poets are not really the unacknowledged legislators of the world. But in terms of anti-hegemonic resistance, spoken word has an advantage that comes from being undefined, ephemeral, local, forced to set up shop in quirky cafés and dive-y bars rather than on course syllabi or in publishers' catalogues. In other words, there is a tactical advantage in being "genre." In a sense, it is the very fact that spoken word is actively or passively excluded from the poetry canon that gives it this advantage, and therefore the efforts of promoters to brand spoken word as a continuation of the ancient practice of oral poetry, or to try to gain recognition for spoken word from other domains of poetry, are ironic and perhaps self-defeating.

Instead of constantly striving to establish a lineage or to create a generic canon, which are inherently strategies of institutionalization, I'd like to see spoken word practitioners deploy the tactics of the unacknowledged producer. One of these tactics is speed. Publishing poetry takes time; it is historical; compared to other art forms, it is slow-moving. Spoken word, though, can be instantaneous. It involves the compression of some or sometimes all the functions of cultural production: the artistic milieu, the development of the author, the composition of the work, the performance and the reception, often into a single moment. Even if the work is not at all improvised, it is the nature of live performance that the individual iteration will be. This is a fundamental

characteristic of the tactic; as de Certeau says, "Because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'" (xix).

I want to move the study of poetry away from the analysis of aesthetic strategies, and towards an examination of the tactics of listening. How do audiences of spoken word create the form themselves through their reactions and their ways of socializing around the work? De Certeau insists that we must examine not only what representations are produced and how they are received, but also what is made of them. A survey of what TV shows are on the air and which ones people watch does not tell the whole story of television culture; we must also ask what people do with those shows, how they use them. I think it would be useful to apply a similar analytical tactic to poetry, and to the place that poetry occupies in the broader culture: rather than asking which poetry is meaningful to people, and whether their choices are justifiable, we should ask what *experiences* of poetry are meaningful, and how people actively make them so.

CONCLUSION: POPULAR, PARODIC, PERFORMATIVE

This is the point in the evening when the MC takes the microphone for the last time to say, "I hope you have all enjoyed yourselves; please come back next week." The following text is what I am calling a conclusion, although my feeling is that it is more like a prologue. This project has only scratched the surface of what there is to say about performance literature as a social project; furthermore I feel that I have only begun to discover what I personally have to say on the subject, and I look forward to expanding and refining what I have written here. Thinking about spoken word in the context of academic research has brought up a host of questions that I had not previously considered, that my separate contacts with spoken word and with academia had not encouraged me to consider. Chief among them are questions having to do with genre, identity, and authenticity: what role do these concepts play in how critics evaluate literature and in how people determine their cultural interests and allegiances? I have already brought up many ideas that touch on these issues, but I will conclude by briefly outlining some connections between them.

In many ways, this dissertation has been about distinctions between low and high culture, or to use language that is more current and more precise, between the popular and the avant-garde—and it has also been about my efforts to challenge those distinctions. The latter two categories are not comprehensive, but claims about each are often framed in binaristic and relative terms: the popular excludes everything that is not accessible, and the avant-garde excludes everything that is not innovative. Interestingly,

poets who align themselves with either category often consider themselves marginalized by the mainstream. Susan Somers-Willett, in *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, implicitly makes opposing aesthetic categories of popular and official (dominant) poetry, with slam poetry and spoken word on the "pop" side of the binary. She specifies, for example, that avant-garde poetry performance is not popular. This fairly well-accepted conception of the popular/avant-garde dichotomy seems to refer not to the size of the audience but rather to the boldness of the form, with each side considering itself more bold.

The problematic thing about drawing a distinction in this way, between the popular and everything else, is that it suggests that some poetry, like slam, is "of the people" while other poetry, like avant-garde or so-called academic poetry, exists beyond people, beyond the social. But academic poetry is also "of the people" and by the people—a different slice of people, no doubt, but still people. This sense of the term "popular" is both a slight to the poetry it excludes and a diminishment of the poetry it means to justify. It is the inverse of terms such as "folk art" or "outsider art," which are similarly used to demarcate cultural boundaries. Such terminology marks "popular" art as transient, contingent, naïve, non-canonical, marginal, "other." The label "popular" is in this way akin to the label "ethnic"—its use creates a privileged category of non-ethnic, or in this case, elite: permanent, universal, knowing, canonical, central, dominant. To that list we might add "unpopular," which would be structurally fitting and empirically accurate, if unflattering. This othering of the popular is a political problem that leftist theorists such as Tony Bennett and Stuart Hall recognized when cultural studies first

began to examine mass culture. "There is no fixed content to the category of 'popular culture,'" Hall points out, and as much as dominant culture may try to define one, "there is no fixed subject to attach to it—'the people'" (239). It is not possible, in other words, for "the people" to be a sub-set of society.

Therefore I am wary of attempts to define spoken word, for example, in opposition to poetries that may be perceived as dominant or less accesible or more elitist. There is one sense in which spoken word is a popular form: many, many people practice it. But using this to valorize spoken word as the poetry of "the people" not only encourages a divisive politics of identity among poets, it also makes the entire practice of spoken word into an identity itself. What the difficulty in defining spoken word shows is that spoken word can not and should not be conceived as an identity to which one can belong; rather it is a behaviour that one can choose to participate in or not. Spoken word is performance, but it is also performative, in the sense that it only defines an individual, whether a performer or an audience member, in ways that are assumed and contingent rather than inherent and unchanging. Spoken word poems may often seem to be about straightforward expressions of identity, but spoken word as an activity is a diverse, fluid environment in which participants can try on different identities, passively and actively, by listening or by speaking. It is an identity-neutral environment, or, to return to Agamben, a "whatever" community. This is precisely how I see spoken word as a source of resistance to normative structures: not through fiery-eyed, forceful demonstrations of identity but through fiery-eyed, forceful *performances* of identity.

The performative nature of spoken word can be seen in the role parody plays in the conception and execution of spoken word performances and events. For the average consumer of pop culture, of course, the performance poet is already purely parodic: an embarrassingly earnest creature, willing to seize a microphone and inflict painfully cliché verse on a sparse and semi-interested audience, thereby exhibiting a peculiar mixture of egotism and self-pity. There is perhaps no figure in the world of art, excepting perhaps the mime, that is more open to ridicule. What this portrait elides, however, is that parody is an important feature of spoken word itself: in performing his or her poetry, the spoken word artist in a sense performs "poet," explicitly or not, and credibly or not.

As I discussed in chapter ten, the spoken word movement of the last couple of decades owes a great debt to the irreverent attitude of the punk movement, which plays out in spoken word's sense of self-parody. Before the poetry slam, there were poetry bouts in boxing gear. The events imitated professional boxing matches, complete with gloves and girls in bikinis, which in itself was an arch and self-ridiculing commentary on poetry readings. Even earlier than that, the Beats were intensely aware of the effect of the beatnik stereotype on their own performances—Ted Joans even apparently ran a tongue-in-cheek "Rent-a-Beatnik" service, where he would play the beatnik. The original poetry slam at the Green Mill in Chicago operated along the same lines as a professional wrestling bout: it was an exhibition, a performance art piece arranged by the "contestants" who were actually in cahoots, although it perhaps resembled American Gladiators more than pro wrestling. One of the participants showed up with shoulder pads and studded leather gloves with spikes, while another one wore a camouflage-patterned

tutu and called herself Rambolina. Meanwhile, other poetry events took on a similarly ludic tone. In New York, Bob Holman and Pedro Pietri featured dead poets such as Walt Whitman and Sylvia Plath in their onstage TV talk show, and in San Francisco Gary Glazner created a carnivalesque slam with a barker and hot dog vendors, which he says was largely inspired by John Cage's ideas about aleatory art. Today the poetry slam is much more formalized, and the sense that the participants are actors in a ensemble cast is usually eclipsed by the sense of competition, but the element of self-parody persists in how the slam is presented, and it has often been the point. According to Alexis O'Hara, organizer of Montreal's Sham Slam, "The event is all about making fun of slams and the spoken word scene in general." Alexis is of course a performer herself, and she used the proceeds from the Sham Slam to fund her team's trip to the US National Poetry Slam Championships (Miller, "Verse Case"). This tendency towards parody is a common thread in spoken word, not just in the Sham Slam. Popular performers in Montreal in the '90s included Ed Fuller, whose act consisted of a lurid facsimile of a crooning lounge lizard; Dayna McLeod, who was known for her routine dressed as a giant beaver, among other things; and Les Abdigradationists, who played wonky pseudo-New Wave music and read what they called "poésie pure."

In chapter seventeen, I discussed the perception that many people have of spoken word as a more "direct" or sincere kind of poetry. It's more likely that spoken word involves a kind of role-playing and that directness is one of the "effects" adopted by the performer. This would not mean that the performance is deceitful, but rather that various discourses are displayed for the audience in such a way that the constructed nature of

those discourses is made obvious. In much spoken word the text is composed of a Barthesian tissue of pop cultural quotations: for example, the voice of a newscaster is used to convey incongruous emotional material, a snippet of pop melody is used as a refrain, and the metaphors used are drawn from TV shows and movies. This discourse collage is primarily a way of subverting the claim to "sincerity" of these pop sources. Spoken word of this variety could be seen as a kind of theatre that, rather than portraying characters, reproduces the interaction of discourses. A spoken word text, in other words, is what Bakhtin called a hybrid utterance: a single voice employing multiple kinds of speech. Those performances that create a feeling of directness, on the other hand—this is especially true of the blunt, first-person forms of the poetry slam—focus on the discourse of a particular character that the performer inhabits. Performance poetry events, and poetry slams in particular, can perhaps be interpreted as a literary drag show, where the line between good and bad poetry may become blurred or inverted, and where the carnival atmosphere of dress-up and disidentification (in José Muñoz's sense) creates a situation open to abrasiveness, conflict, confusion, humour, resistance, and risk, in a way that a more sedate, fixed-identity reading might not. Spoken word is not acting, many purists will insist, but neither is it simply "being yourself."

If spoken word performance is more a behavior than an identity, it challenges us to ask a much larger question: is there identity outside behavior? Do people do spoken word because they need to or because they want to? Is there a spoken word gene? This line of thought leads us back to speech act theory and its critics: if spoken word is performative in the sense outlined above, then contrary to what I said earlier it is not

performative in J.L. Austin's sense: it is excluded from that paradigm, of speech acts that accomplish things in and of themselves, because it is a fictional, or as Austin puts it, a "parasitic" use of language. Eve Sedgwick has pointed out that Austin's efforts to exclude or even stigmatize the theatrical or fictional are tellingly overdetermined: not only does he call them "parasitic," they are also "ill" and "etiolated" (unnaturally pale, sickly, weak). This resonates with Paul de Man's characterization of the performative as "aberrant" (105). It is enough for Sedgwick to suggest a few other adjectives: abnormal, effete, perverse, to drive home that performance may always in one way be queer performance. Furthermore, Sedgwick also explains that the agents involved in any performative speech act include not just the speaker and the addressee but also the interpellated witnesses. She examines, for instance, how Austin's most re-iterated example—that of the utterance "I do" at a wedding—necessarily implicates not just the bride and the groom and the minister but the entire audience as well, and therefore has a forcibly normative function. If the audience is a part of the conditions of a performative utterance that is "natural" or normative, then it is also complicit in the unnatural, perverse, aberrant utterance that presents a challenge to fixed identity and fixed cultural hierarchies.

That, in the end, is the conclusion that resonates the most for me after nearly two decades of participation, observation, and theorization of performance literature. Spoken word is a social project, but one that has the potential to subvert rather than reinforce social groupings based on identity, especially identities as culturally entrenched as that of "poet." I have also found that spoken word offers a necessary counternarrative to

assumptions about genre, identity, and authenticity that still underpin the conventional operation of literary criticism. The discomfort that many poets and critics feel about spoken word can be attributed, I think, to its potential to undermine an evaluative approach to poetry criticism and to complicate questions such as: Who is a poet? What is good poetry and according to whom? And what purpose should it serve? These questions are constantly being asked, of course, and I haven't answered any of them here, at least not definitively. What is clear to me, though, is that spoken word represents a poetic culture in which the conventional answers to those questions no longer hold the attention of the audience.

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