

**The Performance and Perception of Authenticity  
in Contemporary U.K. Spoken Word Poetry**

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## Declaration of Authorship

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Zahra Hils', written in a cursive style.

Signed:

Date: 7 Sep. 2020

## **Abstract**

Contemporary spoken word poetry events are often described as a platform for ‘authentic’ expression: emotionally charged spaces at which poets viscerally, honestly share their personal experiences directly with the audience. Scholarship into this genre generally concurs that ‘authenticity’ functions as an aesthetic and moral quality within the genre: that poems and poets perceived as ‘authentic’ achieve more success. However, ‘authenticity’ is not a singular, static trait but rather a rapidly evolving, culturally conditional, and subjective process relying on the dialogic exchange of performance and perception. This thesis seeks to clarify the discourse regarding authenticity within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry by proposing a genre-specific taxonomy of ten strains of authenticity which are commonly performed, framed, and perceived in this sphere. These distinct, though interlacing, strains are the authenticities of origin, autobiographical self, narrative, persona, temporal state, emotion, voice, identity, motivation, and engagement. The thesis draws upon social scientific methodology, including interviews with 70 U.K.-based poets, to examine how each of these strains functions as an aesthetic and moral quality within the genre. It considers how individual poets may perform these authenticities as well as how the conventions of spoken word spaces encourage the perception of poets as ‘real’ people (rather than actors playing characters) sharing autobiographical narratives while fully co-present with their audiences. Ultimately, this thesis emphasises the constructed, subjective nature of authenticity by revealing the extent to which spoken word performances are pre-composed, rehearsed, and otherwise artistically wrought. It concludes by analysing the commonality of descriptions of spoken word poetry as ‘authentic’ in academic scholarship and popular media and argues that this rhetoric is rooted in stereotype and downplays the skill and craft required in this multidisciplinary art form.

# Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP</b>   | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>ABSTRACT</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>TABLE OF FIGURES</b>  | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>   | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>  | <b>11</b> |
| DEFINING SPOKEN WORD POETRY  | 17        |
| U.K. SPOKEN WORD HISTORY   | 26        |
| LACK OF CRITICAL ATTENTION   | 31        |
| METHODOLOGY  | 35        |
| <i>Approach to Poem Analysis</i>   | 36        |
| <i>Methodology: Ethnography</i>  | 38        |
| <i>Data Collection: Interviews with Poets</i>                            | 42        |
| <i>Methodology: Audience Reception Theory</i>                            | 59        |
| CHAPTER LAYOUT   | 63        |
| <b>CHAPTER 1: CONTEXTUALISING ‘AUTHENTICITY’</b>                         | <b>67</b> |
| DEFINING ‘AUTHENTICITY’  | 68        |
| ‘AUTHENTICITY’ IN SPOKEN WORD POETRY                                     | 76        |
| THE PARADOX OF PERFORMATIVE AUTHENTICITY                                 | 81        |
| WHY A TAXONOMY?  | 83        |
| CLARIFYING TERMS   | 86        |
| <i>Terms for I</i>   | 86        |
| <i>Paratext</i>  | 87        |
| CHAPTER CONCLUSION   | 88        |
| <b>CHAPTER 2: AUTHENTICITIES OF SELF</b>                                 | <b>89</b> |
| AUTHENTICITY OF ORIGIN   | 90        |
| <i>The Convention of ‘Authenticity of Origin’</i>                        | 92        |
| <i>Devices for Performing ‘Authenticity of Origin’</i>                   | 97        |
| <i>Theoretical Comfort with ‘Inauthenticity of Origin’</i>               | 98        |
| <i>Section Conclusion</i>  | 100       |
| AUTHENTICITY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF                                    | 101       |
| <i>The Convention of ‘Authenticity of Autobiographical Self’</i>         | 102       |
| <i>Lejeune’s Autobiographical Pact</i>                                   | 103       |
| <i>Techniques for Performing ‘Authenticity of Autobiographical Self’</i> | 106       |
| <i>No Guarantee of Autobiography</i>                                     | 108       |
| <i>An Exception: Persona Poems</i>                                       | 110       |
| <i>Section Conclusion</i>  | 111       |
| AUTHENTICITY OF NARRATIVE  | 112       |
| <i>Expectations of Veracity</i>  | 113       |
| <i>The Referential Pact</i>  | 115       |
| <i>Bending the Pact: Nuances in Veracity Performance</i>                 | 117       |
| <i>Reactions to Fictitious Material</i>                                  | 121       |
| <i>Exceptions: Surreal and Humorous Material</i>                         | 128       |
| <i>Section Conclusion</i>  | 131       |
| CASE STUDY: CONNOR MACLEOD’S “FLOWERS”                                   | 131       |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| CHAPTER CONCLUSION   | 137        |
| <b>CHAPTER 3: AUTHENTICITIES OF PRESENCE</b>                         | <b>138</b> |
| AUTHENTICITY OF PERSONA  | 141        |
| <i>The Convention of 'Authenticity of Persona'</i>                   | 142        |
| <i>Performing, not Acting</i>  | 148        |
| <i>Inauthenticity as Self-Care</i>                                   | 149        |
| Section Conclusion   | 150        |
| AUTHENTICITY OF TEMPORAL STATE                                       | 150        |
| <i>The Legitimacy of 'Authenticity of Temporal State'</i>            | 152        |
| <i>Techniques for Performing 'Authenticity of Temporal State'</i>    | 154        |
| <i>'Authenticity of Temporal State' as Dependent on Liveness</i>     | 156        |
| Section Conclusion   | 157        |
| EMOTIONAL AUTHENTICITY   | 158        |
| <i>Valuing 'Emotional Authenticity'</i>                              | 159        |
| <i>Subjectivity of Perceiving 'Emotional Authenticity'</i>           | 163        |
| <i>Consciously Prompting 'Emotional Authenticity'</i>                | 165        |
| <i>The Ethics of 'Emotional Inauthenticity'</i>                      | 166        |
| Section Conclusion   | 168        |
| CASE STUDY: JACK MACMILLAN'S "PARACETAMOL"                           | 168        |
| CHAPTER CONCLUSION   | 172        |
| <b>CHAPTER 4: SOCIALLY MEDIATED AUTHENTICITIES</b>                   | <b>173</b> |
| AUTHENTICITY OF VOICE  | 174        |
| <i>Valuing 'Authenticity of Voice'</i>                               | 175        |
| <i>Paying Homage to 'Original' Styles</i>                            | 179        |
| Section Conclusion   | 181        |
| AUTHENTICITY OF IDENTITY   | 181        |
| <i>Identity Performance as Empowering</i>                            | 185        |
| <i>Significance of Visible/Audible Markers</i>                       | 187        |
| <i>Marginalised Identity Markers as Authenticating Factors</i>       | 188        |
| <i>Spoken Word's Association with Marginality</i>                    | 195        |
| <i>Burden of Representation on Marginalised Poets</i>                | 199        |
| <i>Incentivisation to Perform Essentialising Material</i>            | 201        |
| <i>Non-Marginal Poets and Appropriation</i>                          | 211        |
| Section Conclusion   | 215        |
| AUTHENTICITY OF MOTIVATION   | 216        |
| <i>Contextualising 'Authenticity of Motivation'</i>                  | 217        |
| <i>'Authenticity of Motivation' Within Spoken Word</i>               | 219        |
| Case Study: Poetry in Advertising                                    | 221        |
| <i>Implications for Professionalisation</i>                          | 230        |
| Section Conclusion   | 231        |
| CASE STUDY: KEITH JARRETT'S "HIP HOP SALVATION"                      | 231        |
| CHAPTER CONCLUSION   | 238        |
| <b>CHAPTER 5: EVENT CONVENTIONS AND 'AUTHENTICITY OF ENGAGEMENT'</b> | <b>239</b> |
| EXPLAINING TERMS: PROXEMICS AND SPATIAL FUNCTION                     | 244        |
| THE SPOKEN WORD EVENT  | 248        |
| <i>Counter-Institutional Conventions</i>                             | 250        |
| <i>Marketing</i>   | 252        |
| <i>Physical Setting</i>  | 256        |
| AUTHENTICITY OF ENGAGEMENT   | 266        |
| CASE STUDY: LOUD POETS, STRAIGHT OUTTA DENNISTOUN                    | 271        |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| CHAPTER CONCLUSION  | 277        |
| <b>CHAPTER 6: ‘AUTHENTICITY’ AND THE CRITICAL DISCOURSE</b> | <b>279</b> |
| POETRY SLAMS AS CRITICAL FORA                               | 282        |
| THE VALORISATION OF TRAUMATIC NARRATIVES                    | 287        |
| SHORTCOMINGS OF THE CRITICAL DISCOURSE                      | 295        |
| CASE STUDY: “THE CULT OF THE NOBLE AMATEUR”                 | 305        |
| A BETTER CRITICAL FRAMEWORK                                 | 309        |
| CHAPTER CONCLUSION  | 315        |
| <b>CONCLUSION</b>   | <b>317</b> |
| <b>WORKS CITED</b>  | <b>321</b> |
| <b>APPENDICES</b>   | <b>357</b> |
| APPENDIX A: TAXONOMY OF SPOKEN WORD AUTHENTICITIES          | 358        |
| APPENDIX B: INDEX OF CITED POEMS                            | 359        |
| APPENDIX C: INDEX OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS                  | 362        |
| APPENDIX D: ETHICS APPLICATION                              | 367        |
| APPENDIX E: RISK ASSESSMENT                                 | 376        |
| APPENDIX F: INVITATION EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS                | 381        |
| APPENDIX G: PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET                 | 382        |
| APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT FORM                           | 388        |
| APPENDIX I: SOHC RECORDING AGREEMENT FORM                   | 390        |
| APPENDIX J: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE                              | 392        |
| APPENDIX K: FOLLOW-UP EMAIL TEMPLATE                        | 395        |

## Table of Figures

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Figure #1: Macmillan performing an ‘error’ during the line ‘She asks me what it’s like to live at home with my mum and my dad / [gesture] / asks what it’s like to live at home with my mum / and her new boyfriend.’ Still from UniSlam 2018, filmed by Tyrone Lewis. .... | 171 |
| Figure #2: Still from “Voices Nationwide: Mary on squirrelling away a bit each month.” YouTube, uploaded by Nationwide Building Society, 10 July 2017, <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnbLS7YwNI4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnbLS7YwNI4</a> .....          | 223 |
| Figure #3: Jarrett’s hand gestures as he performs the line ‘using pared down rhythms to connect / the seemingly disparate seams of my selves.’ Still from the 2016 Muddy Feet recording (“Keith Jarrett - Hip Hop Salvation.”).....   | 236 |
| Figure #4. McAuley’s ‘taxonomy of spatial function in the theatre.’ In <i>Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre</i> , pp. 25. ....  | 246 |
| Figure #5: AR Crow performing at Loud Poets: Straight Outta Dennistoun, 5 Nov. 2015. Photo credit: Bibi June. ....  | 274 |

All of the figures in this thesis can also be viewed via  
<https://tinyurl.com/AilesPhDResources>

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## Introduction

What is a good poem? ... I look for the truth in it. Which is –  
depending on how good a poet is, can be very easy to fake. If you can  
– if you can fake sincerity, you’ve got it made.  
—Connor Macleod (Interview)

It is a Sunday evening in late January, 2018, and several hundred people are gathered at the Curve Theatre in Leicester for the finals of UniSlam, the annual poetry slam for university students across the U.K. The audience is composed predominantly of these young poets cheering on their fellow competitors, plus some spectators from Leicester interested in what the Facebook event page describes as a ‘cornerstone event in the British spoken word calendar’ (CURVE theatre, Leicester). While the 900-capacity theatre has not quite sold out, there is a large and highly enthusiastic audience. The room feels abuzz with nervous, excited energy. The stage is professionally lit and features four microphones on stands lining the downstage edge, with a judges’ table along stage right and a podium showcasing three silver trophies at upstage left.

We are now halfway through the final, expertly compered by spoken word veteran Kat Francois. Of the many poets who have taken the stage for solo and team performances, their youth has been the only consistent demographic feature. The performers are remarkably diverse, reflecting a range of races, ethnicities, accents, classes, genders, sexual orientations, and abilities. Many of them have performed material asserting and celebrating their identities, particularly those with identities which have been societally marginalised. Many also have performed poetry concerning personal trauma: narratives of violence, sexual assault, and oppression.

Now Francois asks who will perform the next poem representing the team from Bath Spa University. From their seats in the audience the Bath Spa team all yell ‘Connor!’ and a tall, lanky young man bounds up from among them to the stage. He is white with unruly brown hair, round glasses, and black nail polish, dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt with an unbuttoned plaid shirt over it. He does not carry a book or any other prompts from which to read his poem. After adjusting the

microphone stand to his height, he looks down and settles his body into a neutral position. The theatre is silent, awaiting his performance.<sup>1</sup>

Connor looks up, adjusts his glasses, makes some indistinct hand gestures, and begins: ‘OK, so I have bought you flowers.’ His first-person poem is structured as an address to an unidentified figure. It becomes apparent that this person is absent from the speaker’s life, and that because the speaker misses them he has taken up various activities to feel closer to them (using their detergent, taking up cooking lessons, etc.). The addressee is not specifically identified, but the contextual cues imply that it was a romantic relationship which has come to an end: ‘I miss how you smell,’ ‘You did only leave me one of your shirts.’

The poem’s tone is conversational, casual, to the extent that the speaker interrupts himself several times with a new thought as if having suddenly remembered it. While the piece lacks any rigid form or metre, it features frequent internal rhymes and plays with rhythm. Connor frequently adjusts the speed and volume of his voice to shift the tone of the poem. The performance engages his entire body: his hands are virtually never still, and at one point he even leans away from the microphone stand to shout a line at upstage right. For the majority of the poem his gaze is focused into the audience. The spectators audibly engage throughout the poem: at humorous moments they laugh, there is a smattering of applause, and some click their fingers in appreciation.<sup>2</sup>

As Connor seems to recall the experiences he is recounting through the poem in real time, his emotional affect shifts from upbeat to sombre. Roughly two-thirds of the way through the poem, the absence of the addressee is explained:

I have stopped saving up for a motorbike.  
Thought you’d be happy about that,

<sup>1</sup> This account is primarily based on my memory of the event as an audience member. I have also relied on a video recording of this exact performance (“Flowers,” filmed by Tyrone Lewis) which is not publicly available online but may be viewed via the link in Appendix B of this thesis. All quotations in this section are consistent with that iteration of the poem.

<sup>2</sup> Within some spoken word contexts, clicking one’s fingers can a way of indicating appreciation of a poem, as it is less disruptive than clapping while the poem is taking place. This trend has a long history in the U.S. reaching back to the Beatniks (Rosman) and at one point in U.S. slam culture denoted the audience’s disapproval rather than praise (M. Smith *Stage a Poetry Slam* 22). In my observation this practice is less entrenched in the U.K. and is most commonly used in poetry slam settings rather than spoken word events more generally.

cos you always did say they were dangerous.

We both now know what that danger is.<sup>3</sup>

The speaker describes his visceral reaction to the addressee's death using sensory imagery, eliciting more finger-clicking from the audience. Connor's body is more still now, his speech slower and quieter. As the poem comes to a close, the earlier lines are repeated—'So I've started using your detergent / I've started taking cooking lessons'—with these actions recast as commemorative duties following the addressee's death: 'Because I've worked out that if I can be / anything like how good you were to me / it will make up for the hours we never had.' Connor's voice trembles and cracks faintly as he speaks the poem's final lines, with a long pause before the final word: 'I will always, always bring you flowers // Dad.'

At this twist ending, reframing the loss as that of a parent rather than a lover, several audience members audibly gasp. Connor turns from the mic and walks back to his seat to thunderous applause and cheers. The poem has lasted 2:40, safely under the allotted three minutes permitted per poem at the slam. While Connor's individual score is not read out, his team places second in the final, no doubt due in part to the success of his poem.

\*

Sitting in the audience, I mull over what I have just witnessed. I am present at UniSlam in several capacities: as a competitor representing the University of Strathclyde, as an academic observing the event for my PhD research, as a spoken word events producer scouting fresh talent, and simply as a lover of poetry. I know the poet performing, Connor Macleod, in each of these capacities: as my competition in the slam, as a fellow academic also researching spoken word and one of the poets I interviewed three months prior for my PhD research, as a fellow events producer, and as a friend within the spoken word community. I also know that the narrative that he just performed onstage is at least partially fictional: his father is still alive.

<sup>3</sup> I transcribed the poem directly from the video; the punctuation and lineation are not based on any published version of the poem but rather on my perception of the pauses and breaths within that performance.

As I filter out of the theatre alongside the other poets and spectators, I consider what I have learned in the past year interviewing spoken word poets across the U.K. and through my own experiences as an insider in this scene. Most U.K. spoken word poets think that our audiences automatically assume the poetry we share onstage to be true and autobiographical.<sup>4</sup> I wonder: how much of the audience tonight assumed Macleod's poem to be autobiographical? Although I have not interviewed any of the spectators at Curve Theatre tonight, based on their audible reactions to the poem it certainly seems like they were moved by it: as though, perhaps, they sympathised with what they believed to be Macleod's experience.

If indeed the audience did assume that the poem was autobiographical, what factors led to that assumption? The poem was performed skilfully and convincingly, with emotional depth and the sort of realistic detail that often characterises true narratives. I wonder: would the audience's perception of whether Macleod's poem was autobiographical have been different if he had read from a book? if he had not been introduced by name? if he had entered from the wings instead of the audience? been costumed (wearing a suit, dressed all in black, etc.)? been a person of colour? female? Did the poets in the audience have different assumptions regarding the poem's veracity than the non-poets? What if the competition had taken place in a pub, or in a lecture hall?

Furthermore, if the audience assumed that the poem was autobiographical, did this assumption influence their assessment of the poem's quality? If they had known that the narrative was fictional, would they have applauded the piece as loudly as they did? Would the judges have scored it differently?

Say the majority of spectators did assume the work was autobiographical: does that matter? Is Macleod's composition a perfectly valid piece of art, a well-written poem which need not be factually 'authentic' in a genre which does not explicitly guarantee veracity? Or is it an act of fraud, a violation of the delicate ethics—indeed, the 'safe space'—of the spoken word sphere? Does the fact that the piece was performed at a high-stakes competition affect these ethics? Are Macleod's motivations for performing this piece—including any pressures or strategies for success—relevant to its ethical status?

<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 2 I evidence this claim and analyse its effects on the genre.

As I exit the theatre and go to celebrate with my team and fellow poets, I must consider: how is my perception of this poem affected by my multifaceted relationship with Macleod and with spoken word in the U.K. more generally? Is my fascination with the aesthetic and ethical ramifications of this poem coloured by the fact that I have just performed an autobiographical piece in the semi-final? by my research into the ethics of ‘authenticity’ in spoken word poetry? by my personal experience of loss?

Finally: why does the question of the poem’s ‘authenticity’ matter so much, anyway?

\*

I open this thesis with this anecdote for several reasons.<sup>5</sup> First, it illustrates many of the core conflicts and ideas motivating this research, including the complex ethics of performing non-autobiographical narratives at spoken word events, the popularity of trauma narratives at slams, and the celebration of ‘authenticity’ within the spoken word sphere. It also demonstrates my multifaceted relationship to the issues I take up here: I am simultaneously a witness in the audience, a fellow poet and producer, and an academic informed by scholarship. My perspective is coloured not only by my research into the scene but also my personal and professional relationships with fellow spoken word poets and the insight (and potential bias) these relationships engender.

This thesis engages with each of the provocations listed above, as well as other key considerations, in order to investigate the role of ‘authenticity’ within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry. This art form has long been considered a vehicle for ‘authentic’ self-expression: the unfettered sharing of one’s experiences through live poetic performance. Much of the media coverage of spoken word poetry highlights how ‘genuine’ it is; for instance, an article on the genre on the Scottish

<sup>5</sup> I will also return to this poem in Chapter 2, where I use it as a case study demonstrating the ethics of ‘authenticity of narrative’ within contemporary U.K. spoken word.

Book Trust website proclaims, '[w]henver you hear a slam poet<sup>6</sup> perform, the *honesty* of what they do shines through, and their voice is absolutely *authentic*' (Leslie n.p., emphasis added). The perceived 'authenticity' of spoken word poetry appears to be one of its greatest appeals: within an increasingly mediated world, audiences seem drawn to an art form featuring poets 'sharing their truths' live and apparently unfiltered.

The majority of existing scholarship on contemporary spoken word poetry has agreed that perceived 'authenticity' is the primary criterion for success in this art form: that the more 'real' a poem feels to the audience, the better it is considered to be.<sup>7</sup> In 1998, in one of the earliest critical works concerning contemporary spoken word poetry, Damon theorised that 'the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of "realness"—authenticity at the physical/sonic and meta-physical/emotional-intellectual-spiritual levels' (329). Virtually all of the following scholarship has cited and built upon her claims, asserting the centrality of 'authenticity' within the aesthetics of spoken word.

However, despite this consensus, the scholarship has thus far lacked much intensive engagement with precisely how the performance and perception of 'authenticity'<sup>8</sup> functions within this art form, particularly in the U.K. context.<sup>9</sup> What exactly do audiences value? Is it the perception that the poetry is autobiographical and true? the perception that the poet is fully present onstage, emotionally engaging with the audience? that the poet is not copying a popular style but rather performing in their own voice? that they are motivated by pure creativity rather than by money or fame? As this thesis will demonstrate, 'authenticity' does not denote a single

<sup>6</sup> Poetry slams are competitive events at which live poetry is performed; sometimes the wider genre of spoken word poetry is referred to as 'slam poetry' (or this term may refer to specific styles of poetry which are successful within poetry slam contexts). Throughout this thesis I use the term 'spoken word poetry' to refer to this genre. Later in this Introduction I clarify this terminology and further discuss how the poetry slam functions within the spoken word scene.

<sup>7</sup> Scholars upholding the importance of 'authenticity' within contemporary spoken word include Eid; R. Fox; Gregory; Hoffman; Rivera; Somers-Willett; and Wheeler.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this thesis I set off 'authenticity' in quotations to indicate its subjective, constructed nature.

<sup>9</sup> Eid, Somers-Willett, and Rivera intensively investigate how 'authenticity' performance, perception, and valuing functions in the U.S. spoken word (particularly slam) scene; throughout this thesis I apply their research to the U.K. context.



aesthetic quality but rather multiple modes of performance and perception, from the aesthetic to the ethical (and often both).

My research attempts to redress this gap in the scholarship by investigating the role of ‘authenticity’ within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry using a range of methodologies. In this thesis I propose a taxonomy of ten strains of ‘authenticity’ which may be performed, perceived, and valued in different manners and to different extents within the genre.<sup>10</sup> Such a taxonomy is unprecedented within spoken word poetry research and introduces much-needed clarity into the critical discourse around the performance of selfhood within this genre. I also apply performance studies and audience studies research to spoken word poetry to analyse how the marketing, staging, and hosting conventions of live spoken word events encourage audiences to assume that this poetry is ‘authentic’ in a variety of ways. Throughout the thesis I evaluate how certain narratives and identities are often inherently deemed more ‘authentic’ than others within the U.K. spoken word sphere and examine the effect of these judgments on the material poets feel incentivised to compose and perform. I conclude by analysing the damaging effects the aesthetic valuing of ‘authenticity’ has had on the development of a rigorous critical discourse for this genre.

## **Defining Spoken Word Poetry**

While the anecdote opening this thesis described work performed at a poetry slam, what I characterise as ‘contemporary spoken word poetry’ can be found in both competitive and non-competitive events; in theatres, pubs, libraries, schools, and on the picket line; performed not only by young people but by individuals reflecting a wide range of demographics. It has been labelled as ‘performance poetry,’ ‘slam poetry,’ ‘oral poetry,’ ‘live poetry,’ even ‘live literature.’ The genre occupies a unique space at the nexus of the dramatic monologue, poem, stand-up routine, activist speech, performance ‘happening,’ and more forms of oral rhetoric, and derives influence from many international cultural traditions.

<sup>10</sup> A diagram of this taxonomy can be viewed in Appendix A.

Stylistically, spoken word poetry is characterised by its relative accessibility, dynamic performativity, and commitment to audience engagement. Poems are often (although not necessarily) performed from memory<sup>11</sup> and entail not only the recital of a text but also full physical engagement including facial expressions and gesture. Usually spoken word poets do not use received forms (i.e. sonnets) or strict metre, instead writing in free verse while still engaging many poetic devices, most notably rhythm and rhyme.<sup>12</sup> Generally spoken word poets use relatively accessible language and avoid relying on references with which spectators might not be familiar. This accessibility serves multiple purposes; first, it enables audiences to understand (or at least appreciate) the poem upon a single viewing, given that (unless they attend another event or view a digital recording of the poem) they are not guaranteed to experience it a second time (Somers-Willett 35). Secondly, as I will discuss further in this Introduction and Chapter 4, the spoken word genre embraces an ethos of accessibility, with poets and promoters often explicitly contrasting spoken word's 'democratic' nature against the perceived elitism and exclusivity of 'academic' poetry (Rivera; Schmid). While a range of subjects may be covered at any given spoken word event, many poets perform apparently autobiographical material concerning personal struggles against adversity, particularly oppression and trauma.

Although the majority of spoken word performances are solo acts in which the poet performs original material, collective performances including 'group' or

<sup>11</sup> Memorisation is a common practice, particularly for more experienced and professional spoken word poets; however, it is not a requirement of the genre nor a prerequisite for success. For instance, in his data collection at the 2018 Hammer & Tongue National Slam Final in London, Bearder found that only one fifth of the poems were performed from memory (69).

<sup>12</sup> The use of metre and rhyme within spoken word poetry not only enhances the auditory experience but can also aide poets in memorising their work (Burnett; Somers-Willett). See Novak for an in-depth analysis of the audiotextual elements of live poetry focused on the U.K. spoken word scene (*Live Poetry* 75-144).

‘team’ poems<sup>13</sup> and multi-genre collaborations with musicians<sup>14</sup> and other artists also occur. Additionally, since the turn of the millennium<sup>15</sup> spoken word poets have been creating long-form shows which may incorporate elements associated with theatre (i.e. costumes, lighting) and poetry (i.e. rhyme), yielding the loose genre ‘spoken word theatre.’ This thesis focuses primarily on single poems performed as part of sets or at slams; because collaborative material and spoken word theatre exist at the nexus of multiple genres, not all of the arguments I make here concerning the function of ‘authenticity’ in spoken word poetry writ large will necessarily apply to these multi-disciplinary projects.<sup>16</sup>

However, even these broad generalisations cannot fully describe all of the material under the umbrella of ‘spoken word’: the field is constantly shifting and expanding to include new practices and styles. As contemporary styles of spoken word spread globally, it ‘takes on distinct forms in each new context to which it is brought, as it is reconstructed in line with local styles, traditions, conventions and concerns’ (Gregory<sup>17</sup> 32). For instance, while the U.S. and U.K. generally impose a three-minute time limit on poems performed at slams (thus affecting the usual poem length within those scenes), German poetry slams typically allow poets longer to perform (Zschoch). Even cities as close to one another as Edinburgh and Glasgow

<sup>13</sup> In my observation, ‘group’ or ‘team’ poems are relatively uncommon in the U.K. adult spoken word scene, at least outwith collectives (for instance, Loud Poets devises multi-poet pieces) and slams (university teams competing in the annual UniSlam often collaboratively compose and perform multi-poet pieces). Based on my experience, I believe that these ‘group’ or ‘team’ poems are more popular within the U.S. spoken word scene—at least on the slam circuit—than in the U.K. spoken word scene, although further evidence is required to confirm this hypothesis.

<sup>14</sup> Spoken word performance series providing a live band to accompany the poets include Tongue Fu (London) and Loud Poets (Scotland).

<sup>15</sup> Apples and Snakes Director Lisa Mead describes how “Apples pioneered the one-person show. Lemn Sissay’s show “Something Dark,” which he’s redoing at the moment [in 2017], was one of the first big ones. But before that, Roger Robinson did a show called “Shadowboxer” in about ’99, 2000 before “Something Dark” was out. So there was this beginning of this move into theatre, into ‘How do we make these longer pieces of work?’” (Interview).

<sup>16</sup> For research directly into spoken word theatre, see Novak’s “Performing Black British memory,” Walker’s ““We want spoken word theatre to go global, so we have to be the force making that happen,”” and Osborne.

<sup>17</sup> Although Helen Gregory has since changed her surname to Johnson, for the sake of clarity throughout this thesis I cite her work under Gregory since the text I am citing was published under that name.

have developed unique styles drawing upon the specific artistic cultures in which the genre has steeped.<sup>18</sup> Given the vast array of influences, regional styles, and aesthetic and social functions of this genre, it is difficult to define in any singular manner; as Poole notes, ‘no consensus would appear to have been reached as to what might constitute a comprehensive description of the phenomenon’ (340). Even the name of the genre is variable and somewhat contested, so in order to ensure clarity in the scholarship, here I will identify my terminology and working definition for this art form. Throughout this thesis I utilise the term ‘contemporary spoken word poetry,’ or ‘spoken word’ as a shorthand, since within the U.K., the term ‘spoken word’ now seems the most common descriptor for this genre.<sup>19</sup> I refer to those who practice this form as ‘spoken word poets’ or ‘spoken word artists’ as these terms encompass the range of practices upon which they draw. In the interest of concision, at times throughout this thesis I abbreviate this to ‘poets’ while still referring to spoken word poets. If I am discussing poets in a more general sense (i.e. not only spoken word poets) I clearly indicate that.

Importantly, not all of the poets whose work I analyse here identify with this label: some prefer to be called ‘performance poets’ or simply ‘poets.’<sup>20</sup> For instance, Dominic Berry argues that the term ‘spoken word’ does not acknowledge the craft behind the work, given that ‘speaking words’ is a quotidian act: ‘It just drains any sense of artistry’ (Interview). For some, qualifying ‘poet’ in any way (as in ‘spoken word poet’) is problematic. As Marsh et al. have observed, ‘the very designation “performance poet” has become a problem for some writers who feel it to be a denigrating term used by the Establishment, a code for working class or ethnic

<sup>18</sup> In the episode of the Process Productions U.K. slam documentary series ‘Scores, Please?’ concerning regional variation, most of the 25 poets interviewed report wide-ranging stylistic diversity across the U.K. slam and spoken word scenes (“Scores, Please? - Episode 8 (Finale) - We're Going To Regionals”).

<sup>19</sup> This terminology has evolved over time: Lucy English recalls how ‘when I first started doing it it was called “slam poetry” or “performance poetry”’ but ‘I’m using “spoken word” at the moment just because the term “performance poetry” does seem to have got a bit dated’ (Interview). Bearder’s scholarship has also concluded that ‘[i]n Britain, over the last ten years, the term “performance poet” has gradually been superseded by “spoken word artist”’ (62).

<sup>20</sup> None of the poets I interviewed identify as ‘slam poets,’ highlighting a difference in how artists self-identify between the U.K. and the U.S. where this label is more common.

poetry that does not need to be taken seriously’ (59).<sup>21</sup> When, as Frost argues, ‘[s]poken word is often interpreted as a sub-genre of poetry’—and generally a sub-par sub-genre—it is understandable that ‘many spoken word performers would prefer that their work be seen as poetry and nothing else’ (10). Given that each term for this genre carries its own connotations and stigmas, there was no single term I could use that would comfortably incorporate each artist and their varying philosophies regarding the art form. Thus my usage of ‘spoken word’ is not intended to uphold it as the proper term for the genre, but rather to reflect the wide range of practices and identities it encompasses.

Although proposing a definition for this multi-disciplinary genre is as risky as establishing a single term, I define spoken word poetry as *poetry composed with the intent of being performed live by its author*. My definition is consistent with the way in which most of the artists interviewed for this thesis defined the genre: Carly Brown characterised it as ‘something that I create specifically with the intention of ... performing it on a stage to an audience’ and similarly Lucy English defined it as ‘poetry that has been written with a live audience in mind’ (Interviews). Below I briefly break down this definition, clarifying why composition with the intention of live performance and the convention that the author be the performer are core to this genre.

First, while it may seem obvious, it is worth reinforcing that spoken word poetry is poetry designed to be spoken aloud. This genre is similar to theatre in the sense that while transcripts of the material may be silently read and enjoyed, the ultimate iteration of the work is its live performance.<sup>22</sup> The composition process for spoken word poetry generally includes not only writing the poem’s text but also planning and rehearsing vocal dynamics, facial expressions, and even physical

<sup>21</sup> See also d’Abdon’s argument that within the South African literary sphere, the term ‘performance poet’ represents ‘a subterfuge employed to minimize black poets’ contribution to written traditions’ (“‘You Say ‘Performance Poet’, I Hear ‘Dance Nigger, Dance’”: Problematizing the Notion of Performance Poetry in South Africa” 51). In the Chapter 4 section on ‘authenticity of identity’ I further discuss the nuances of how spoken word as a genre has been associated with marginalised identity, including detrimental effects on the perception of some marginalised poets’ work.

<sup>22</sup> I follow oral poetry scholars Bernstein, Middleton, and Novak in perceiving the isolated text of spoken word poems as a transcript, rather than the poem proper. The philosophy guiding my approach to spoken word poetry analysis is further explained in the Methodology section.

gestures. As Schmid observes, spoken word poets ‘define the performance as an aesthetic category in its own right’ rather than merely a means of communicating a poem to an audience in order to encourage them to purchase the text of the poem (7). Thus I follow S. Weinstein in clarifying that ‘the distinction here between performance and page poetry is whether the poem was primarily created for performance or primarily created as a way to expose the work to a public that will then, ideally, go on to read the text in its written form’ (7).<sup>23</sup>

While this work is composed for live performance, it of course may also exist outwith live performance contexts. Poets often record their work audiovisually and publish it online: there is a growing archive of publicly accessible material on YouTube and other video- and audio-hosting sites. Additionally, there has been a recent surge in the print publication of spoken word transcripts, particularly through companies such as Burning Eye Books and Stewed Rhubarb Press which specifically cater to spoken word poets. Thus when throughout this thesis I use the term ‘spoken word,’ I indicate poetry performed in any physical venue or through any recording or publication which has been marketed and/or labelled as ‘spoken word’ or with any of the other terms indicating this genre (i.e. ‘performance poetry’ or ‘slam poetry’). This extends to online and print spaces and includes any poems posted to channels featuring spoken word material, such as the Button Poetry label based in the U.S. or the Apples and Snakes channel in the U.K. As this thesis analyses, the framing of material as ‘spoken word’ fundamentally affects the audience’s horizon of expectations for the work and thus their perceptions of its ‘authenticity.’

The second element of my definition, specifying that this material is intended to be performed live *by its author*, indicates the importance of authorial presence within spoken word poetry. The rules of the poetry slam—which do not control the conventions of the broader spoken word sphere but heavily influence its customs—

<sup>23</sup> Inevitably attempts to define this genre yield the (valid) question: isn’t any poem that is performed a performance poem? Certainly poems written for the page may be performed in an engaging fashion and may be legitimately perceived as ‘spoken word.’ The generic boundaries between ‘page’ and ‘stage’ poetry are porous and I do not wish to reinforce them further. However, in order to analyse this art form, it must be defined, and intentionality for live performance is the singular unifying element of contemporary spoken word poetry.

dictate that all material performed at the slam must be original to the performer.<sup>24</sup> Currently there is no culture within spoken word of writing poems for others to perform (as with playwriting), ghost-writing, or ‘covering’ others’ work. In the Chapter 2 section on ‘authenticity of origin’ I further discuss (and complicate) the tradition of authorial presence within spoken word; suffice it to say now that it is an integral element to the form.

While here I have defined spoken word poetry as a distinct genre for the sake of clarity, I do not wish to reinforce any strict binary between ‘page poetry’ and ‘stage poetry.’ As previously noted, at times the separation of ‘spoken word’ into its own category has been used to denigrate poets prioritising live performance, implying that they are not actually poets or are otherwise sub-par. This perspective ignores the breadth of poetic practices drawing upon oral and literary traditions with many intersecting practices and styles. Many artists compose material for both live and print, audiovisual, and digital contexts and discover rich inspiration in the play between media. Furthermore, as Claire Trévien notes, “‘page poets’ ... really improved their game in terms of reading and performance’ at the same time as ‘a lot of spoken word poets have also had their books published,’ leading to ‘a blurred distinction’ between these styles (Interview). To distil this diversity into ‘page’ and ‘stage’ is not merely reductive but also leads to inaccurate assumptions regarding the quality and cultural capital of these intersecting, overlapping genres. Thus, while within this thesis I recognise spoken word poetry’s distinct elements and analyse it accordingly, I reject any concept of a rigid binary between ‘page’ and ‘stage’ poetry and instead celebrate the spectrum of poetic styles informing one other today. When it is necessary in this thesis to contrast ‘page’ and ‘stage’ poetry, I am as specific as possible, for instance using terms such as ‘page-based poetry’ or ‘poetry designed for print publication’ for the sake of clarity.

<sup>24</sup> Gary Mex Glazner, the producer of the first U.S. National Poetry Slam, published the rules of the slam in that culture at that time in his text *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*. The section entitled ‘Who Wrote the Poem Rule’ stipulates that ‘[e]ach poet must have written the poem he or she performs’ (14).

Finally, throughout my scholarship I avoid the term ‘slam poetry,’<sup>25</sup> although some of the criticism I cite uses it.<sup>26</sup> Poetry slams are competitions at which live poetry is performed: they are events at which technically all styles of poetry are welcome. As poetry slam founder Marc Smith describes, ‘[s]onnets, haiku, pantoums, villanelles, raps, rants, ballads, limericks... you name it and it’s been performed on a slam stage ... Anything and everything is game’ (*Stage a Poetry Slam* 46). I recognise, following Gregory<sup>27</sup> and other researchers who have adopted the term ‘slam poetry,’ that often certain styles, topics, and trends are particularly successful at poetry slams, and that the cyclical rewarding of these elements within this context (i.e. through poems in this style winning slams) has arguably facilitated the development of particular ‘slam styles.’ In the interviews I conducted with U.K. spoken word poets, most participants were confident in identifying tropes of ‘slam-winning’ poems in their scenes. While popular ‘slam styles’ differ regionally<sup>28</sup> and evolve over time, my data indicate that the type of poetry currently popular within U.K. slams is high-energy; performs emotional intensity; and either reveals personal experience, conveys a political message, or is humorous. In the U.K., poetry of this nature is sometimes panned by poets who consider it to be exaggerated and clichéd; Bearder defines the term ‘slammy’ as denoting

[c]rowd-pleasing poetry that uses excessive theatrics to perform humour, political rhetoric or extremes of emotion (usually relating to the performer’s own life), crafted with little attention to writing techniques traditionally associated with poetry. (58)

In Chapter 6 I further explore these ‘slam styles’ and consider the nuances of the slam as a quasi-microcosm for critical discourse within U.K. spoken word poetry.

<sup>25</sup> My approach to this term is influenced by Gilpin’s in his influential article “Slam Poetry Does Not Exist: How a Movement has been Misconstrued as a Genre.”

<sup>26</sup> My rationale for avoiding this term is rooted in my analysis of the role of poetry slams in the U.K. spoken word scene; see Aptowicz (42-3) for an examination of whether it is pertinent to characterise ‘slam poetry’ as a genre in the U.S. context.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory’s neologism describing slam as a ‘for(u)m’ neatly communicates the simultaneous nature of the poetry slam as an event and (arguably) ‘slam poetry’ as a specific style within the broader genre of spoken word poetry (43-4).

<sup>28</sup> For instance, several of the poets I interviewed specified that humorous, witty poems tend to be successful in U.K. slams (Jones; McGeown; Trévien), with some directly contrasting this preference against what they perceive to be a tendency for darker material to prevail in U.S. slams (Cockrill; Luckins).



However, I argue that particularly within the U.K. context, trends which achieve success within the slam context are also rewarded within the wider spoken word context, and thus there is not a significant enough difference between ‘slam poetry’ and ‘spoken word poetry’ to merit separate terms in the context of this study. Most slams select judges from amidst the audience (Aptowicz),<sup>29</sup> as was the original format established by Marc Smith in Chicago in 1986.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, generally speaking, slams reward the material most popular with audiences, and therefore the trends for success within poetry slams parallel the trends for success more broadly within the spoken word scene. Additionally, the limitations and rewarded elements within the poetry slam format inevitably affect the material performed in the spoken word scene more generally. For instance, where poetry slams institute time limits of three minutes per poem, poets within that scene wishing to perform their work at slams must compose material within those time limits; consequently, the material within the scene is shaped by the slam’s requirements.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, while North American slam circuits (for adults and youth) are relatively well-developed and thus a specific style has arguably developed through and for them, the U.K. lacks an equally well-established infrastructure. While poetry slam events happen across the U.K. relatively frequently (depending on the region and the number of live literary organisations operating in that area), these events rarely offer high financial and/or professional rewards for victory. It is not possible for any U.K. poet to sustain a career solely through slam performance: success at these forums can benefit a poet’s reputation and lead to other opportunities, but slam victory alone does not offer career stability in the same manner as it can in the U.S.

<sup>29</sup> In the U.K. today, some slam organisers choose to pre-appoint judges who have more experience with spoken word: for example, the Scottish National Poetry Championships generally is judged by a panel including a journalist, a musician (or other artist), a spoken word producer, and the previous year’s champion. When I refer to slams in this thesis, however, I refer chiefly to audience-judged slams in order to use them as a loose barometer of the audience’s preferences.

<sup>30</sup> According to Smith, the first poetry slam occurred on 20<sup>th</sup> July, 1986 at Chicago’s Green Mill Jazz Club (*Stage a Poetry Slam* 10-11). As many scholars (and Smith himself) recognise, competitive live poetry has many precedents globally, from flying to renga (see Bearder 41-4).

<sup>31</sup> Slam rules strongly affect but do not wholly dictate material performed in the broader spoken word context; continuing in this example, a spoken word poet in a scene with three-minute slam rules would still be free to compose and perform material over three minutes at other live literary events.

scene (Bearder 31). Thus I argue that the stylistic divisions between the work performed at U.K. poetry slams and other U.K. spoken word events are relatively minimal, as poets will perform the same work across event formats. Finally, the use of the distinct term ‘slam poetry’ erroneously suggests that only one variety of poetry may be performed at a slam, so my avoidance of this term is also rooted in a desire to preserve the stylistic diversity that may still be found at U.K. slams despite some of the aforementioned homogenisation.

## **U.K. Spoken Word History**

Contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry has a rich history drawing upon many artistic and activist traditions. While it is outside the scope of this PhD to provide (or rather, attempt) a complete history of oral poetics in the U.K., here I briefly contextualise today’s spoken word poetry through surveying its recent evolution.<sup>32</sup>

In sketching the history of U.K. spoken word, it is challenging to know where to begin: the genre draws from many intersecting literary, performance-based, and political movements, with both local and global influences. As Bearder has charted, U.K. spoken word is rooted in a variety of ‘democratic literary movements’ in which poetry was central to expressing selfhood and affecting societal change (91).<sup>33</sup> In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, arguably the most influential and immediate precedents

<sup>32</sup> For more thorough accounts of U.K. spoken word history, see texts including Bowen’s *A Gallery to Play To: The Story of the Mersey Poets* (1999), Marsh et al.’s “‘Blasts of Language’: Changes in Oral Poetics in Britain since 1965” (2006), Pearce et al.’s *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora Space and the Devolution of Literary Culture* (2013), Virtanen’s *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960-1980: Event and Effect* (2017), and Bearder’s *Stage Invasion: Poetry & The Spoken Word Renaissance* (2019).

<sup>33</sup> Bearder lists these precedents to contemporary spoken word as the Romantic Era poets (1770s-1850s), Chartist poets (1830s-50s), Modernism (1900s-40s), the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-early 1930s), the Beat poets (mid-1950s-60s), the British Beats and Liverpool poets (1960s), the Black Arts Movement (late 1960s-70s), dub poetry (late 1970s onwards), hip-hop (late 1970s onwards), punk poetry (late 1970s-80s), and U.K. alternative cabaret (1980s-90s) (92-121).

for the genre in the U.K. included dub poetry,<sup>34</sup> the Liverpool ‘Mersey Beat’ poets,<sup>35</sup> and punk poetry<sup>36</sup> (Novak, *Live Poetry*). Marsh et al.’s 2006 survey “‘Blasts of Language’: Changes in Oral Poetics in Britain since 1965” charts a wide range of influences and communities within U.K. live poetics including ‘campus readings, avant-garde performances, poetry slams, ethnic performance, religious arts, and the heritage poetics of minority languages’ (46).

The development of U.K. spoken word has been heavily influenced by U.S. literary and political movements, notably the Beat generation<sup>37</sup> and the Black Arts Movement. Arguably the most significant U.S. import to recently shape the U.K. spoken word scene was the poetry slam, founded in the U.S. in 1986 and first occurring in the U.K. in 1994, which not only constituted a new competitive style of poetry event but also significantly affected spoken word stylistically (Gregory 53). Each of these movements, as well as other artistic styles—including stand-up comedy, hip-hop music, avant-garde performance ‘happenings,’ and the memoir boom—has influenced contemporary spoken word’s styles, ethics, and demographics.

Spoken word poetry’s development as a genre has been heavily influenced by counter-hegemonic artistic movements and philosophies. As Chapter 5 will discuss, U.S. poetry slam founder Marc Smith deliberately crafted his events as oppositional to what he perceived as the ‘old school poetry reading (crusty bards droning their

<sup>34</sup> The transatlantic diaspora from the Caribbean to the U.K. in the mid-1900s yielded rich cross-cultural artistic movements, including dub poetry: a highly musical, often politically charged poetic genre emerging in the U.K. from the 1970s. For more on dub poetry’s origins, styles, and legacy, see Dawson; Hitchcock; Marsh; and Saroukhani.

<sup>35</sup> In the 1960s, Liverpool was the birthplace of the ‘Mersey Beat’ style, characterised by humour, musicality, and pop culture references. *The Mersey Sound* anthology (Penguin, 1967), featuring Adrien Henri, Roger McGough, and Brian Patten, is one of the best-selling poetry anthologies of all time (“50 Years of Mersey Sound”). For an extensive history of this movement, see Bowen’s *A Gallery to Play To: The Story of the Mersey Poets*.

<sup>36</sup> In the 1970s and 80s, as part of the punk wave in U.K. including Attila the Stockbroker, John Cooper Clarke, and Joolz Denby began performing alongside bands, often in environments somewhat hostile to poetry (Bearder 118-19; Gregory 51). The online ‘Stand up and Spit’ archival project has extensively documented the ‘Ranting’ sub-section of the punk poetry movement; see also Wells.

<sup>37</sup> On 11 June 1965, U.S. and U.K. Beat poets performed together in London’s Royal Albert Hall in an event entitled ‘The First International Poetry Incarnation.’ Several scholars have charted the influence of this transatlantic gathering on the burgeoning U.K. live poetry scene (see Virtanen 27-53; Bowen 64-7).

precious stanzas to stoic, well-behaved audiences composed of relatives, chums, and students pandering for extra credit) (*Stage a Poetry Slam* 3).<sup>38</sup> The poetry slam's alignment 'against a perceived ivory tower<sup>39</sup> of canonical written poetry' is evidenced by its use of non-expert judges and the value it places on the audience's opinion of the performed material (Rivera 116). Furthermore, in part due to its do-it-yourself origins and punk ethos, much of the spoken word scene is grassroots, consisting primarily of independently run event series and collectives: Bearder characterises the history of spoken word in the U.K. as developed primarily through 'horizontal links' between peers (129-42). While this grassroots orientation has been fundamental to spoken word's identity as a countercultural art form, the voluntary, precarious nature of much of the production work has also led to challenges to sustain events series and other enterprises.<sup>40</sup>

Subsequently, the development of the U.K. spoken word scene has not been linear but better characterised as surging and waning in waves. Anthony Anaxagorou shares how his experience of the scene's shifting popularity contrasts against the media's portrayal of the art form: 'I think it's peaks and troughs with this thing. So the one thing that is incorrect is the constant catchphrase is "poetry is the new rock n' roll" ... it's been the new rock n' roll for the past 45 years' (Interview). At the time of my data collection in 2017, the U.K. spoken word scene was in a 'boom' period: when I asked interviewees if they had observed any shifts in the spoken word scene since they entered it, the majority indicated that it had grown larger. Colin Hassard's claim that the scene has 'definitely vastly improved in terms of size and numbers and ... opportunities' was echoed by participants across the U.K., with many citing an increase in the number of events and the extent of mainstream attention (Interview).

<sup>38</sup> In Chapter 5 I will further discuss how the conventions of contemporary spoken word events are designed to contrast against the conventions of what are perceived as less engaging 'page poetry' readings.

<sup>39</sup> At times spoken word organisers explicitly state this aim, as in the 1992 *Apples and Snakes* anthology: '[s]et up at a time when a multitude of energies were laying siege to the Ivory Tower that was 'British Poetry', *Apples and Snakes* was fired on an original brief to promote poetry as a popular and exciting medium and as a vital community and cross-cultural activity' (Beasley, Foreword).

<sup>40</sup> Rachel McCrum's research on communities of practice within Scotland's spoken word scene describes this scene as 'grassroots,' characterised by a 'lack of formal structure or qualifications' ("The Ties That Bind" 24, 30).

As spoken word has gained more mainstream cachet, its identity as a grassroots, counter-institutional movement is slowly evolving; the past thirty years have heralded ‘the increasing institutionalization and commodification of the [spoken word] movement’ internationally (Schmid 637; see also Bearder 143-51). In some areas of the U.K.<sup>41</sup> organisations now support spoken word poets and events through programming and financial support, the most significant being Apples and Snakes in England.<sup>42</sup> Literary prizes traditionally more focused on print publications have in the past decade increasingly recognised the achievements of poets with performance practices,<sup>43</sup> including the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry (Raymond Antrobus, 2018; Jay Bernard, 2017; Hollie McNish, 2016; Kae Tempest<sup>44</sup>, 2012) and the Forward Prize for Best Collection (Danez Smith,<sup>45</sup> 2018) (“Ted Hughes Award,” “Danez Smith: US Poet Is Youngest Ever Forward Prize Winner”). Educational programmes are eroding the notion of spoken word as ‘anti-academic’ by bringing the genre directly into the academy. Programmes such as SLAMBassadors and Leeds Young Authors and Writers (established in 2001 and 2003, respectively) encourage young people to develop their creative writing and performance skills through a pedagogy of spoken word (“About,” *SLAMBassadors*; “About,” *Leeds Young Authors and Writers*). Higher education programmes such as the Performance Poetry module at Bath Spa University<sup>46</sup> are not only developing a

<sup>41</sup> Institutionalised support for spoken word is uneven across the U.K.; poets in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are not within Apples and Snakes’ remit and lack equally established central agencies focused specifically on this genre (Bearder 151). As Scottish poet Leyla Josephine quipped in our 2017 interview, in ‘Scotland you don’t really get paid for your art and England you do ... it’s very London-central’ (Interview).

<sup>42</sup> Founded in 1982, Apples and Snakes supports spoken word poets in England through live events, development programmes, and resource and education provision (“The Apples and Snakes Story”).

<sup>43</sup> Not all of the poets I list here would necessarily identify primarily as spoken word poets; however, all incorporate live performance and auditory elements into their practices.

<sup>44</sup> Kae Tempest was previously known as ‘Kate Tempest’; in August 2020 they posted a public statement changing their name and updating their pronouns from she/her to they/them. Throughout this thesis I respect their identity by referring to them in this manner; however, at several points I cite quotations from sources published prior to this statement which use Tempest’s previous name and pronouns and for the sake of accuracy and clarity I do not alter the text within these quotations.

<sup>45</sup> Smith is a U.S.-based poet; the others award winners listed are all based in the U.K.

<sup>46</sup> From 2012 to 2017 there was also a Spoken Word Education strand which ran alongside the MA Writing in Education programme at Goldsmith’s University of London. See Bearder 158 for a more complete list of spoken word modules taught in the U.K. in 2019.

model for spoken word education but laying the groundwork for a burgeoning critical discourse.

However, the institutionalisation and professionalisation of U.K. spoken word has not wholly replaced the independent events circuit or grassroots, DIY ethos of the genre; the development of both ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ links (in Bearder’s terms) continues simultaneously. The co-exist and intersection of the grassroots and the established structures within the same artistic scene can cause friction, however: some U.K. spoken word poets believe that the art form must eschew mainstream popularity in order to retain its activist power, whereas others welcome the shift to more professional, less precarious career opportunities. In the Chapter 4 section on ‘authenticity of motivation’ I analyse these tensions and their potential effects on the development of sustainable career opportunities within this scene.

Accompanying the increased mainstream exposure and institutionalisation of the form has been the increased diversification of spoken word poetry in the U.K. While there is a lack of statistical evidence to confirm this trend, the majority of the poets interviewed for this thesis contend that the scene has grown increasingly diverse in recent decades: it is now more inclusive for poets of different gender identities,<sup>47</sup> ethnicities,<sup>48</sup> and sexual orientations.<sup>49</sup> Rose Condo, like many of the poets I interviewed, has ‘noticed conversations blow open about gender and about

<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the most striking evolution in the scene has been the increasing acceptance and celebration of female voices. In an interview with Apples and Snakes, Joolz Denby recalls how early in her career, performing ‘could be really violent ... really confrontational’ particularly for women, remembering situations in which audiences ‘would throw lighted cigarettes at you, they would throw full cans of beer, they’d spit at you, throw glasses at you’ (Denby n.p.). In my experience as a young female poet, these violent, sexist reactions do not characterise today’s U.K. spoken word scene: while sexist attitudes and predatory behaviour remain, it could be argued that women and non-binary poets face less overtly bigoted reactions to their performances.

<sup>48</sup> Whether U.K. spoken word has significantly increased in racial diversity is challenging to parse, given that some of the artistic movements feeding into spoken word, such as dub poetry and hip-hop, have long been dominated by artists of colour. Bearder cites an interview with Salena Godden in which she shares her experience that the scene has grown more racially diverse (72). While my interviews with U.K. spoken word poets indicated that the scene has generally grown more diverse, there were not many specific references to an increase in racial diversity. Further research into the demographics of this scene is required to confirm this trend.

<sup>49</sup> While again, there is a lack of data to confirm these observations, according to several poets I interviewed, spoken word spaces now feel safer for queer poets to openly divulge their sexual orientations.

race and about identity, about class. About like welcoming in accessibility<sup>50</sup> at nights and at events' (Interview). The age demographics have also shifted: many poets contend that younger voices, particularly university-aged students, now dominate the scene.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, the U.K. spoken word scene is rapidly evolving both stylistically and demographically, making this moment an exciting opportunity to chart its (at times fitful) evolution.

### **Lack of Critical Attention**

While spoken word poetry is increasingly gaining mainstream popularity across the U.K., an academic discourse analysing the genre has been slow to emerge. Some spoken word scholarship began to appear in the late 1990s, but by 2009 Somers-Willett lamented that 'it is still rare to find critical material on slam poetry that is more substantive than a case study or review,' and despite notable steps forward this remains generally true (134). One of the chief barriers to developing a rigorous critical discourse for contemporary spoken word is the perception that as a more accessible art form, spoken word is less worthy of serious critical study. It has faced condescension in the media and academic circles as a flash-in-the-pan pop culture trend with no artistic merit: in 2000 Harold Bloom called slam poetry 'the death of art' (qtd. in Barber 379). Former performance poet Nathan Thompson's excoriating comment '[w]e cannot allow slam poetry to replace the role poetry plays in our lives. The threat is there' illustrates this perspective that spoken word is distinct from 'real' poetry and to confuse the two would have dire consequences (n.p.).

The core issue for these critics appears to be spoken word's aesthetic prioritisation of live performance, as it apparently detracts from the literary merits of

<sup>50</sup> In my experience as a poet and producer, although conversations about the importance of accessibility at spoken word events are common, unfortunately many events are still held at inaccessible venues (i.e. without step-free access or hearing loops) (see also Lightbown 10-11). Organisers often point to the lack of event funding as a factor in this inaccessibility; in Chapter 5 I will further describe how resource shortages and other factors have affected where events are typically held.

<sup>51</sup> In Jenny Lindsay's experience in the Scottish spoken word scene, the 'age range has changed ...spoken word is very strangely in my opinion now seen as something young people do' (Interview). Many other poets, including Harry Baker, Sophia Walker, and Harry Josephine Giles, also attest to this demographic shift (Interviews).

the poetry. Traditionally in literary studies,<sup>52</sup> poems have been conceived as fixed, stable texts unaltered by being embodied; as Middleton explains, there has been ‘a commonplace assumption that nothing remarkable happens to the poetry itself at these events, that meaning stays fundamentally unchanged’ (“The Contemporary Poetry Reading” 262). Consequently, within criticism of contemporary spoken word, the physical performance of the poetry is not appreciated as an integral element of the multi-modal art but rather as an extra-lexical display designed to cover up poor writing. As Marsh et al. observe, ‘this poetry is rarely if ever studied with the assumption that its orality is integral to its achievement’; rather, its orality is perceived as a detraction from this achievement, thus entirely missing the point of spoken word’s multi-modality (49).

Spoken word poets are keenly aware of this critical perspective that a skilled performance practice and literary rigour are mutually exclusive. Poet Clare McWilliams shares that she has ‘been accused of only being performative, as opposed to being a good poet. So because I can perform that work, people ... can make the assumption that the work isn’t put into it’ (Interview). Given that spoken word poets compose material with the intention of performing it themselves in a live context, performance must be considered a core, essential element of the poetic experience in any critical engagement with this genre. Novak’s 2011 text *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* provided a refreshing addition to the field by proposing a comprehensive critical framework for the analysis of live poetry, and I use and build upon her methodology within this thesis.

An additional, fundamental barrier to the development of a critical discourse concerning spoken word is the preoccupation with ‘authenticity’ as an aesthetic quality.<sup>53</sup> As this thesis examines, spoken word poets tend to present their work as

<sup>52</sup> This text-focused approach to poetic analysis has been helpfully challenged by theorists of oral folklore and poetics in oral cultures, include Parry and Lord; Bauman; Foley; and Finnegan.

<sup>53</sup> That this thesis is thoroughly preoccupied with ‘authenticity’ within the U.K. spoken word scene, then, could be perceived as rather ironic. However, it is my belief that in order to deconstruct any value system, one must first understand how it functions. This thesis does not assume or valorise ‘authenticity’ within spoken word poetry, but instead rigorously examines the manner in which it is performed and perceived. By conducting this research and developing a language for future discussions of ‘authenticity’ in spoken word, this thesis provides a greater comprehension of this problematic effect and tools for dismantling it.



‘authentic’ through composing (seemingly) autobiographical and true material, appearing spontaneous and genuinely emotional, and employing various other techniques. ‘Authenticity’ has become a key marketing device for this genre: as I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, promotional rhetoric for spoken word events often describes these events as inclusive, social forums for meaningful interpersonal engagement, activism, and radical honesty. Regardless of how true, emotional, or ‘purely’ motivated this poetry actually is, *the perception of its ‘authenticity’* appears to be core to attracting participants and, as I will argue, a key aesthetic quality for gauging the success of the poetry. This thesis closely examines the constructed nature of how ‘authenticity’ is performed (by the poet), contextualised (by the format of the event and rhetoric concerning the genre), and perceived (by spectators and other participants). I demonstrate how within U.K. spoken word poetry (as in all areas) ‘authenticity’ is not a stable quality inhering in the poetry (or poet) but the subjective by-product of this social, performative exchange.

However, as Chapter 6 examines, much of the critical discourse within the media concerning spoken word (i.e. reviews of events, magazine and even academic articles on the genre) does not recognise ‘authenticity’ as a subjective perception but rather as essential to the art form. Because ‘authenticity’ denotes rawness, spontaneity, and pure honesty, such critical descriptions contribute to a problematic concept of spoken word as rough, un-skilled, melodramatic diarising rather than meticulously composed and rehearsed art. Furthermore, as I examine in Chapter 4, this concept of spoken word as inherently ‘authentic’ is influenced by the demographics of its participants: this is a genre which poets with marginalised identities have often used as a forum for expressing their lived experiences. Because marginality is associated with ‘authenticity’ due to deeply rooted systems of prejudice (including racism, sexism, classism, and ableism), I argue that the relatively diverse demographics of the U.K. spoken word scene have contributed to the inaccurate depiction of spoken word poetry and poets as inherently ‘authentic’ within much of the popular and media perception of this genre. Throughout this thesis I will demonstrate how these factors have intersected to undermine the progression of a healthy critical discourse for this multidisciplinary genre.

Because the critical discourse regarding how ‘authenticity’ functions is still

nascent, my research is informed by scholarship from other artistic fields where the discourse on ‘authenticity’ performance and perception is more developed. These include hip-hop (Armstrong; Fraley; Harrison; Hess; Hodgman; McLeod; Morrissey; Neal; Schur; Tait; A. Williams), blues music (Daley; Gatchet; Grazian; S. A. King); rock music (Attias; Auslander; Behr; Moore; D. Weinstein), country music (Peterson (*Creating Country Music*, “In Search of Authenticity”); Shusterman), storytelling (McMaken), and comedy (Double; Lockyer). In drawing upon these discourses, I do not imply that the way in which ‘authenticity’ functions in these fields exactly mimics how it functions in contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry: the specific markers, techniques, and context of ‘authenticity’ performance and perception inherently vary with the specific parameters of each genre. However, drawing upon the theories and language developed by other scholars provides a helpful comparative framework through which to analyse this complex, nuanced effect.

Despite the challenges described above, scholarship concerning contemporary spoken word poetry is beginning to develop internationally. The majority of the criticism that exists to date focuses on the social contexts in which spoken word poetry takes place: there is a growing body of social scientific (including ethnographic) scholarship concerning community-building within spoken word<sup>54</sup> and how spoken word may be used as an educational and potentially emancipatory tool within educational contexts.<sup>55</sup> While this research is important, there has been a lack of parallel scholarship analysing the poetry itself: the craft it entails, its aesthetics, and the composition and performance techniques commonly utilised by spoken word poets. This thesis addresses this gap by combining social scientific methodology with direct analysis of the poetry and the introduction of new language for evaluating ‘authenticity’ performance and perception.

Finally, although much of the critical discourse concerning contemporary spoken word poetry has focused on the U.S. context since the scene is larger and more developed there, there is a growing body of literature focused on various

<sup>54</sup> See Gregory; A. L. Johnson; J. Johnson; and Schmid.

<sup>55</sup> See Camangian; Fenge et al.; Fiore; Fisher; S. Weinstein; Ramirez and Jimenez-Silva; and Rivera.

spoken word cultures internationally.<sup>56</sup> Specifically in the U.K. context, the past fifteen years have seen the publication of several noteworthy texts<sup>57</sup> and the gradual emergence of a critical discourse both within and outwith<sup>58</sup> university contexts. This thesis contributes to this developing discourse through its specific focus on poets and spoken word cultures across the four nations of the U.K.: all of the poets interviewed for this research work (or have worked) within this scene and all of the poems I analyse are by poets based in the U.K. It is probable that many of the conclusions I draw could also be applied to other spoken word scenes internationally, although further research would be required to confirm these generalisations.

## Methodology

The methodology utilised in this thesis draws upon practices from multiple disciplines, as befits the study of an art form occupying the intersection of many artistic media. In analysing the role of ‘authenticity’ in contemporary spoken word poetry, I engage with philosophy (specifically regarding the development of ‘authenticity’ as a cultural concept); performance studies (particularly theories of liveness, presence, and embodiment); studies of oral narratives (including folklore and storytelling); autobiography studies<sup>59</sup>; genre studies; audience studies

<sup>56</sup> See the scholarship of Adejunmobi on spoken word poetry in West Africa; Cullell in Spain; d’Abdon in South Africa; Émery-Bruneau and Néron, Keleta-Mae in Canada; Lacatus in Sweden; Muhammad in Egypt; and Poole in France.

<sup>57</sup> These include Marsh et al.’s ““Blasts of Language”: Changes in Oral Poetics in Britain since 1965” (2006); Gregory’s thesis “Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S. Poetry Slam Discourses” (2009); Novak’s aforementioned *Live Poetry* (2011); Fowler’s *Postcolonial Manchester: Diaspora Space and the Devolution of Literary Culture* (2013); Silva’s thesis “Live Writing: A Psychophysical Approach to the Analysis of Black British Poetry in Performance” (2018); McGowan’s thesis “Slam the Book: The Role of Performance in Contemporary U.K. Poetry” (2016); and Bearder’s *Stage Invasion: Poetry & the Spoken Word Renaissance* (2019). Silva and McGowan’s theses were under embargo at the time of writing and thus are not cited within this thesis. The upcoming critical anthology *Spoken Word in the U.K.*, edited by Lucy English and Jack McGowan and to be published by Routledge in 2020, represents an exciting milestone for the development of this discourse.

<sup>58</sup> The current increase in academic scholarship concerning contemporary U.K. spoken word owes much to the critical discourse which has been ongoing outwith formal academic institutions and publications. Notable organisations and platforms advancing this work include *All These New Relations*, the Lunar Poetry Podcast, Process Productions, and *Sabotage Reviews*.

<sup>59</sup> This field is also known as life writing studies.

(particularly audience reception theory and methods for analysing performance spaces); studies of other art forms (including comedy, theatre, and dance); ‘Outsider Art’ studies; and various social scientific methodologies (primarily ethnographic research including qualitative data collection) and theories (including proxemics, social performativity, and identity: theories of race, class, gender, and other identity characteristics). Many of these fields were founded relatively recently and thus their core theories and methodologies are still developing, providing me with an exciting opportunity to conduct cross-disciplinary research in an emergent field. In this section I explain my approach to analysing poems, my ethnographic methodologies, my interview-driven data collection and thematic analysis, and my use of audience reception theory.

### **Approach to Poem Analysis**

As previously noted, because oral poetics—particularly contemporary, accessible forms of live poetry—have been seriously under-researched, there exists no single established, comprehensive critical framework for analysing spoken word poetry. Thus instead of relying on pre-existing methodological approaches to evaluate the poetry in this thesis, I developed a multifaceted philosophy and practice drawing upon various critical frameworks and techniques. My practice is particularly informed by the methodology for live poetry analysis proposed within Novak’s 2011 text *Live Poetry*.

My approach to analysing spoken word poetry is grounded in the consideration of this poetry as fundamentally embodied, spatially contextualised, and plural. When discussing spoken word, I take ‘the poem’ to denote not merely the text but also the oral and physical performance as they occur within a live space with a co-present audience. I follow Bernstein in believing that ‘[s]uch elements as the ... sound of the work in performance may be extralexical but they are not extrasemantic’ and thus that it is imperative to take into account such elements as the poet’s vocal dynamics, gestures, and apparel; the physical context of the performance, including the venue and staging features; the way in which the poem is introduced; how the event is marketed; and so on (5). This framework is grounded in oral poetics scholarship, which has urged a reconceptualisation of verbal arts

requiring analysis of the entire situated event rather than simply the textual record (see Bauman; Finnegan; Foley).

Furthermore, I recognise spoken word poems as inherently ephemeral and unfixed, lacking any singular definitive iteration and evolving through each new performance. I again follow Bernstein in believing that a spoken word poem

is not identical to any one graphical or performative realization of it, nor can it be equated with a totalised unity of these versions of manifestations. The poem, viewed in terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence. (9)

For instance, there is no singular definitive performance of Sara Hirsch's "Death Poem"; each time it is performed constitutes a unique, new iteration. This represents a fundamental difference between page-based poetry and performance-based poetry. With page-based poetry, the text is generally held as constitutive of the entire work: the same poem can be re-printed in different volumes and (as long as the words and formatting are consistent) it is still interpreted as the same poem, rather than a unique iteration. This is because, given the fundamental perception of the text as the totality of the work, new publication or even different readings of the work are not perceived to alter the poem itself. In contrast, within contemporary spoken word poetry, *the way in which a poem is performed is integral to the meaning of the poem itself*, and thus each new performance constitutes a distinct iteration of the work. Thus each time I analyse a poem in this thesis, I note the specific iteration(s) of the poem I am citing and avoid giving particular authority or legitimacy to any given iteration. When comparing different performances of the same poem, rather than automatically interpreting any differences (in text, gesture, tone, etc.) as errors by the poet, I consider how these changes may reflect the poet's ability to adapt material to specific contexts.

Spoken word is a fundamentally social art form in which each performance is contextualised and directly affected by the presence and (often audible) responses of the audience. In recognition of the fact that the 'audience and poet collaborate in the performance of the poem,' wherever possible I have analysed poems that I have witnessed in live performance (Middleton, "The Contemporary Poetry Reading")

291). Encountering the poem live rather than through printed or recorded media allows me both to effectively participate in the creation of the poem and to witness the engagements of my fellow audience members. However, due to the impossibility of encountering each poem I wished to analyse in a live context, as well as the fallibility of my memory, I have also relied on supplementary records of poems within my analysis. These include audio/visual recordings (either staged or recorded at live events) and textual transcripts. I do not perceive these records to accurately and completely constitute the performances themselves, but rather to be ‘resonants, traces, and fragmentations’ of performances which ‘although not the thing itself, reflect upon, remember, evoke, and retain something of performance’ (Reason 2, 1). I do not analyse any poems for which video recordings are not available, as the text of the poem does not reflect the entire work and can only be considered a transcript or score.

Finally, in recognition of the fact that spoken word poets intend their work for this live setting and (to varying degrees) plan and rehearse their orality and physicality, I follow Novak in referring to the creative practice in spoken word as a ‘compositional practice’ rather than as a ‘writing practice’ (*Live Poetry* 20). This terminology also recognises the fact that some spoken word poets do not physically write down their poetry, instead composing material mentally and orally. For instance, Kevin Mclean’s composition practice does not involve physically writing; rather, he composes a line in his head and repeats it aloud until he generates the next line, thus cumulatively building a poem entirely orally (Interview). Although Mclean’s practice is not common, using the term ‘compositional practice’ accounts for the variety of literary, oral, and performance techniques involved in creating and delivering spoken word poetry.

### **Methodology: Ethnography**

The core methodological approach informing this thesis is ethnography: I used a broad range of data collection techniques which situated me within the field I studied, including event observation and participation, interviews with figures within the scene, and close analysis of not only the poetry but the discourse surrounding it (i.e. media reviews, online comments). I follow Gregory in this philosophy of

ethnography as a ‘broad approach than as a narrow set of methods’ and many of my data collection techniques echo hers in her 2009 thesis (111). While I did not maintain a formal, regular diary of my observations, I regularly reflected in various capacities: through taking notes following individual events, writing blog posts, and otherwise recording my experiences and interpreting their significance. This approach of gathering data through multiple methodological techniques ensured that my research was not myopic but enriched by diverse perspectives and modes of analysis (Toren).

Importantly, I undertook this ethnographic research as an insider<sup>60</sup>: I approach spoken word not only as a researcher, but also as a poet, producer, and educator.<sup>61</sup> Since my first experience of live spoken word poetry at an Edinburgh slam in 2012, I have regularly composed spoken word (as well as poetry for print publication) and I perform frequently across the U.K.<sup>62</sup> I also organise and publicise spoken word events: since 2015 I have worked as a producer and performer with Scottish company I Am Loud Productions. This has entailed creating platforms for other poets through our monthly showcases as well as devising hour-long touring shows as part of a multidisciplinary artistic collective. Additionally, I work as an educator focused on spoken word poetics in various capacities, including through youth and adult workshops and in university settings.

Conducting insider research necessarily entails assuming an emic perspective: I cannot claim total objectivity but rather my scholarship is informed by my personal, subjective experiences (Headland et al.). While this perspective necessitated negotiating several potential issues (as I will discuss shortly), it also

<sup>60</sup> While the term ‘insider’ is helpful to indicate my active inclusion within this field prior to my formal research, I recognise that the binary between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ is unstable; as Woodward describes, ‘the research process can never be totally ‘inside’ or completely ‘outside’, but involves an interrogation of situatedness and how ‘being inside’ relates to lived bodies and their practices and experiences’ (547).

<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, my practice as an academic *and* artist in this genre does not make me unique within the field but rather consistent with my predecessors and peers. Virtually all of the academics who have built the scholarship on spoken word are also poets themselves, including Bearder; R. Fox; Frost; Gregory; J. Johnson; Somers-Willett; and Wheeler.

<sup>62</sup> Although I am from the U.S., virtually all of my experience of spoken word has been in the U.K. context. Apart from a couple of open mics and one slam I have participated in during visits home, my exposure to U.S. spoken word has been limited to research and viewing digital content (i.e. YouTube videos).

provided many benefits which vitally informed my research. First, I was able to draw upon experiential knowledge of what it means to play several roles within the spoken word community, including as a performer, audience member, producer, host, slam judge, critic, and educator. Furthermore, my presence at spoken word events engaging in the poems I analyse was necessary in order to fully evaluate this live, participatory art form. As Kjeldsen observes, ‘being present provides the researcher to a whole range of sensate and phenomenological impressions—sights, sounds, smells, touch and so on—that can only be experienced in person’ and which are integral to the poetry (24). Being a poet myself, I also personally understand the tensions involved with the ethics and aesthetics of ‘authenticity’ within this genre and can thus relate to the complex performative balancing act of ‘being oneself’ onstage.

Being an insider was particularly helpful during my data collection phase as I interviewed spoken word poets. My familiarity with my fellow poets, producers, educators, and critics in this scene both helped me to source participants for the study and to establish trust: like Gregory, I found that my insider status ‘facilitat[ed] my identification and recruitment of participants and the ease with which I was able to establish rapport with them’ (114). Additionally, as Brannick and Coghlan observe, the insider researcher ‘can use the internal jargon, draw on their own experience in asking questions and interviewing, be able to follow up on replies, and so obtain richer data’ (69). My familiarity with the ‘jargon’ of the spoken word genre and community meant I was able to understand any shorthand references made by participants: for instance, if a participant referred to ‘Button Poetry style’ I knew they were referring to the style of highly emotional and dramatic spoken word poetry often regarding oppression and trauma popularised through the YouTube channel of U.S.-based organisation Button Poetry.

However, being an insider to this sphere also presents several challenges which I introduce here and detail throughout this section. First, as Kanuha observes, the insider researcher’s understanding of jargon can also be a disadvantage: if they allow the interviewee to continue speaking without asking them to explain what they mean, they miss the opportunity to have terms explained (thus bringing clarity to the discourse and making any interview records more publicly accessible). This also



risks the possibility that the participant and insider researcher have different perceptions of terms' meanings, thus creating the potential for the participants' perspective to be misinterpreted in the analysis (Kanuha 442).

Additionally, insider researchers can be ignorant of effects which to them are commonplace but which function as pivotal aspects of the area they are researching (Hayano; Kanuha). Particularly given that my research examines basic assumptions regarding spoken word poetry, it was imperative that I not take any features of the genre as incidental but rather consider how each facet of the art form contributed to 'authenticity' effects. Furthermore, I needed to temper my experiential knowledge with humility and, like J. Johnson, 'had to overcome my own ethnographic arrogance: that, as an active member of the community, I already knew what I needed to know to carry out this research' (*Killing Poetry* 26). Throughout this process I worked to step back and observe events with fresh eyes, noting the most mundane details and considering their roles within the art form.

As an insider researcher, I have also been careful not to assume that my experiences, opinions, and perspectives are reflective of those of all other U.K. spoken word poets (Kanuha 442-3). This was one of the primary reasons I decided to conduct large-scale data collection (as I will shortly detail): to ensure that when I formed arguments I was drawing upon the perspectives of many individuals, not simply making assumptions based on my personal experience. Consistently throughout the research process I reflected upon my own practices as a spoken word poet (and producer, critic, and educator) in order to identify them and thus be more equipped to distinguish them from the overall trends in my data. To this end, in late 2017 I conducted a formal self-reflection utilising my interview schedule,<sup>63</sup> which was a useful exercise enabling me to clarify my own position as an artist. By comparing my answers to the trends in the wider data pool I was able to identify where my personal views were consistent with broader consensus and where they diverged.

<sup>63</sup> Because this was not a formal interview conducted by a separate interviewer—effectively, I asked myself questions and then answered them in a somewhat bizarre, though ultimately helpful, manner—this audio file is not being archived at the Scottish Oral History Centre with the rest of my data.

Finally, one might question my ability to write about the art form which has given me a level of support, success, and financial benefit in a critical, unbiased fashion. Certainly my engagement in spoken word poetry colours how I perceive it; however, it is also my primary motivation for critically investigating it. I wish to see the art form respected as the nuanced, multidisciplinary genre I consider it to be and thus I analyse it with the rigour it deserves. My approach to this research echoes that of Somers-Willett in that

this project does not intend to be a celebration of slam poetry's popularity, nor does it attempt to defend slam poetry from its critics.... I consider myself neither a champion of the slam genre nor a detractor of it but rather a poet who is interested in how performance can inform her writing and a critic interested in how poetry slams generate new avenues of public discourse for poets and audiences. As a writer who wears the many hats of slam poet, academic poet, critic, and scholar, I hope the perspective of my experience proves enlightening not limiting. (11)

Throughout this research process, I have worked to balance my deep respect for my fellow poets with a desire to build the rigorous critical discourse many of them wish to see. To borrow the words of my fellow poet Rachel McCrum: 'my spoken word community [is] full of contrary buggers, independently minded outliers, wilful rebels and thrown souls, and I write those words'—and this thesis—'with love' ("The Ties That Bind" 26).

### **Data Collection: Interviews with Poets**

The primary component of my ethnographic methodology was a major data collection project consisting of face-to-face interviews with spoken word poets and other key figures engaged in the U.K. spoken word sphere. Between May and November 2017 I conducted 70 audio-recorded interviews averaging an hour and half each.<sup>64</sup> These interviews took place across the four nations of the U.K., including in the cities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, Bristol, Cardiff, Manchester,

<sup>64</sup> The interviews ranged in length from 36 minutes to two hours and 53 minutes. In total I recorded 103 hours of audio.

Birmingham, Belfast, Derry, and more (participants hailed from across the country, not just those urban centres; they were merely convenient meeting sites<sup>65</sup>).

In planning this course of data collection, I was conscious of the lack of publicly accessible information concerning contemporary spoken word poetry in the U.K.<sup>66</sup> Because of the ephemeral nature of the genre, collecting and archiving data regarding the history of the scene, event records, and poets' styles in a sustainable manner presents significant challenges. As Marsh et al. opine, 'since the proliferation of readings and other more performative, theatrical, and musical forms of poetry events has not attracted historians, much of this work is already lost—neither recorded nor reviewed, despite its evident importance for poetry, for both poets and audiences' (46). In a step towards correcting this issue, all of the interviews I conducted through this study are being archived at the Scottish Oral History Centre (SOHC) in Glasgow.<sup>67</sup> The public is able to access each audio file and complete transcript to the degree of the interviewee's comfort.<sup>68</sup> This archive will serve as a permanent source of historical record and insight regarding the U.K. spoken word sphere at this time.

This course of interview-driven data collection is not unprecedented within U.K. spoken word scholarship. In 2002-03 Marsh et al. interviewed poets for their historical study of U.K. performed poetics; in 2007 Gregory interviewed poets in the U.K. and U.S. to compare slam cultures in these scenes; Novak conducted interviews to inform her 2011 text *Live Poetry*; Silva conducted interviews with Black British poets in 2016 for her thesis<sup>69</sup>; and Bearder conducted interviews to inform his 2019 text *Stage Invasion*. My research builds upon theirs—some individuals I interviewed

<sup>65</sup> Appendix C: Index of Research Participants contains information on where each participant was based at the time of the study.

<sup>66</sup> Another major project working to correct this issue is the Apples and Snakes Spoken Word Archive, which was launched online in December 2015 and gathers physical and digital ephemera documenting the U.K. spoken word scene.

<sup>67</sup> This archive is planned for online publication in 2021. I have not cited interview quotations using timestamps or page numbers throughout this thesis (instead, I cite each as 'Interview'); however, once the archive is live, the transcripts will be fully searchable for those wishing to find any quotations.

<sup>68</sup> The majority of participants (63 out of 70) have granted full public access to their interviews, with the remaining seven granting limited access for research, publication, education, lectures, and broadcasting.

<sup>69</sup> Silva's interviews are being publicly archived by the British Library.

had also participated in one or more of these studies<sup>70</sup> and some questions in our interview schedules are similar—but for the most part I focus on different queries specific to ‘authenticity’ perception and performance in this genre.

In the following section I detail my criteria and process for participant selection, the ethical ramifications and considerations, the interview schedule, how data was stored and transcribed, and the data analysis process.

### ***Participant Selection***

For this study I interviewed figures active in the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene in various diverse ways, including poets, event organisers, producers, publishers, educators, and institutional leaders.<sup>71</sup> The grand majority (67 of the 70) are poets (often alongside other roles): however, three of them (Liz Counsell, Dave Coates, and Lisa Mead) are not spoken word poets but rather producers, critics, and spoken word organisation directors, respectively. In almost every instance one individual occupied multiple roles simultaneously; as Gregory observes within the slam context and as is also true of wider spoken word culture, ‘poets almost always perform some additional role at slam events, frequently acting as audience, comperes, organisers, judges and educators’ (27). Interviewing individuals occupying different roles within the scene provided various perspectives on the genre and insight into the ways in which decisions at the organisational or editorial level shape the art form more generally.

In designing this study, I was conscious of the risk of sampling bias as an insider researcher: for my own relationships, tastes, and blind spots as a poet and producer to negatively affect (i.e. limit) the data pool (Stephenson and Greer). To mitigate this risk, I relied upon snowball sampling (Noy).<sup>72</sup> First, at the outset of my study I developed a list of potential participants. The criteria for selection was simple: participants needed to be directly engaged in some capacity in the U.K. spoken word poetry scene (throughout this section I will further detail my

<sup>70</sup> Joelle Taylor, for instance, was interviewed for mine; Bearder’s; Gregory’s; and Marsh et al.’s studies.

<sup>71</sup> See Appendix C for an index of all participants including notes on their roles within the scene at the time of their interviews (coded as *poet*, *producer*, *educator*, *editor*, and *critic*).

<sup>72</sup> This technique belongs to a family of sampling techniques variously named ‘chain, referral, link-tracing, respondent-driven and purposive sampling’ (Noy 330).

considerations for participant inclusion). When I received ethical approval to commence my data collection, I reached out to all of the figures on this list and began scheduling interviews with them. At the conclusion of each interview I asked each participant who they would recommend I speak with and, when possible<sup>73</sup> and relevant,<sup>74</sup> I invited those individuals to the study. A primary advantage of this technique is that it can be used to find members of less visible communities, including those which lack organised databases (Biernacki and Waldorf 144). As I wanted not only to interview figures with established, highly publicised careers within the U.K. spoken word scene but also those who operated more at the ‘grassroots,’ using snowball sampling helped me to identify these individuals who are less high-profile but nonetheless have unique, important perspectives on this scene. In the end, of the 70 participants interviewed, I had met 36 previously (often through seeing them perform and/or working with them); the rest I had either been aware of through reputation or they had been suggested to me through snowball sampling.

In inviting participants to this study, I worked to ensure that the demographics of my data pool were as reflective of the demographics of the U.K. spoken word scene as possible. I invited individuals with varying levels of formal education; with diverse identities in terms of class, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and age; based in a variety of locations across the U.K.; and practicing a range of different styles of performance-based poetry. I gauged participants’ identities based on my perceptions and any available information, rather than through direct data collection: at no point did I through writing or during the interviews ask them to fill out a survey concerning their race, gender, age, etc. This was primarily due to my consciousness that spoken word poets are often individuals

<sup>73</sup> Towards the beginning of the study this technique was more effective, as following interviews I had ample time to look into the suggested participants, determine whether they would be suitable for the study, contact them, and arrange interviews. Near the end of the study, particularly during my final weeks of data collection in Northern Ireland, this was less feasible as I needed to wrap this phase of my research. However, I continued asking participants for their suggestions in order to develop a database of potential participants for future data collection.

<sup>74</sup> While the majority of suggestions for prospective participants were helpful, some figures suggested did not fit the criteria for inclusion in the data pool. Often this was because their careers were peripheral to the spoken word scene (i.e. their practices focused on print publication rather than live performance) or because they were not based in the U.K.

with marginalised identities and my subsequent concern that being asked to report these identities might deter some from participating.<sup>75</sup> Thus I lack reliable, self-reported data on participant demographics. In reporting these demographics below, I am relying on comments the participants made about their identities during the interview, through their poetry, or on public forums, with a final resort being my perceptions of their identities.<sup>76</sup>

It is challenging to gauge whether or not the demographic spread in my data set could be considered representative of the U.K. spoken word scene because there is no reliable data regarding the scene's demographics. Attempting to determine the demographic make-up of practitioners of any art form is challenging, but particularly so when the terms for and definition of that art form are contentious (should all those whose work falls into a broad definition of contemporary performance-based poetics be counted, even if they do not identify as 'spoken word poets'—and who determines the definition?) and the line between amateur and professional is blurred (should the data set include all who have ever performed spoken word poetry at an open mic, or only those who have reached a certain 'professional' threshold—and how would that threshold be determined?). Thus when inviting participants for interviews, I did not measure the demographics of my sample against any target demographics, but rather using my own judgment as a researcher, producer, and poet.

Although reliable demographic data on the U.K. spoken word scene does not currently exist, there are two studies providing some insight into the demographics of the scene which I use as tentative comparative points here. First, for her doctoral thesis, Gregory recorded data at 13 adult poetry slams in southern England between 2006-07, collecting demographic data (gender and ethnicity) on both slammers and audience members. Additionally, Bearder collected a small data set at the 2018 Hammer & Tongue National Slam Final in London: he gathered information on the

<sup>75</sup> In retrospect, a way to collect these data while protecting participants' privacy and ensuring their comfort would have been to circulate a digital, anonymous survey to all participants at the conclusion of the study. In future research of this nature I intend to use that methodology.

<sup>76</sup> I recognise that my perceptions of participants' identities may not necessarily match their experienced identities; thus, in gathering and reporting demographic data I have made every effort to ground these data in participants' own reporting of their identities.

poems performed and the age, gender, and ethnicity of the poets performing them for his text *Stage Invasion* (307). Neither of these data sets could be perceived as fully representative of the U.K. spoken word scene in 2017 (nor would either scholar claim them to be): both are limited in geographic spread (Gregory's to southern England, Bearder's to a single event in London) and Gregory's data was collected a decade prior to mine. However, together they serve as a limited<sup>77</sup> yet still useful comparative framework providing a glimpse into the demographics of U.K. spoken word performers. In the analysis below I compare the demographics of my research participants to their demographics of their data samples to indicate how my sample might (or might not) be a demographically representative sample of U.K. spoken word poets.

While I believe the pool of participants I interviewed to adequately reflect the demographics of the U.K. spoken word scene at the time of data collection, there are some ways in which my data pool is not as representative as it might have been, particularly in terms of racial diversity (as detailed below). Below follows a breakdown of my participants' demographics; analysis of the extent to which my sample is representative of the U.K. spoken word scene (where possible, based on Gregory's and Bearder's data); and, where relevant, how in future research I plan to adjust my participant selection strategy in order to ensure better representation.

First, in order to ensure my data was representative of spoken word cultures across the U.K., I invited participants living and working in cities and regions around each of the four nations of the U.K. At the time of data collection, 43 interviewees were based in England, 18 in Scotland, six in Northern Ireland, and two in Wales.<sup>78</sup> I did not gather data on participants' countries of origin, prioritising instead the countries in which they work. Participants based in Scotland are slightly over-

<sup>77</sup> Both Gregory and Bearder base their data collection on their perception of the poets' demographics rather than using any demographic data reported by the poets. This is for practical reasons (i.e. the logistical and ethical challenges of collecting this data from slam participants); however, as both scholars acknowledge, it means that these data are less reliable because they are grounded in perception.

<sup>78</sup> The only person I interviewed who was not living primarily in the U.K. at the time of our interview was Rachel McCrum, who had recently moved from Edinburgh to Montreal. I included McCrum in the study because of her extensive experience working in the U.K. live literature scene prior to her move.

represented in this study because I live and work in Scotland and thus I am more familiar with the scene there.

Ensuring that my data set reflected the racial and ethnic diversity of the U.K. spoken word poetry scene was a major priority in my participant selection. Of the 70 participants I interviewed, nine are non-white (13%). This is roughly double the proportion of non-white people in the U.K. at the time of the last data collection<sup>79</sup> and consistent with Bearder's observations of racial diversity in his 2018 data set.<sup>80</sup> However, it is slightly lower than Gregory's estimate of racial diversity in her 2006-7 data set<sup>81</sup> and, based on my observations of the U.K. spoken word scene, I believe my data set slightly under-represents the percentage of Black and minority ethnic performers in this sector. I regret this lack of representative diversity and in the future I wish to extend my archive of interviews at the SOHC to make it more reflective of the rich racial and ethnic diversity of the U.K. spoken word scene.

While I did not poll participants for their gender identities, based on any self-identifying statements which they gave and my perceptions of participants' gender performance, 37 were male (53%), 31 female (44%), one non-binary (1.4%), and one genderqueer (1.4%). The gender identities represented in my data set are roughly consistent with those in Gregory's and Bearder's data sets.<sup>82</sup>

In determining whether my data set was representative of the diversity of sexual orientation in the U.K. spoken word sphere, I was highly sensitive to ethical

<sup>79</sup> According to the 2011 census (the most recently recorded national data), the non-white population was 14% in England and Wales, 4% in Scotland, and 1.8% in Northern Ireland (data in Scotland and NI recorded as 'minority ethnic'), averaging 6.6% non-white across the U.K. ("Population of England and Wales"; "Ethnicity, Identity, Language and Religion"; "Census 2011: Key Statistics for Northern Ireland").

<sup>80</sup> In Bearder's sample at the 2018 Hammer & Tongue National Slam Final, he perceived that 'between 10-13% of competitors might be described as poets 'of colour' in the widely used sense of not belonging exclusively to white European heritage' (311).

<sup>81</sup> In Gregory's 2006-7 research on southern English slams, she found that 20.4% of the poets competing were Black or minority ethnic (BAME) (368-9). However, of the 13 slams at which Gregory collected data, six featured no BAME poets and two (in London) featured 80% BAME poets, thus making any statement of 'average' BAME representation difficult and reinforcing the extent to which demographics in this art form vary across geographical regions and events (368-9).

<sup>82</sup> In Gregory's 2006-7 research on southern English slams, she found that 29.7% of those competing were female (368-9). In Bearder's 2018 Hammer & Tongue data set, based on his perceptions '40-43% of the slammers presented as typically female and 57-60% presented as typically male,' but as he recognises 'this records perception only, and in particular does not account for gender non-conformity or non-binary and other genders' (311).



issues, particularly participants' privacy; I did not and do not want to 'out' any participants through my data reporting. One technique for reporting this data might have been to report the number of participants who publicly perform poems explicitly claiming queer identities (including lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations). However, this statistic would be inexact (not all queer poets will necessarily perform work regarding their queerness) and would entail directly inferring a confessional stance in all of these performers' work, which this thesis seeks to dissuade. Thus here I avoid reporting any demographic data regarding the sexual orientations of the participants in my study, other than to estimate that (based solely on my personal knowledge of participants and experience within this scene) my sample feels generally representative in this regard.<sup>83</sup>

Spoken word poetry is sometimes described as a 'youth movement' primarily by and for young people (Sparks and Grochowski (abstract); Yanofsky et al.), and as previously cited much of the scholarship regarding this genre has been pedagogical material analysing the potential of spoken word as a resource for self-expression and literacy in educational contexts. While certainly many spoken word poets are young people, the U.K. scene benefits from a rich cross-generational diversity. In selecting participants, I ensured that I was reflecting that diversity in my research by inviting figures of a range of ages. While, again, I did not collect personal data from participants, based on their self-reported ages in biographies and the social media profiles to which I have access (and my perceptions, where I lack data), of the 70 participants at the time of the interviews 22 were in their 20s (31.4%), 28 in their 30s (40%), 11 in their 40s (15.7%), 6 in their 50s (8.6%), and 1 in their 60s (1.4%).<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup> As Gregory and Bearder did not collect data on the sexual orientation of poets in their samples (likely due to the same challenges regarding feasibility and privacy as my study faced), I would lack comparative data sets to gauge whether my sample is representative of the U.K. scene in this area in any case.

<sup>84</sup> Although I recognise that educational spoken word programming such as Slambassadors, Young Identity Manchester, and Leeds Young Authors has yielded many teenage spoken word poets, I deliberately did not interview any poets under 20 years old. This was both because the scope of my research focuses on adult spoken word poetry in the U.K. and for ethical reasons (i.e. I did not seek approval for research on minors).

This data spread is relatively consistent with Bearder's findings and feels representative based on my observations of the U.K. scene.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, while a participant's age and the length of their engagement in the scene are not necessarily correlated (i.e. a 25-year-old may have ten years of experience while a 60-year-old only has one; 'emerging' does not denote young), I did factor into my participant selection inviting poets with a range of levels of experience in spoken word poetry. Some of the participants had only been active in the scene for several years, whereas others had been engaged in various capacities for decades. This breadth of levels of experience both allowed me to consider how poets' perspectives of their art form evolve with experience and allowed me to track for changes in the genre and sector over time.

The most challenging identity trait for me to measure in my data sample was class. Because class identity is highly complex, culturally variable, and mutable (Bottero), it is difficult to measure in any standardised, quantifiable fashion. A person's experience of class identity may not be congruent with external perceptions of their class identity based on their level of educational attainment (Ingram) or occupation (Evans and Mellon; Friedman). Thus for me to estimate the class identities of my participants based on my perceptions of their class identities would have been a flawed methodology. Even if I had circulated an anonymous questionnaire for participants to self-report their class identities (i.e. 'working class,' 'middle class,' etc.) this might for some socially mobile participants have posed a challenge: if they grew up 'working class' but now earn a 'middle class' income, do they report their socially experienced class or their financial realised class (Curtis)? Although I lack quantitative evidence of class diversity in my data sample, in their interviews participants independently reported a range of class identities and socioeconomic circumstances, so I am satisfied that my data sample does not significantly omit any class identity present in the U.K. spoken word scene.

Finally, in selecting participants to invite to this study, I worked to ensure that I was selecting poets with a wide range of creative practices and styles.

<sup>85</sup> Bearder's sample at the Hammer & Tongue National Slam Final was (based on his perception) 9% teens, 31% 20s, 31% 30s, 20% 40s, and 8% 50s and above (310). The demographic age spread in my data set is thus relatively consistent with his, other than my lack of representation for under-20s.

Obviously this is not a quantifiable metric, but I feel confident that my data set is relatively representative of the stylistic diversity of the U.K. scene. The artists interviewed cite influences from Gil Scott-Heron (Aliyah Hasinah) to Rimbaud (Clare Trévien) to Baz Luhrmann (Clare McWilliams). They innovate with incorporating various media into their practices including singing (Jemima Foxtrot), working with paper cut-outs (Fat Roland), and burlesque (Mel Bradley as Ms. Noir). Some weave elements of the surreal into their work—Rob Auton, Sam Small—while others’ invite the audience’s trust as they negotiate purportedly autobiographical narratives —Kathryn O’Driscoll, Joelle Taylor. While most perform single poems as part of their practice, many also work in the emerging genre ‘spoken word theatre,’ including Luke Wright, Jemima Foxtrot, and Bibi June. Although, as previously discussed, the breadth of creative practices in the U.K. spoken word scene makes the formulation of any singular definition challenging, it ultimately manifests a rich, multi-faceted artistic sphere, reflected at least in part through the wide range of practices reported by the poets I interviewed.

I recognise that the amount of data collected in this study (over 100 hours of interview audio with 70 participants) is somewhat unusual for an English dissertation. Arguably I could have gathered meaningful, relatively representative data from a smaller sample, and initially in my project plan I intended to interview only 25-50 participants. However, my final data set was larger for several reasons. First, the combination of participant selection techniques I used (initial invitations and snowball sampling) meant that throughout the period I was collecting data I continued to confirm more interviews with individuals. Furthermore, as I was conscious that not everyone I invited to the study would be interested in participating, I sent more invitations than I expected to do interviews, but those I invited overwhelmingly responded positively. Additionally, throughout the study I monitored the demographics of participants in order to ensure representative diversity in my sample. When I perceived any underrepresentation of any trait, I actively invited more individuals with that trait to correct the balance.<sup>86</sup> Finally, as I

<sup>86</sup> For instance, I became conscious early in my study that I had interviewed almost no people of colour. Although I had already confirmed interviews with more people of colour for later in the study, at this realisation I actively invited more people of colour to the study in order to redress this underrepresentation.

note above, the U.K. spoken word scene is remarkably stylistically varied, so I believe a large data set was necessary to capture the diversity of practices and perspectives.

### *Ethics*

This course of data collection required ethical approval, which was granted by the University of Strathclyde in April 2017.<sup>87</sup> Although this study was assessed as low-risk, there were nonetheless several key ethical considerations that I weighed in designing and delivering it which I will briefly discuss here. In her chapter ‘Ethnographic Interviewing’ in the *Handbook of Ethnography*, Heyl set out four core practices of ethnographic interviewing generally agreed upon in the scholarship: respectful listening, self-awareness, cognisance of context, and recognition of limitations (370). Although I discovered Heyl’s research after my data collection, retrospectively I consider my interviewing practices to be in line with these tenets.

As previously discussed, one of the core ethical considerations I negotiated in designing and carrying out this research was my insider status: I was conscious that my identity as a fellow poet and a producer would influence the way in which participants interacted with me. Being interviewed by an insider researcher may exert a pressure on the participant to disclose (or conceal) certain narratives or perspectives (Alvesson). For instance, had an interviewee disliked I Am Loud Productions, they likely would not have felt free to express that dislike in our interview, no matter how open I professed the space to be. In order to minimise the potential for bias, I did not actively emphasise my insider status with the participants: I entered the interview context in a researcher role and, unless directly queried, avoided discussing my own perspectives on the questions I was asking.<sup>88</sup> I

<sup>87</sup> My approved Ethics Application can be viewed in Appendix D and my Risk Assessment in Appendix E.

<sup>88</sup> In one interview, the participant directly asked me if I was a poet, indicating that this practice of not overtly disclosing my insider status in the Participant Information Sheet or other documents meant that some participants may not have perceived me as an insider. I do not believe this was a common occurrence, however; obviously all of the participants who I knew personally prior to the interviews were aware of my insider status, and my digital presence (i.e. website, social media pages) make my identity as a poet and producer clear, so any participants who looked me up prior to our interview would have immediately realised my status.

conducted interviews in neutral, public settings whenever possible and avoided wearing any I Am Loud Productions-branded clothing or badges.<sup>89</sup> I also worked to combat any sampling bias in participant selection due to my insider status by using a snowball sampling technique, as previously discussed, so that I was not only interviewing those with whom I was personally and professionally familiar but a broad range of participants.

My second ethical concern was ensuring participants felt safe, comfortable, and informed through the interviews. All participants were adults who openly participate in spoken word poetry, and all of the queries in the interview schedule referred to the participant's relationship with this art form. While some of the questions referred to the relationship between one's self and one's art, thus requesting personal reflection, at no point did I ask participants to divulge autobiographical experiences not related to their craft. I also made it clear to participants at the outset of each interview that they were not obligated to answer every question and were free to stop (or pause) the interview at any time. I ensured that participants were fully informed on the intent, procedure, and output of the study throughout their participation. When inviting prospective participants to the study, I included the Participant Information Form and prior to each interview, I sent the participant the Informed Consent Form<sup>90</sup> and SOHC Recording Agreement form<sup>91</sup> so that they had the opportunity to review them fully before we met.<sup>92</sup>

My third major ethical concern was privacy: it was imperative that participants had full control over how their data was stored, reported, and disseminated. The SOHC Recording Agreement form gave participants three options as to the level of accessibility of their recording in the archive: full online access, limited online access, and anonymity (see Appendix H for exact wording).<sup>93</sup> I

<sup>89</sup> See Alvesson for a nuanced discussion of the benefits and limitations of closeness-maximising research.

<sup>90</sup> See Appendix H.

<sup>91</sup> See Appendix I.

<sup>92</sup> The only exceptions to this practice occurred when, using the snowball sampling technique, a prospective participant was recommended to me and, because I was only in the area for a short time, the interview needed to occur very soon after the recommendation. In these rare instances, I thoroughly reviewed the materials with the participant in person prior to the interview.

<sup>93</sup> As previously noted, 63 granted full public access to their interviews, seven granted limited access, and none required anonymity.

ensured that each participant understood each option prior to their interview, then allowed them to decide their option either prior to the interview or following it. This meant that they could choose an option and participate in the interview conscious of the access level (potentially filtering their replies based on that level) or wait until after the interview to decide the access level based on what they had shared. Even if they had selected an option in advance, I gave them the chance to re-evaluate that decision following the interview if they had shared anything that they felt uncomfortable with being public.

This control over access has been extended to the participant throughout the remainder of the data analysis and archival process. As I completed each interview transcript, I emailed it to the participant alongside the audio file. If there were any points in the audio where I was unsure of what they had said or the spelling of a name that I could not work out independently, I asked them for clarification. In this email<sup>94</sup> I also reminded them that this data would be publicly archived at the SOHC, reminded them of the level of access they had selected in their Recording Agreement Form, and invited them to change the access level after reviewing the interview audio/transcript if they wished to ensure they were completely comfortable with how their information was being stored.

Throughout this thesis, wherever I use direct quotes from participants, I cite them using their names.<sup>95</sup> I recognise that this is somewhat unusual for studies using social science methodologies; however, I adopted this practice because although they were given the option,<sup>96</sup> none of the participants chose for their interviews to be archived and cited anonymously. This may be because, as Gregory found in her research, the concept of anonymity felt ‘rather counter-intuitive to a large proportion of my interviewees, many of whom spent considerable periods of time promoting themselves as poets and ensuring that their words were credited to them’ (116).

<sup>94</sup> A template of this email can be read in Appendix K.

<sup>95</sup> Throughout this thesis I cite the names under which the poets perform, rather than their legal names (in the less common cases where poets use pseudonyms; see Chapter 2). In the case of poet and scholar Pete Bearder, who performs under the name ‘Pete the Temp,’ references to Bearder’s critical text *Stage Invasion* are cited under ‘Bearder,’ while references to my interview with Bearder are cited under ‘Pete the Temp.’

<sup>96</sup> See point 5 in my Informed Consent Form (Appendix H). No participants selected option 3 in the SOHC Recording Agreement Form (Appendix I).

Additionally, Heyl suggests that in certain situations the practice of naming research informants (given consent) may be ‘empowering’ for those individuals, which may have factored into spoken word poets’ decisions to be named in an academic study of this under-researched genre (375). Furthermore, the identity of the poet speaking often significantly informs the context in which I cite their data, particularly when I refer to the experiences of poets with marginalised identities. While using broader generalisations regarding poets’ identities was a possibility (i.e. ‘a poet of colour states...’) the nature of identity as complex and fluid dissuaded me from this technique, and the consent of each participant to use their names rendered it unnecessary.

### ***Interview Schedule***

The interviews were semi-structured: I worked from a set interview schedule but adapted questions to each participant’s practice and asked follow-up questions where relevant. Using a semi-structured interview schedule allowed me the flexibility to engage with myriad participants with wide-ranging experiences and practices and to ask each questions relevant to their various careers. There were, however, some questions which I consistently asked across all interviews with the same wording to ensure clarity and precision. The interview questions deliberately covered a wide range of issues, including creative practices, preferred terminology for the genre, and participants’ perceptions of the U.K. spoken word sphere and its critical discourse.<sup>97</sup> In conducting these interviews I gathered information not only on the subjects most pertinent to this thesis but also those which I felt might be useful for the public record and future researchers in this field: for instance, the local history of participants’ scenes. Given that the analysis in this thesis only scratches the surface of the data gathered, it is my hope that future scholars will draw upon it to further the growing body of scholarship in this field.

<sup>97</sup> The full interview schedule utilised in this interview series can be found in Appendix J.

## *Data Analysis*

My approach to organising and interpreting the data I collected through my interviews was informed by the qualitative methodology of thematic analysis. Although in designing and carrying out my research I effectively designed my own data analysis methodology rather than utilising a set, pre-existing methodology, the actions I took are consistent with the principles and practice of thematic analysis. This relatively flexible qualitative approach is useful for breaking down and interpreting large data sets (N. King) as well as ‘potentially provid[ing] a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data’ (Braun and Clarke 78). In this section I detail my approach to data analysis, noting how my approach was broadly consistent with Nowell et al.’s ‘Step-by-Step Approach to Conducting a Trustworthy Thematic Analysis’ (4).

Once I had conducted an interview, after securely uploading the audio file, my first step was transcribing that audio word-for-word. Sometimes this transcription process began relatively soon following the interview; however, as this is a time-consuming process, more frequently the transcription took place weeks or months later. I began transcribing interviews while I was still actively collecting data (rather than waiting until my data collection period finished) so that I could apply the insights I gained from closely listening back through the interviews to my practice: this was a vital aspect of my reflexivity as an ethnographic researcher. I generally followed the naturalised approach to data transcription: as precisely as possible I transcribed what and how the participant spoke, including approximating their dialect and accounting for non-verbal cues including pauses (Oliver et al.). I chose the naturalised approach over the denaturalised approach due to the importance of these non-verbal cues and to avoid as much as possible imposing my interpretations and values over the data, particularly at this initial stage (Schegloff).

While this exacting technique meant that this process was heavily time-consuming, it ensured the transcripts were complete and fully searchable for key words and themes,<sup>98</sup> which assisted with analysis. Fully transcribing the data also allowed me to familiarise myself with the material: by closely listening to

<sup>98</sup> Another motivation for word-for-word transcription was increasing the accessibility of the SOHC archive of these interviews.



participants' statements again without the social pressure of actively interviewing them, I was able to pay detailed attention to the nuances of what was said, how it was said, and what was omitted (see Heyl 375-6). My methodology here was consistent with the first phase of Nowell et al.'s methodology, 'Familiarizing Yourself with the Data': I made notes of themes within the interviews, interesting segments to revisit, and areas where the data significantly supported—or undermined—my initial hypotheses.<sup>99</sup>

As I transcribed the interviews, I developed a central data bank consisting of many sub-documents. First, I created sub-documents for each query in the interview schedule: for example, headings included 'When is a poem finished' and 'Would you characterise everything you say onstage as "true"?' When I completed an interview transcript, I entered its data into the relevant sections of the data bank, marking each quotation with the initials of the participant who had said it. Next, I created sub-documents for the data which did not neatly fit under these query headings. These were data prompted by follow-up questions not on the general interview schedule, data where the participant had gone off topic from the question, and data which simply did not fit into any of the categories formed by the queries. These themes included 'commercial use of spoken word' (many poets, unprompted, brought up the Nationwide Building Society advertisements featuring poetry), 'trauma,' and 'mainstream versus grassroots.' At times, an interview quotation would fit into multiple categories, so I would duplicate it and place it in each relevant sub-document. Effectively, through this process I coded my data into rough thematic categories, enabling me to separately analyse the material relevant to each theme. My approach here approximates what Lockyer terms the 'scissor-and-sort' technique common to qualitative thematic analysis (590) and incorporated many of the actions in Phases 2-3 of Nowell et al.'s methodology ('Generating Initial Codes,' 'Searching for Themes') (4).

When this process was complete, my data were compiled into 82 sub-documents (each representing distinct, though intersecting, themes) under eight

<sup>99</sup> As previously noted, because I was conscious of the potential biases I might hold as an insider researcher, this strategy of consistent reflexive note-taking was central to my research practice.

broad headings.<sup>100</sup> To begin analysing these data, I went through each sub-document highlighting material which explicitly encapsulated the participants' perspective (i.e. Yes/No/Maybe answers) and which provided insight into my research questions. Highlighting this particularly relevant material allowed me to quickly scan the data for trends and themes: for instance, to identify when multiple participants had independently mentioned a certain event, artist, or other topic. This technique also facilitated some quantitative data analysis was possible from the interviews: when I asked a direct question inviting a positive or negative response, I was able to count the number of positive versus negative replies.<sup>101</sup> At times, through highlighting this material I identified further themes and reflexively created new sub-documents collating this material. This process roughly approximates Phases 2-3 of Nowell et al.'s methodology ('Reviewing Themes,' 'Defining Theme Names'), although as a solo researcher I did not confer with project partners in developing my themes (4).

Throughout the process of analysing this data and building my arguments for this thesis, I continually re-read and re-examined these data. I also frequently searched key terms in my data bank—including 'authentic(ity),' 'tru(e/th),' 'presen(t/ce),' and 'trauma'—to ensure my conclusions took into account all relevant data. Citing my findings in this thesis, I both report broad thematic trends and use quotations from the interviews to indicate artists' positions.<sup>102</sup> Ultimately, I am confident that my approach of identifying trends, highlighting representative and relevant material, searching key words and phrases, and gathering quantitative data where possible enabled me to appropriately and fully analyse my data according to the core tenets of thematic analysis.

<sup>100</sup> These headings were: Influences, Composition Process, Self/Truth, Politics/Safe Spaces, Defining Spoken Word, Criticism, Publishing, and Broader Context.

<sup>101</sup> This was not always possible, however; the majority of questions were open-ended rather than inviting a Yes/No response. Additionally, even when questions invited a positive or negative response, often participants responded more ambiguously in a manner that evaded binary quantification.

<sup>102</sup> I do not directly quote from each interviewee within this thesis; however, each interview informed the conclusions I made. Only the interviews from which I drew quotations are listed in the Works Cited but a full index of all research participants can be found in Appendix C.

## **Methodology: Audience Reception Theory**

As Chapter 1 will discuss, ‘authenticity’ is not a static quality but a cooperatively constructed negotiation. Within spoken word poetry, ‘authenticity’ is performed by the poet, contextualised through the rhetoric surrounding the event and the event conventions, and (potentially) perceived by spectators. Throughout this thesis I rely on primary evidence wherever possible to interrogate how this construction occurs: by analysing poetry, interviewing poets regarding their practice, and considering how events are formatted and marketed. However, for this study I did not directly gather evidence from audiences across the U.K. regarding their perceptions of ‘authenticity’ within contemporary spoken word and thus I rely on secondary evidence in hypothesising their perceptions of ‘authenticity.’ As I will detail below, these include poets’ perceptions of their audiences’ beliefs, media reviews and scholarship, and my experiences as an insider to the scene.

Generally I agree with the contentions of Barker; Stromer-Galley and Schiappa; and other audience-studies theorists that ‘if rhetorical critics make claims concerning the determinate meanings of the text or the effects those texts have on audiences, then the critic should turn to the audience to support those claims’ (Stromer-Galley and Schiappa 49). However, within the context of this PhD conducting that research was not feasible. This was chiefly due to a lack of resources: the kind of large-scale data collection which would have been necessary is prohibitively time-consuming, expensive, and challenging to coordinate. In order to gather meaningful data, I would have needed to design and receive ethical approval for a survey of many spoken word events across the U.K., factoring in communications with event producers, a strategy for enforcing survey collection, and additional time to interpret and analyse all results. While this is a research avenue which I am interested in pursuing in the future in order to gather more conclusive evidence of the phenomena I describe in this thesis, it was outwith the scope of this PhD.<sup>103</sup>

I am, however, conscious of the potential issues with a lack of direct audience

<sup>103</sup> As far as I am aware, there has been no recent large-scale research focused directly on U.K. spoken word audiences, although as previously noted Gregory recorded gender and ethnic demographic data of audiences (and slammers) in her 2006-7 research into southern English slams (368-9).

research in this study and have worked to avoid them. Although I rely throughout this thesis on my first-hand experience as a spectator at spoken word events, I am aware that ‘critics cannot function as surrogates for audiences, simply because they are very different from those audiences’ (Kjeldsen 5). As a researcher, I do not watch spoken word performances in the same way as a ‘typical’ audience member<sup>104</sup>: my perception is filtered by my knowledge of the art form and I (often inadvertently) tend to critically analyse the material rather than simply appreciating it. Spectators’ levels of knowledge of the genre which they are viewing ‘can impact significantly on our experience and the potential intersubjective exchanges that result’ (Whalley and Miller 22). Those with expertise include not only academics but practitioners as well: my data consistently revealed that poets perceive the ‘authenticity’ of their peers’ work in a different manner to how casual reviewers, online commenters, and other ‘non-expert’ spectators seemed to perceive it. Thus the cautious, reflexive stance I took throughout this research process as an insider applies here as well: in considering how audiences may perceive this material, although my perceptions are unavoidably informed by my experiences, I avoid upholding my personal tastes as a spectator as representative of audiences’ experiences more widely.

In the absence of quantitative audience-response data, I rely on a variety of secondary evidence to make my arguments. First, I use data from my interviews with figures in the U.K. spoken word scene: in each interview I asked poets how they believe their audiences interpret the level of ‘authenticity’ in their poetry.<sup>105</sup> This is indirect evidence: it can only indicate how poets *perceive* the reception to (and demand for) their work, a judgment which will be influenced by the poets’ projected desires, insecurities, and other factors. Consequently, I am careful throughout this thesis not to use these data as conclusive, direct evidence of audiences’ perceptions. However, these data still provide a helpful metric despite their limitations: in developing their perceptions of how audiences interpret their work, poets rely upon considerable lived experience including visible and audible spectator reactions

<sup>104</sup> Specifically, I mean that I have motives for viewing this work and factors influencing my perception of it beyond being entertained. I recognise that there is no ‘typical’ audience member—as Conroy contends, ‘the “ideal” spectator exists only as an abstract idea’—and that each audience member brings their own horizon of expectations to the work (6).

<sup>105</sup> These queries included ‘Do you think audiences believe everything you say onstage is ‘true’?’ and ‘Do you think audiences take you as representative of any group or identity?’

during performances, conversations with spectators following events, and online comments and reviews indicating spectators' positions. Furthermore, understanding how poets *perceive* audiences' reception of their work is important regardless of whether these perceptions are accurate: poets' senses of what their audiences believe and value fundamentally shape what and how poets perform. Thus, although these data are limited, they provide insight into how assumptions of 'authenticity'—or, more specifically, poets' assumptions of audiences' assumptions of 'authenticity'—shape the genre.

Second, in the absence of direct audience research, I drew upon media reviews, successful trends in poetry slams,<sup>106</sup> and comments upon spoken word videos<sup>107</sup> as rough, secondary proxies for audience testimony. Discovering and analysing these data involved various methodologies. To research media reviews, for instance, I set up daily Google Alerts for the terms 'spoken word poetry,' 'performance poetry,' and 'slam poetry' and saved the relevant articles<sup>108</sup> to my data set. I also combed through platforms featuring reviews of spoken word events—including *Sabotage Reviews*, *All These New Relations*, and Edinburgh Fringe review sites such as *Broadway Baby*—and added these reviews to my data set. As I accumulated more evidence, I continuously analysed these sources, roughly coding them for trends in the media rhetoric regarding contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry. Here my methodological approach again approximated thematic analysis, and throughout this thesis my argument is informed both by the broad conclusions I drew from this analysis and by quotations from specific articles indicative of this rhetoric.

While for the sake of ease throughout this thesis I frequently refer to 'the audience' or 'audience members,' I do not wish to imply that spoken word spectators are a homogenous bloc, perceiving and valuing 'authenticity' in a unified, consistent manner. In 1998 Abercrombie and Longhurst encouraged a shift in how audience studies theorises the audience—from a singular body to a collection of distinct individuals each informed by their own frame of reference—and I agree with the

<sup>106</sup> See Chapter 6 for a more detailed explanation of how I use the poetry slam as a quasi-microcosm of the critical discourse within U.K. spoken word poetry.

<sup>107</sup> See the Chapter 3 analysis of digital annotations to Neil Hilborn's "OCD."

<sup>108</sup> The majority of the search results on any given day are not relevant: they include event listings, articles on 'spoken word' not referring to poetry (i.e. psychological studies), and articles which only mention the genre in passing.

latter conception. Perceiving the audience as heterogeneous is particularly important when analysing spoken word poetry because the identities of ‘audience member’ and ‘performer’ blur constantly: often poets emerge from and return to the audience rather than appearing from the wings (which would physically distinguish them from audience members).<sup>109</sup> As Freshwater contends,

The common tendency to refer to an audience as ‘it’ and, by extension, to think of this ‘it’ as a single entity, or a collective, risks obscuring the multiple contingencies of subjective response, context, and environment which condition an individual’s interpretation of a particular performance event. (5)

Each spectator brings their own prior experiences with the genre, knowledge of the poet,<sup>110</sup> biases, interpretive strategies, aesthetic preferences, and moral values to bear upon the work they are experiencing. In developing reader-response theory, Jauss termed these preconceptions the ‘horizon of expectations,’ and Bennett has since applied this concept within audience-response theory (Jauss 22; Bennett 141).<sup>111</sup> While throughout this thesis I analyse each element of spoken word poetry which affects spectators’ perceptions—from poets’ onstage actions to marketing materials to staging conventions—there are countless factors influencing their perceptions which cannot be measured. Thus in this thesis I conceive of the audience as a diverse gathering of distinct individuals each bringing a unique horizon of expectations to bear in their perceptions of the work.

Finally, while myriad factors contribute to the perception (or lack thereof) of ‘authenticity’ in a poet’s performance, most important is the way in which the work is framed *as spoken word*.<sup>112</sup> As Goffman influentially theorised, the way in which behaviours and performances are framed—as performance, as a specific genre, as

<sup>109</sup> In Chapter 5 I further describe this tendency and how it encourages the perception of poet-performers as ‘authentic,’ non-representative figures.

<sup>110</sup> This includes the spectator’s memories of previous performances of the work; see Carlson’s *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* for a thorough investigation of this effect.

<sup>111</sup> The concept of the ‘horizon of expectations’ and the importance of acknowledging the reader/spectator’s agency in constructing the meaning of the work owes much to Stuart Hall’s model of audience reception as proposed in his landmark 1973 paper “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” and extended in later works.

<sup>112</sup> Chapter 2 further explores the importance of framing devices by applying Lejeune’s concept of the autobiographical and referential pacts to the spoken word poetry context.

‘authentic,’ etc.—fundamentally affects the way in which they are perceived (*Frame Analysis*). For instance, a spectator could view a spoken word poem at a spoken word event and perceive it as ‘authentic’ (true, autobiographical, etc.). However, if they were to view this piece as part of a showcase of dramatic monologues, they would apply a different frame to the work and would likely perceive it to be an acted work of fiction. This may seem obvious—how art is framed affects our perceptions of it—but is important to reinforce here. An anecdote from Apples and Snakes Director Lisa Mead illustrates how the audiences’ horizon of expectations affects their perception of the work’s ‘authenticity’:

I took a friend of mine to see Lemn [Sissay]’s show, and she’s a theatre-maker. And she didn’t realise it was his personal story, so she viewed it as him being an actor. And so she had a very different take on it, because ... she just didn’t realise. And I said, ‘Oh no, that’s his story, that’s all true.’ (Interview)

Although the siting and staging cues of spoken word events are heavily influential in shaping spectators’ expectations of the poetry, the horizons of expectation each spectator brings to bear also has a significant effect.

## Chapter Layout

I begin in **Chapter 1: Contextualising Authenticity** by defining the concept of ‘authenticity’ and sketching its historical evolution. I highlight the constructed, dialogic, and multifaceted nature of ‘authenticity,’ identifying it not as an inherent quality in any item, person, or artistic exchange but rather a subjectively performed and perceived trait. In order to contextualise my proposal of a taxonomy of spoken word ‘authenticities,’ I indicate how scholars within many other disciplines have similarly divided the concept of ‘authenticity’ into various context-dependent strains. I also clarify several key concepts and introduce the language I use to distinguish between the various ‘I’ roles within spoken word poetry.

The next three chapters lay out the first nine strains of ‘authenticity’ in my taxonomy in detail. Each chapter concludes with a case study demonstrating the strains described. **Chapter 2: Authenticities of Self** introduces the concepts of *authenticity of origin* (the perception that the performer of the poem is also its

author), *authenticity of autobiographical self* (the perception that the performer of the poem is the speaker of the poem, i.e. that first-person narratives are autobiographical to the performer), and *authenticity of narrative* (the perception that any feasibly true narratives shared onstage are true). Applying Lejeune's theories of the autobiographical and referential pacts, this chapter argues that spoken word poetry as a genre encourages audiences to perceive all poetry labelled as 'spoken word' as original, autobiographical, and 'true.' It analyses the fraught ethics of these authenticities of self, noting how breaches in the autobiographical and referential pacts can yield serious professional and personal consequences for poets. I also describe ways in which individual poets can perform these authenticities of self through various techniques in their composition, performance, and marketing practices. However, this chapter complicates the notion of spoken word as an inherently 'confessional' genre by indicating how poets are flexible in their adherence to autobiography and truth. I conclude this chapter with a case study of Connor Macleod's poem "Flowers" (expanding upon the anecdote opening this thesis) illustrating each of these strains.

**Chapter 3: Authenticities of Presence** is concerned with the performance and perception of live, responsive spontaneity within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry. First it introduces the theory of *authenticity of persona*, or the perception that the poet is neither acting nor adopting a persona, but showing the audience their 'true' self. Next it proposes the idea of *authenticity of temporal state*, which is the illusion of spontaneity: the perception that performances are not pre-composed or pre-choreographed but extemporaneous. Third, it explains the concept of *authenticity of emotion*, or the perception that the poet's emotional affect onstage genuinely reflects their internal emotional state during the performance. Again, while this chapter contends that spoken word as a genre encourages audiences to perceive these 'authenticities,' it reveals how crafted and constructed they are, identifying the techniques poets use to project them. In concluding this chapter illustrates how each of these strains can be performed through a case study of Jack Macmillan's poem "Paracetamol."

Next, **Chapter 4: Socially Mediated Authenticities** looks beyond the ways in which spoken word poets perform self and presence to consider how audiences



judge poets' authenticities against societal models. Because 'authenticity' is a socially constructed, dialogic exchange rather than an inherent trait, it is perceived (or rejected) based on stereotypes, ethical standards, and other 'norms.' The first strain examined in this chapter, *authenticity of voice*, describes the perception that the poet is not copying or following in others' styles but instead using their 'natural' voice. The second section, on *authenticity of identity*, is a thorough consideration of how poets' visibly and audibly apparent identity markers (signalling race, gender, class, etc.) affect how they are perceived as 'authentic' or 'inauthentic.' It describes how stereotypes and societal prejudice pressure marginalised poets to perform their identity in certain manners in order to be perceived as authentic. Finally, the section regarding *authenticity of motivation* describes the perception that spoken word poets are motivated not by external incentives (i.e. money, success), but 'pure' creativity and/or activism. This chapter concludes with a case study of Keith Jarrett's poem "Hip Hop Salvation" which illustrates all nine of the authenticities presented to this point.

**In Chapter 5: Event Conventions and 'Authenticity of Engagement'** I take a broader perspective to consider how the context of spoken word events frames expectations of 'authenticity.' Throughout this chapter I rely upon audience reception theory (particularly Bennett's work), theories of spatial relationships and proxemics (McAuley; E. Hall), and theatre semiotics (Elam). I argue that the way in which U.K. spoken word events are typically staged encourages the perception of performing poets as 'authentic' figures who are not representing characters, but rather 'being themselves.' This effect is reinforced through many facets of live events including the erosion of spatial and social distance between poets and spectators; the invitation of engaged audience participation; the welcoming, accessible tone of marketing materials; and the use of spaces, seating arrangements, and staging practices not common in traditional theatrical or literary settings. In this chapter I also introduce the tenth and final strain of authenticity relevant within contemporary spoken word: *authenticity of engagement*. This is the perception that the poet-performer is directly engaging with the audience: performing to and with spectators and adapting material for this specific context. This chapter emphasises the importance of the live event in framing the audience's expectations and

perceptions of ‘authenticity’ within contemporary spoken word and concludes with a case study of the 2015 Loud Poets event ‘Straight Outta Dennistoun.’

Finally, in **Chapter 6: ‘Authenticity’ and the Critical Discourse** I argue that the aesthetic and moral valorisation of ‘authenticity’ within the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene has been detrimental to the development of a rigorous critical discourse. I use poetry slams as a microcosm for the wider critical discourse, observing how certain styles and themes—particularly narratives of trauma and oppression—are particularly successful. I analyse how this aesthetics derives from the valuing of ‘authenticity’ within contemporary spoken word poetry and describe the detrimental effects the fetishisation of personal adversity has on poets. I apply theories from ‘Outsider Art’ scholarship to argue that the critical discourse concerning U.K. spoken word poetry is grounded in deeply problematic assumptions regarding poets’ inherent authenticities: that often it takes their apparent ‘authenticity’ at face value rather than recognising the skill and craft inherent in creating the work. I use Watts’ 2018 article “The Cult of the Noble Amateur” as a case study illustrating this effect and describe how this trend is harmful not only for poets but also for the development of spoken word poetry as a professional pursuit. Finally, I propose a set of critical practices tailored to contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry which critics should utilise to avoid assuming ‘authenticities’ in this work and instead to rigorously analyse its craft and context.

The **Conclusion** of this thesis emphasises that emotionally affecting, powerful spoken word performances and well-developed craft are not mutually exclusive. I end by suggesting further research which might build upon this study and by pointing hopefully towards the continuing development of this critical discourse.

## Chapter 1: Contextualising ‘Authenticity’

I think it’s important for the poet to be authentic. Now that doesn’t mean that they need to be telling the truth. It means that they need to be authentic.

—Jenny Lindsay (Interview)

‘Authenticity’ is frequently invoked in depictions of contemporary spoken word poetry, both by figures outwith the scene (i.e. journalists reviewing shows) and by poets themselves describing what they appreciate about the genre. Scholarship on spoken word poetry has long contended that poems gauged to be ‘authentic’ are more likely to win slams or succeed in other critical fora (see Damon; Eid; Hoffman; Rivera; Somers-Willett). This theory suggests that the perceived ‘authenticity’ of a poem (and/or poet) functions as a marker of its quality within this genre. However, the use of ‘authentic’ as a descriptor and aesthetic trait is not only subjective but frustratingly vague: does the user mean that the work is *real*? *Honest*? *True*, *accurate*, *genuine*, *original*, *natural*? Each term approximates part of the connotation of ‘authenticity’ within contemporary spoken word but none fully grasps it. Additionally, how can these qualities be accurately gauged—and is accuracy even relevant or possible in subjective interpretations of artistic performance?

While the existing spoken word scholarship generally asserts that the audience’s perception of a poem’s (and, by extension, poet’s) ‘authenticity’ is a key factor of success in the genre, the discourse has lacked a deep analysis of what precisely that critical determination entails: what actions, identities, narratives, and performances connote ‘authenticity’ here and how they may be performed and perceived (particularly in the U.K. context). This chapter begins this investigation by considering what exactly ‘authenticity’ *is* and how its denotations and the extent to which it is valued have shifted over time. I briefly sketch the history of ‘authenticity’ as a concept in Western culture then specifically describe how it has been previously analysed within spoken word poetry scholarship. Next I indicate how my technique of creating a taxonomy of multiple context-dependent strains of ‘authenticity’ is preceded within other fields of study. This chapter concludes by clarifying some

of the terminology used within the following chapters.

## **Defining ‘Authenticity’**

Because the concept of ‘authenticity’ has a long history and many (sometimes conflicting) denotations, I begin here by contextualising it within Western thought and surveying its varying definitions. The origin of the term is generally traced to the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the philosophy of Rousseau,<sup>113</sup> but its connotations have evolved considerably since.<sup>114</sup> Today, the term encompasses a wide range of meanings, leading Dutton to argue that “[a]uthentic,’ like its near-relations, ‘real,’ ‘genuine,’ and ‘true,’ is what J. L. Austin called a ‘dimension word,’ a term whose meaning remains uncertain until we know what dimension of its referent is being talked about’ (258). As this thesis explores, the denotation of ‘authenticity’ is entirely dependent on the context in which it is being performed and perceived, thus requiring more precise, context-specific language to analyse its effects and prompting the development of my taxonomy of ‘authenticity’ strains in U.K. spoken word poetry.

In existentialist philosophy, ‘authenticity’ is ‘a question that is to be addressed by the individual in his or her “self-making”’ and implies ‘a sort of “transparency” between one’s actions and one’s true self, regardless of social roles’ (Cobb 7). This is the denotation of ‘authenticity’ closest to its sister term ‘sincerity,’ which Trilling characterised as ‘a congruence between avowal and actual feeling’ (2). Although the terms ‘sincerity’ and ‘authenticity’ are often used interchangeably today,<sup>115</sup> technically they have separate, though interlinking, denotations.

<sup>113</sup> Trilling writes extensively of Rousseau’s effect in making ‘authenticity’ a core value within contemporary Western society (*Sincerity and Authenticity* 58).

<sup>114</sup> The linguistic root of ‘authenticity’ is ‘the Ancient Greek notion of *authentikos*, connoting both the idea of an original, authoritative text as well as authority over something or someone’; however, as Cobb observes this originating definition ‘is not sufficient to understand how authenticity works in contemporary society’ (1, 3).

<sup>115</sup> While understanding the original, distinct denotations of these terms is helpful, today they are now relatively synonymous in usage, with some scholars arguing that distinguishing between them is not necessary (see Eve 120). The majority of contemporary scholarship regarding the concepts addressed in this thesis uses the term ‘authenticity’ as the primary term to denote socially negotiated performances and perceptions. Many of the spoken word poets I interviewed use the terms interchangeably. Throughout this thesis I use the term

‘Authenticity’ has been considered a virtue in and of itself for the individual, whereas ‘sincerity’ is a social behaviour, ‘a means to enable one’s reliability towards others’ (Laceulle 191). As Eve summarises, ‘only an individual can tell whether they are being authentic (if even they can) but sincerity is a societal, public virtue that can be verified and judged by others’ (122-3). These essentialist concepts of ‘authenticity’ and ‘sincerity’ assume an internal true self which may be wholly and unchangingly conveyed to others, implying the possibility of raw self-expression (Guignon). As I will discuss shortly, the way in which selfhood is theorised has considerably evolved in many fields since existentialism; however, this concept of an individual’s self as stable, singular, and knowable can still be powerfully alluring, particularly in perceptions of contemporary performing arts.

In the 1700s era of Romanticism, the concept of ‘authenticity’ arose alongside the notion that society was morally corrupt.<sup>116</sup> Rousseau’s philosophy was influential here: he championed the notion of being true to one’s inner self in defiance of restrictive, corruptive societal structures (Trilling; Lindholm). In this model, societal existence was perceived as a corruptive force, encouraging frivolity and excess, and personal ‘authenticity’ ‘was framed as a reaction/fix’ to this moral threat (Zukin 729). Because of this binary pitting personal ‘authenticity’ against luxurious lifestyles, the concept of ‘authenticity’ became classed: lower or working class became a marker associated with ‘authenticity’. As Zukin explains,

Identifying authenticity with the downwardly mobile gradually spread from Germany to France and from universities to cities, where major art collections, theaters, and publishers flourished, and artists and intellectuals could sell their work. Most artists who produced work for these markets were not well paid. ... they lived in working- class quarters not just because they were rebelling against the conformity of the bourgeoisie, but because they could not afford better apartments.

Like earlier German intellectuals, poets and novelists living *la vie de*

‘authenticity’ to denote the collaboratively determined interpretation of the ‘genuine’ in individuals, behaviour, and objects. I generally avoid using ‘sincerity’ in the interest of clarity.

<sup>116</sup> Trilling initially posited this theory of how ‘authenticity’ arose as an important moral and aesthetic force in his 1971 text *Sincerity and Authenticity*, and the scholarship has built upon with his conclusions (see Guignon; Zukin).

bohème in mid-nineteenth century Paris contrasted the authenticity of lower-class urban life, especially the lives of the most marginalized groups—criminals and gypsies—with what they saw as the hypocrisy of the rich. Writers romanticized the shabby and sordid, often diseased,<sup>117</sup> outcast lower class as more honest than the bourgeoisie, and this romantic image became a source of their artistic inspiration. (728-9)

‘Authenticity’ became the province of the working class, the ‘Other’ able to access a purity which the bourgeoisie had relinquished with their acquisition of wealth and status (Guignon). ‘Authenticity’ continues to be linked with working-class identity today, although the specific markers have evolved over time.<sup>118</sup>

Class is not the only identity characteristic associated with authenticity: race, ability, and more identity traits are all imbued with varying levels and concepts of inherent ‘authenticity’ in different cultures.<sup>119</sup> These associations function in multiple ways. First, within a specific culture, an individual with one identity may be perceived as inherently more ‘authentic’ than an individual of another identity. For instance, within the contemporary U.S. rap scene, blackness is a strong marker of ‘authenticity,’ so black rappers are generally considered more ‘authentic’ in their craft than white rappers<sup>120</sup> (Hess; Hodgman; McLeod). Second, one’s behaviour dictates the extent to which one is perceived to be an ‘authentic’ representative of one’s demographic group, based on essentialist concepts of identity. Again using the U.S. contemporary rap scene as an example, within this sphere certain performances

<sup>117</sup> Waltz and James’ research further indicates that ‘[d]isability in the form of illness, markedly tuberculosis, was closely associated with the aesthetics of Romanticism’ and charts how the valorisation of disability as inherently ‘authentic’ continues today (373).

<sup>118</sup> Schwarz’s recent research, for instance, suggests that middle-class minorities ‘often face difficulties being recognized as authentic and experiencing themselves as such’ and serves as a reminder of the importance of an intersectional approach to analysing the performance and perception of culturally-rooted authenticities (Abstract).

<sup>119</sup> In the Chapter 4 section on ‘authenticity of identity’ I further discuss how these associations between certain marginalised identity characteristics and ‘authenticity’ function in the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene.

<sup>120</sup> When individuals within a certain culture cannot claim ‘authenticity’ using the dominant markers, they may perform other identity-based authenticities to assert their legitimacy. For instance, the research (separately) conducted by Armstrong, Fraley, and Hess into the varying self-authentication strategies used by white rappers demonstrate how Eminem uses his ‘underclass’ background to legitimise his presence in this scene (Armstrong 345).

of blackness (incorporating hegemonic masculinity, working class identity, and other markers) are considered more 'authentically' black within this scene than others (Laybourn). These associations are grounded in societal stereotypes, identity-based concepts of what constitutes the 'natural' and 'original' which are cyclically defined and reinforced. Writing in the context of Texan blues music, Gatchet argues that

Authenticity can be productively understood not as an objective quality or state of being but rather as the product of cultural struggle. The many ways in which authenticity is defined, categorized, and negotiated symbolically will always depend on how this struggle plays out and who takes part in it, as various parties draw on discursive and symbolic resources (language, images, signs) to influence what they and others understand authenticity to be. In popular cultural forms such as music, an artist's identity often heavily influences whether or not that artist is perceived as 'authentic.' (208)

Generally, 'authenticity' has been associated with marginalised identities: those less powerful within society are thus considered to be less 'corrupted' (though, of course, afforded fewer opportunities for success). As Hill writes, '[t]he rhetoric of "authenticity" has ... depended upon the representation (and self-expression) of the most disadvantaged or marginalised of social groups' (103). Furthermore, because 'authenticity' denotes originality, the 'authentic' is sited in the past, the traditional, the un-cultivated and non-advanced (J. P. Taylor). Tourism studies has charted the tendency to romanticise cultures perceived to be 'non-developed' as more 'authentic,' more 'primitive,' uncorrupted by technological and societal 'progress' (MacCannell; Lau; Reisinger and Steiner). The 'authentic' is desired, fetishised, but ultimately not respected as sophisticated, skilled, and refined. In the Chapter 4 section on 'authenticity of identity' I will analyse the way in which marginalised identity has functioned as a marker of 'authenticity' within the contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry scene due to these underlying societal power dynamics and identify some of the consequences of this implicit value system.

Eventually the term 'authentic' came into broader usage: now (in addition to people) cultures, food, and other items and systems are commonly judged on their apparent 'authenticity.' This multiplicity of applications has led to complexity in

what the term connotes, as Baugh explains:

‘authentic,’ like ‘good,’ may be a general term whose specific meaning depends on the context in which it is used. There are, for instance, artistically good poems and morally good people, and as long as we do not confuse moral excellence with artistic excellence, no harm will come from using the same term (‘good’) to refer to both; similarly, although to be an authentic human is a very different thing from being an authentic artwork, the appropriateness of calling humans ‘authentic’ does not render a description of an artwork as ‘authentic’ appropriate. (n.p.)

As this thesis discusses, the dual aesthetic and moral connotations of the term spark a tension at the heart of contemporary spoken word criticism. If a major criterion for spoken word success is the perception of ‘authenticity,’ and if spoken word poetry is perceived as an art of self-proclamation in which the poet *and* the poem are being expressed, assessments of ‘authenticity’ is being made with recourse to both the poem *and* the poet: the art object and the human producing it. These judgments entail not only evaluations of spoken word poets’ craft but also appraisals of the poets’ ethics and their morality as individuals, with potentially serious consequences for poets’ careers, status within the artistic community, and mental health.<sup>121</sup>

Thus far, these concepts of ‘authenticity’ have relied upon essentialist theories of the self: the notion that there is a stable, ‘true’ core to individuals, objects, and other entities which may be ‘authentic’ or ‘authentically’ expressed. However, in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Goffman’s scholarship on social performativity and the ensuing<sup>122</sup> ‘performative turn’ in the social sciences and humanities shifted how the self is commonly conceptualised in these fields. Using theatrical performance as a metaphorical model, Goffman advanced the ‘dramaturgical’ model of self, arguing that individuals constantly perform and negotiate their identities through social

<sup>121</sup> For instance, in Chapter 2 I discuss the ethical condemnations which can result when spoken word poets are perceived to have broken the expectation of ‘authenticity of narrative’ by performing fictional material.

<sup>122</sup> Goffman was not the only scholar to influence this shift in thinking; for instance, J. L. Austin’s notion of ‘speech acts’ also advanced the concept of performativity by arguing that speech can not only convey information but perform actions (*How to Do Things with Words*).



contexts (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*). Goffman's scholarship urged a reconsideration of the self not as 'an independent fixed entity which resides in the individual' but instead 'a social process' (Tseëlon 115). Consequently, throughout much contemporary social sciences and humanities research, the self is generally recognised as multiple, constantly performed, and forged through social and societal negotiations.<sup>123</sup> The performative turn necessitated a reassessment of essentialist notions of 'authenticity,' as Fordahl has charted: 'this dramaturgical theory of social interaction would seem to contradict the very foundation of the authentic self: a self made of manifold social performances would seem inhospitable to any deep or permanent personal authenticity' (306).<sup>124</sup> Throughout this thesis I follow Goffman's dramaturgical model of identity performance: I do not recognise any concepts of an inherent, core 'self' but instead consider the ways in which the self is performed in, and shaped through, various social contexts.<sup>125</sup>

Furthermore, following the logic that there is no 'essential,' 'authentic' self to express, the basic concept of 'authentic expression' is rendered impossible, at least in terms of interpersonal communication (including artistic performance). Since, as Guignon has charted, 'to say that a person is authentic is to say that his or her actions truly express what lies at their origin,' the dramaturgical understanding that there is no singular, stable, core 'origin' to express nullifies the possibility for any individual to act in a wholly 'authentic' manner (278). Consequently, contemporary scholarship on 'authenticity' generally recognises it not as an essential, fixed, stable trait, but rather as a socially constructed, constantly evolving, culturally contingent quality

<sup>123</sup> This is particularly apparent in the field of autobiography studies (also termed life writing studies); as is further discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, this field recognises all expressions of self as performative and limited (see Anderson; Heddon; Smith and Watson).

<sup>124</sup> In this article, Fordahl then seeks to complicate the conventional understanding of dramaturgical models of self as mutually exclusive to concepts of inherent 'authenticity' by noting how 'authenticity' is socially measured and constructed (306). However, even conceived through this framework, 'authenticity' is not a stable inherent trait but a negotiation affected by external societal factors.

<sup>125</sup> Because Goffman's concept of social performativity is well-established and instrumental in theorising the way in which self is performed (particularly in artistic genres valuing perceived 'authenticity') it has frequently been cited in studies of contemporary spoken word poetry (see Eid; Gregory; Somers-Willett). In applying Goffman's theories in my study I build upon their work.

(Cobb).<sup>126</sup> As Peterson describes, it is ‘a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others’ (“In Search of Authenticity” 1086). Throughout this thesis I apply J. P. Williams’ dramaturgical model of ‘authenticity’ (building upon Goffman’s dramaturgical model) in that I describe how ‘authenticity’ is *performed and perceived*. Because, as Williams argues, ‘authenticity is dramaturgically achieved, not some internal essence that guides behaviour,’ in my research I observe the ways in which spoken word poets’ performances of self are shaped through societal discourses of ‘authenticity’ and how they subsequently choose to assert their public identities (98).

The description of any entity as ‘authentic’ is inherently subjective: a matter of perspective influenced by cultural values rather than objectively fact-based. It is ‘dialogic,’ as A. K. Harrison asserts, in that it is ‘both constructed and contested, and therefore in a perpetual state of flux’ (1790, 1785). As noted previously, ‘authenticity’ does not inhere in any art work, but rather is ‘a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed, not inscribed’ (Moore 210). Within the context of contemporary spoken word poetry, this means that no individual poem—or poet—can be accurately conceived of as inherently ‘authentic’; rather, the conferral of that quality is a negotiation between the poet and the spectator, informed by all of the cultural and social markers traditionally associated with ‘authenticity.’ This social nature of determining ‘authenticity’ led Banks to helpfully suggest ‘an understanding of authenticity as a process rather than a quality’ (497).

Furthermore, these markers are constantly evolving: what is deemed ‘authentic’ is determined in reference to continually shifting societal systems, beliefs, and values. ‘Authenticity’ is a deeply culturally conditional notion, interwoven with systems of power and thus heavily politicised; as Cobb observes, ‘[a]uthenticity can never be set in stone by a religion, a nation, or a linguistic community, because our standards and expectations of the Real are constantly evolving, and the construction of the artifice of authenticity depends on the context’

<sup>126</sup> Gubrium and Holstein have charted this shift, noting that ‘[m]ethodologically self-conscious narrative analysts no longer view storytellers and their accomplices as having unmediated access to experience, nor do they hold that experience can be conveyed in some pristine or authentic form’ (163).

(6). The nature of the desire for originality means that few markers of ‘authenticity’ can remain stable for long, as what may have been heralded as authentic, innovative, and creative becomes traditional and passé over time (Peterson, “In Search of Authenticity” 1093).

Since ‘authenticity’ is ultimately a subjective perception rather than an inherent trait, the performance or proclamation of a work as ‘authentic’ does not guarantee that this claim will be taken as legitimate. Poets may present their work as ‘authentic’ in various fashions (as I will discuss throughout this thesis), but ultimately these are necessarily *performances*: what is projected may not correspond to the ‘actual’ (again, to the extent that any experience or identity can be conceived of as having a ‘true’ basis for comparison). Cultural models of ‘authenticity’ may be fundamentally misrepresentative; for example, Shusterman finds that country music promotes a myth of white, rural, non-commercial ‘authentic’ simplicity despite the fact that it has always had links to black artists, many performers come from urban backgrounds, and it has never been ‘free from commercial motives’ (225).<sup>127</sup> ‘Authenticity’ is therefore a relative judgment informed by constantly shifting cultural mythologies, tethered to moral, societal, and aesthetic value systems.

The importance of ‘authenticity’ as not only an aesthetic but moral quality seems to have increased recently in the Western world (Cobb; Peterson “In Search of Authenticity”; Umbach and Humphrey). Several cultural factors and innovations have likely prompted this shift. One, as Peterson observes, is the rise of industrialisation and the ensuing anxiety concerning the ease of reproduction and thus lack of ‘originality,’ as Benjamin notably traces<sup>128</sup> (“In Search of Authenticity” 1094). This leads to a nostalgia, even a deep-seated desire, for ‘original,’ ‘natural,’ ‘authentic’ items and ideas free from the cycle of (re)production, a hunger which seems to have increased in the digital age with its ubiquity of copies.<sup>129</sup> In a similar

<sup>127</sup> Shusterman argues that the genre gets away with this myth by juxtaposing itself against the apparently much more diverse, urban, and commercial nature of other musical forms, especially pop (226). Auslander characterises this strategy of authentication by comparison as ‘exclusionary authenticity’ (*Liveness* 81).

<sup>128</sup> Here I refer to Benjamin’s foundational 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

<sup>129</sup> This is perhaps particularly true on these digital platforms: growing research into online ‘authenticity’ has found that social media entertainment highly values ‘authenticity’ (see Cunningham and Craig).

vein, the dramatic cultural and social changes spurred by globalisation have also led, somewhat paradoxically as Cobb observes, to an increased demand for ‘authentic’ products from various cultures (3). With all of these technological, societal, and social shifts, the markers and means of performing ‘authenticity’ continue to rapidly evolve.<sup>130</sup>

### **‘Authenticity’ in Spoken Word Poetry**

While the rhetoric of ‘authenticity’ has often been applied to poetry (Spacks; Stein), contemporary spoken word poetry has been particularly characterised as ‘authentic,’ arguably more than any other poetic form since the heyday of confessionalism in the 1960s.<sup>131</sup> This rhetoric has been advanced by journalists describing the seemingly autobiographical nature of the genre, by spectators characterising the sense of personal intimacy constructed within the space, by poets asserting the ‘realness’ of their work, and by scholars analysing trends in the social and cultural identities of those successful in the genre. In this section I argue that the focus on ‘authenticity’ in contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry derives from several factors, including the trend towards first-person material, the popularity of the form with marginalised individuals using it to assert the legitimacy of their identities, the activist legacy of the genre, and the liveness of this performance-based art form.

As discussed in the Introduction, the existing scholarship regarding spoken word poetry has often regarded the successful performance of ‘authentic’ selfhood as not only a core element of the genre but a primary factor in securing artistic success. Multiple scholars contend that poems which are deemed by spectators to be more ‘authentic’ will score more highly than poems deemed ‘inauthentic’ or ‘fake.’ These include Wheeler, who has claimed that spoken word ‘depend[s] centrally on the performance of authenticity – the manipulation of textual and/or physical

<sup>130</sup> For a deeper analysis of how ‘authenticity’ performance is shifting with digital media, see Leppänen et al. and the 2005 vol. 8 special issue of *Discourse, Context and Media* on ‘Authenticity, Normativity and Social Media.’

<sup>131</sup> Much of my ‘authenticity’ taxonomy could be applied to the poetics of this confessional era: performances of ‘authenticity’ in that poetry were similarly taken at face value and subsequently valorised or perceived as indicative of a lack of craft (see Blake, Gill, Grobe).

conventions that suggest sincerity, factual accuracy, and expressiveness,' observing that 'authenticity' is (rather paradoxically) not a 'natural' factor but a performative one (149). Eid's interviews with Canadian spoken word poets reveal that they consider the audience's perceptions of their 'honesty' and engagement in the material to be central to the success of their work:

All participants declared that displaying a sense of *honesty* in the performance and *being perceived as personally invested in the piece*<sup>132</sup> often result in receiving evident support and acceptance from the audience, reflected through high scores and active audience response and engagement. (45, emphasis added)

Specifically examining the poetry slam context, Rivera refers to an 'economy of authenticity construction within slam,' and Hoffman similarly argues that 'a politics of authenticity and integrity, an ideal of the "real," is reimagined by and for the slam' (118; 208).<sup>133</sup> Many more scholars have made similar claims;<sup>134</sup> the scholarship on contemporary spoken word strongly asserts the central importance of 'authenticity' within this genre.

My research corroborates this scholarship: multiple sources of evidence indicate that within the U.K. spoken word scene the perception of 'authenticity' is a primary critical factor for determining the quality of spoken word poetry.<sup>135</sup> Many articles concerning the genre explicitly frame it as confessional and inherently 'authentic,' such as this particularly effusive piece:

It's totally *genuine*. Slam poets don't have to try to be cool, but if they did, they'd probably be called out for trying too hard. The bold and brave words are *organic* and *original*. *Honesty* is easy when you just say what you feel, but fakers won't make it far. Audiences know

<sup>132</sup> Within my taxonomy of spoken word authenticities, these would be characterised as 'authenticity of narrative' and 'authenticity of motivation.'

<sup>133</sup> Some spoken word scholarship addresses the concept of 'authenticity' in the genre with less nuance, describing it as an innate factor of the poetry rather than a performance. For instance, Aptowicz describes poets participating in slams as 'undeniably real' with 'stunning and raw voices' (3, 95).

<sup>134</sup> See Somers-Willett; Gregory; R. Fox.

<sup>135</sup> The audience research caveat issued in the Introduction is worth reinforcing here: spectators and critics will differ in their aesthetic preferences and thus cannot be generalised as a homogenous bloc, so my argument here will not unilaterally apply to every individual who views spoken word poetry.

*authenticity*, and poets are nothing if they're not *real*. (Fear n.p., emphasis added)

The rhetoric of 'authenticity' is ubiquitous in these pieces; for instance, an article entitled "One of Authenticity's Last Great Sanctuaries?" regarding the Chicago scene praises one event as 'space in which it is safe to be real' and describes spoken word as a genre 'with honesty as a goal' which 'embroils itself with the everyday crap' (Tirrell n.p.). Another article regarding the U.K. scene celebrates how the genre is growing 'in a sincere, cliché-free way' (Kopotsha n.p.). This common rhetoric significantly frames the way in which the genre is perceived and thus shapes the expectations that spectators bring to it.

Although I did not interview audience members for this study (as explained in the Introduction), the data I gathered directly from poets strongly indicate their belief that spectators judge poems on perceived 'authenticity.' When asked to describe the styles of poetry which tend to be successful within the poetry slam context,<sup>136</sup> several poets directly alluded to poems which the audience is likely to interpret as 'authentic.' Harry Josephine Giles claims that 'more often than not [a slam-winning poem] will have some element of personal authenticity to it' while Keith Jarrett and Dan Simpson characterise 'earnestness' as a successful factor in the slam context (Interviews). Many implied that this is also consistent outwith the slam context; Rob Auton, who performs disarmingly touching, often surreal material, asserts 'I think what people want from the performance is for you to tell your truth and your story, isn't it? So all this is my truth' (Interview).

Furthermore, my interview data indicate that many spoken word poets themselves appreciate 'authenticity' in their peers' work, suggesting that this is not solely an aesthetic preference imposed externally (i.e. by critics and spectators) but also one valued by the practitioners themselves. When asked which factors they appreciate in spoken word poetry (their own or others'), many poets directly cited authenticity. Anita Govan specifies that a good poem 'has to have some authenticity,' and for Harry Baker, it is a central factor: 'for me it is entirely that thing of

<sup>136</sup> While obviously not all spoken word events are slams, to a certain extent the slam can be used as a microcosm of spoken word more broadly: generally speaking, the poems which are successful at slams are also likely to be successful within the spoken word sphere writ large. The nuances of the poetry slam as a critical microcosm are further examined in Chapter 6.

authenticity’ (Interviews). Similarly, Ash Dickinson shares that in his perspective, the performance of ‘authenticity’ is an essential factor of spoken word poetry:

It has to be authentic. Even if it’s not authentic. ... You have to believe in it.... I write a lot of, kind of, magic realism... The one about my fridge falling in love with me... my fridge never fell in love with me ... But I wrote it and deliver it like it did. And I think this is – I think ultimately there has to be that degree that you – you have to believe in it. You as a performer have to be – it has to be honest and true and real for you. (Interview)

As Dickinson’s comments illustrate, the concept of ‘authenticity’ is complex, encompassing the distinct yet overlapping concepts of honesty, truth, reality, originality, and emotional integrity. His statement also reinforces the fact that the perception of ‘authenticity’ is not conditional on the veracity of the poetry but rather *the way in which that ‘authenticity’ is performed*: whether or not a poem is actually ‘true’ may be inconsequential as long as the poem is believable.<sup>137</sup>

Another explanation for the association of spoken word poetry with ‘authenticity’ is its liveness: the fact that it is a performance art contingent upon physically co-present gatherings.<sup>138</sup> First, liveness itself has been upheld as a marker of ‘authenticity’; our cultural tendency to ‘valorize the live over the mediatized’ through considering live performances and interactions to be more ‘authentic’ than mediatized ones has increased the perception of the inherent ‘authenticity’ of spoken word in comparison with text-based literary art forms (Auslander, *Liveness* 46). Scholarship into oral poetics has long recognised this tendency to over-simplify the nuanced interplay between oral and textual literary forms by reducing them to stereotypical models of the ‘traditional’ versus the ‘advanced.’ Finnegan summarises

<sup>137</sup> The complex aesthetics and ethics of truth-telling in contemporary U.K. spoken word will be further investigated in the Chapter 2 section regarding ‘authenticity of narrative.’

<sup>138</sup> While my interview data indicate that U.K. spoken word poets prefer their work to be received live (rather than consumed via recordings), the genre is being increasingly mediatized: poets are now publishing their material through YouTube videos, podcasts, and website and social media posts. As van der Starre has contended, the use of these new platforms by spoken word poets requires a re-framing of how ‘authenticity’ is performed and perceived in digital spaces. This thesis is primarily concerned with the functioning of ‘authenticity’ within live spoken word events and does not heavily consider the implications of digital publication; however, as I suggest in the Conclusion, this is an important avenue for future research.

this reductive framework as

a binary opposition between two contrasting types of social and cognitive organization, the one oral, communal, emotional, non-scientific, traditional, undeveloped, and primitive; the other literate, rational, scientific, individualistic, creative, civilized, Western, and modern. (167)

Due to its liveness, spoken word is characterised in the first camp: it is ‘frequently associated with nature, primitivity, presence, and authenticity’ and may be considered to manifest ‘the ideal of unfettered access, of sincerity and integrity, that orality is imagined to possess’ (Novak, *Live Poetry* 25; Hoffman 206). Chapter 6 will further investigate the ways in which the association of spoken word poetry with ‘authenticity’—and thus ‘primitivity’ and a lack of sophistication—has been detrimental to the development of an adequate critical discourse.

Secondly, because spoken word poetry is a performance-based art form, the audience physically encounters the poet sharing the work they composed and can imagine this interaction as enabling unfiltered access to the ‘reality’ of the poet’s life.<sup>139</sup> While in live readings of text-based poetry, the poet can be conceived of as a relatively passive conduit conveying the (text-based) poem to the live audience, within contemporary spoken word poetry, the poet (as author, performer, and often the speaker of the poem) is perceived to be actively engaging in an act of self-proclamation. Writing in the U.S. context, Somers-Willett argues that

[s]lam poetry entails not only an admission of authorial self but an outright proclamation of authorial self through performance. In this way, the identity of the author is inextricably linked to the slam poem, both in writing and performance, because the author is proclaiming an aspect of self in the poem and performing that self onstage. (35)

In this way the genre’s liveness and the tendency towards first-person narration have led to the perception of spoken word poetry as an art of unfettered self-expression allowing the audience access to the poet’s ‘self.’ While Bernstein has claimed that

<sup>139</sup> This notion that the liveness of spoken word events inherently imbues them with ‘authenticity’ will be complicated in Chapter 3, which analyses authenticities of presence within contemporary spoken word poetry.



‘the poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet; it materialises the texts not the author,’ this theory does not seem to hold for the genre of contemporary spoken word poetry, considering the importance of this performance of self (9). Hoffman directly refutes Bernstein here, arguing that ‘what is performed at a poetry reading is necessarily both the poet *and* the poem,’ and his contention is more apt for the contemporary spoken word context (7).<sup>140</sup> The perception of this genre as a vehicle for transparent, ‘authentic’ self-expression has hindered criticism in that the artist has often been judged *as* the art.<sup>141</sup>

## The Paradox of Performative Authenticity

In discussing how ‘authenticity’ is conveyed, defined, and perceived within a performance-based art form, it becomes evident that the pursuit of ‘authenticity’ is simultaneously inescapable and (paradoxically) self-defeating. Following J.P. Williams’ dramaturgical model of ‘authenticity’: since one *performs* ‘authenticity’ rather than *is* ‘authentic,’ then does the act of performing it not inauthenticate it? The belief that an entity or behaviour can be inherently ‘authentic’ arguably entails the perception of that entity of behaviour as natural, raw, unrehearsed, and original.<sup>142</sup> However, in the context of a crafted, skilled art form such as spoken word poetry, this becomes fraught: as Peterson argues, ‘if authenticity is constructed and subject to continual change, then it clearly takes an effort to appear authentic’ (“In Search of Authenticity” 1086). Trilling’s explanation of this system illustrates its cyclical and paradoxical nature:

society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the

<sup>140</sup> Bearder shares Hoffman’s perspective, contending that ‘[u]nlike the artist who hangs a painting in a gallery, [the spoken word poet] *is* the art ... This *authenticity* has become a central concept to spoken word ... We cannot disentangle the poem from the fact of [the poet] standing on stage’ (76, emphasis in original).

<sup>141</sup> In Chapter 6 I further analyse the detrimental effect the valorisation of the artist’s apparent ‘authenticity’ has had on the critical discourse for this genre.

<sup>142</sup> This effect will be further discussed in Chapter 6 with reference to ‘Outside Art’ studies.

result that a judgement may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic. (11)

In short, the act of striving to be perceived as ‘authentic’ can actually yield ‘inauthenticity,’ due to its intentionality; while ‘a person with sincere intentions’ can strategically mobilise various techniques in order to perform ‘authenticity,’ ‘the purity of the sincerity is somewhat compromised by such strategic thinking’ (Eve 127-8; see also A. Harrison 1785). For example, in an attempt to appear ‘emotionally authentic’ onstage while performing a sad piece, a spoken word poet might prompt themselves to actively be sad—for instance, to cry onstage—and consequently be perceived as ‘emotionally inauthentic.’<sup>143</sup>

The paradoxical nature of ‘authenticity’ is particularly apparent in performance-based art forms, in which a highly constructed and rehearsed work may appear more ‘natural’ than a less crafted, more ‘raw’ work. Additionally, artists wishing to appear ‘authentic’ may simply adopt existing techniques and markers of ‘authenticity,’ rather than actually composing material which feels natural to them: for instance, performing in a certain voice or emotional affect.<sup>144</sup> When a certain style or trope becomes disproportionately rewarded within a commercial system (or parallel rewards-based system, such as slam victories or YouTube views), performers may feel incentivised to apply this concept to their own work. Of course, this eventually erodes the authenticating power of those signifiers, leading what had initially been perceived as ‘authentic’ to grow clichéd.<sup>145</sup> Caroline Bird discusses this effect specifically within the contemporary U.K. spoken word sphere, identifying

this really cloying performance of authenticity where everyone gets sad in the same bit and angry at the same bit ... if someone sets out to move me, I don’t – it doesn’t really work. Cos I don’t feel like they’re

<sup>143</sup> As Chapter 3 will explore, this is a strategy many spoken word poets actively use: they seek to connect emotionally to the work they are performing by actively recalling the memories (or other material) that prompted the poem.

<sup>144</sup> The Chapter 4 section regarding ‘authenticity of voice’ further analyses this tendency to adopt popular styles considered ‘authentic.’

<sup>145</sup> This effect is exacerbated when ‘authenticity’ is a commercially successful trait for a genre, as hip-hop journalist Rob Markman observes within that genre: ‘[w]hen “real” becomes a marketing tool it starts to become a detriment to the genre ... we start off with this very simple idea of what “real” is, and then once an artist takes off by exposing their truth, the industry starts to create a bunch of copycats’ (qtd. in A. Williams n.p.).

exploring anything. I feel like they have an emotional impact they already are planning to – to deliver. And then they use the poem and – to kind of deliver that impact. ... if you kind of plan or – or expect or, you know, set out to have a particular effect on people ... *you're gonna get more and more false by trying to be more and more searingly honest.* (Interview, emphasis added)

Thus the use of popular ‘authenticity’ signifiers in order to appear ‘authentic’ is as likely to backfire as it is to succeed. Additionally, due to the rapid evolution of the spoken word genre, it is likely that many of the techniques I describe in the following chapters may soon no longer hold the same authenticating power as they currently do.

Furthermore, because the perception of ‘authenticity’ is influenced by the visible and audible identity markers of the performer (as I explain in the Chapter 4 section on ‘authenticity of identity’), an authenticating technique that works for one poet may not work for another with a different identity. As Schwarz stresses,

in the symbolic economy of authenticity social practices do not have a fixed value independently of the identity of their carrier. Engagement with the very same cultural practice may grant value to some social actors (for whom it is recognized as authentic), while devaluing others (for whom it is not). (5)

Thus when describing various techniques artists may employ in order to convey their authenticity, it is important to keep in mind that there are no failsafe shortcuts to be perceived as ‘authentic’: ‘authenticity’ is dialogic, culturally conditional, and constantly evolving within this art form and in society more broadly.

## **Why a Taxonomy?**

This thesis clarifies the discourse regarding ‘authenticity’ in contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry by proposing a taxonomy of ten strains of ‘authenticity’ which may be performed and perceived. I divided the concept of ‘authenticity’ into these distinct (though intersecting) concepts in recognition of the fact that one single term does not suffice for any in-depth discussion of its function within the genre; the word ‘is being made to do too much work for a single indivisible concept’ (Behr 5).

Because of the inherently polysemic, context-specific, and evolving nature of ‘authenticity’ as a critical quality, its sub-division into separate components with distinct definitions in scholarly research is not unprecedented. Many scholars have proposed various context-specific systems, including Grossberg (contemporary music); Moore (rock music); Behr (rock music, extending Moore’s taxonomy); Fornäs (cultural theory); Ferrara (cultural theory); Barrett-Lennard (psychology); and MacCannell (tourism). In 2003 Dutton introduced the concept that ‘authenticity’ contained two strains (nominal and expressive<sup>146</sup>), and in 2013 Banks proposed adding a third (instrumental<sup>147</sup>) (Dutton 259; Banks 487). Peterson also reviews previously proposed taxonomies of ‘authenticity’ and proposes his own;<sup>148</sup> however, even then he acknowledges that he ‘found no scheme that did not induce more problems than it solved’ (“In Search of Authenticity” 1091). I made the same decision in conducting my research: while many ‘authenticity’ taxonomies already exist that feasibly I might have adapted to fit the context of U.K. spoken word poetry, I instead decided to begin with a clean slate and generate my categories independently. This is again due to the heavily context-dependent nature of the term; as Rubidge notes, ‘[e]ach medium has subtly different problems to solve regarding the concept of authenticity’ and as such it is helpful to directly create the taxonomy for this genre (222).

Although I have parsed out these separate strains in order to clarify the discussion of ‘authenticity’ within contemporary U.K. spoken word, these strains do intersect, reinforcing and occasionally undermining one another. Here I recognise

<sup>146</sup> Dutton defines ‘nominal authenticity’ as ‘the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring, as the term implies, that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named’ (259). Within contemporary spoken word, this is analogous to my category of ‘authenticity of origin,’ as will be discussed in Chapter 2. Dutton’s second strain, ‘expressive authenticity,’ has to do ‘with an object’s character as a true expression of an individual’s or a society’s values and beliefs’ (259). Several of the strains within my taxonomy (most notably ‘authenticity of voice’) fall into this category.  
<sup>147</sup> In Banks’ scholarship, ‘instrumental assertions of authenticity are understood to be asserted by some party to achieve some material or otherwise clearly identifiable benefit’ (487).

<sup>148</sup> Peterson identifies multiple kinds of ‘authenticity work,’ which are categories of activities/behaviours that individuals, brands, and other entities may take in order to validate/justify their authenticity: ‘authenticity through ethnic/cultural identity,’ ‘authenticity through association with a group (‘the elasticity of group membership’), ‘authenticity through status identity,’ ‘seeking authentic experience,’ ‘technologically mediated authenticity,’ and ‘authenticity to constructed self’ (“In Search of Authenticity” 1086-90).

that the polysemy of ‘authenticity’ entails, in Theodossopoulos’ terms, ‘the co-existence of different simultaneous understandings of the authentic—the negotiation of parallel authenticities in tension’ (339). For instance, within my taxonomy the perception of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ is dependent upon the perception of ‘authenticity of origin’: spectators must perceive that the poet onstage is the author of the poem in order to believe that the ‘I’ voice in the poem refers to the person onstage. Conversely, a poem may be perceived to be ‘authentic’ in one sense but ‘inauthentic’ in another sense: for instance, a poem that a spectator believes to be ‘true’ but written in order to win a slam would be considered ‘authentic of narrative’ but ‘inauthentic of motivation.’

Importantly, I am not arguing that all spoken word poetry *is* ‘authentic’ in these ways; equally, nor am I arguing that it *is not*.<sup>149</sup> Throughout this thesis I avoid judging any poems (or the genre more generally) as ‘authentic’ or ‘inauthentic,’ rather foregrounding the constructed, dialogic, and culturally conditional nature of ‘authenticity.’ I also avoid imposing any ethical framework upon this genre: while spoken word poets and audiences may attach moral value to the existence or lack of ‘authenticity’ within their peers’ work, my scholarship does not legitimise nor reject these moral judgments.<sup>150</sup> For me to authoritatively determine the ‘authenticity’ or ethical acceptability of any poem would not only be presumptuous but also a misrepresentation of the mutable, socially constructed nature of ‘authenticity.’ As Peterson writes concerning his field, ‘no one person or group authenticates country music. Rather there is a cycle of authentication involving everyone active in the field’ (“In Search of Authenticity” 1091). Thus I take into account here the perspectives of many diverse artists, journalists, and scholars—as well as analysing

<sup>149</sup> The one possible exception is in the category of ‘authenticity of origin,’ which concerns whether the poem was written by the person performing it. This is the only strain which could be considered objective and binary: i.e. either the performer is the author (thus the poem is ‘authentic of origin’) or they are not (thus ‘inauthentic of origin’). However, as I argue in Chapter 2, even this strain is nuanced and dependent on the audience’s perception of authorship.

<sup>150</sup> For instance, in Chapter 2, I argue that within the spoken word community, ‘authenticity of narrative’ is valued to the extent that some poets consider the act of telling a fictional narrative onstage without explicitly flagging it as fictional as tantamount to lying and thus morally suspect. However, I do not place any ethical judgment on poets who do so (i.e. I do not condemn them as ‘liars’). Rather, I unpick the nuances within these ethical value systems by providing evidence from multiple perspectives concerning their intricacies.

the poetry itself—to avoid imposing my own value system through this scholarship.

Finally, although I argue throughout this thesis that the conventions of this genre encourage the audience to believe in and value ‘authenticity,’ I do not argue that spectators will automatically assume the ‘authenticity’ of any poem they witness performed. Rather, the perception of each strain of ‘authenticity’ is determined on an individual level based on myriad factors, including the actions of the poet-performer, the conventions of the event, and the spectator’s level of familiarity with the genre and that particular poem and poet.

## Clarifying Terms

In the following two sections I briefly clarify terminology utilised in the following chapters: first, the language used to describe the various ‘I’ roles within the poetry and second, the term ‘paratext.’

### Terms for I

Because many of the sections in the following chapters analyse nuances in the performance of self, here I establish clear terminology distinguishing between the varying speaking and spoken selves within spoken word poetry. Typical terms used to analyse text-bound poetry such as ‘the speaker of the text’ are insufficient here given that spoken word is a performance-based art form: does ‘the speaker’ denote the poem’s narrator? The physical person speaking the text onstage? The author of the poem? Here I rely on autobiography studies for more specific language differentiating the various roles involved in the performance of self. The model I propose extends autobiography scholars Smith and Watson’s language to distinguish between these roles, or ‘I’s. Their original model follows:

- **The ‘real’ or historical ‘I’:** the ‘flesh and blood person located in a particular time and place’ who authored the text (72).
- **The narrating ‘I’:** ‘the ‘I’ who tells the autobiographical narrative;’ in conventional terms, it is the poem’s narrator (Ibid 72). It should not be conflated with the person who authored the text; rather, it is a persona of that historical person who ‘calls forth only that part of the experiential history linked to the story he is telling’ (Ibid 72).

- **The narrated ‘I’:** while the narrating ‘I’ is the ‘agent of discourse,’ the narrated ‘I’ is ‘the subject of history’ (Ibid 73). It serves as the ‘protagonist of the narrative’ and is effectively a character crafted for the text: it is ‘the version of the self that the narrating ‘I’ chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader’ (Ibid 73).<sup>151</sup>
- **The ideological ‘I’:** All performances of self are shaped through the discourse to which the author has been exposed, including philosophical, cultural concepts of self itself. Smith and Watson observe that ‘changing notions of personhood affect autobiographical acts and practices’ and define the ideological ‘I’ as ‘the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells his story’ (Ibid 77, 76).

While Smith and Watson’s model for distinguishing between the varying ‘I’s of autobiographical expression is apt for text-based materials, it requires adaptation to encompass the context of embodied performance. Here I propose an altered system for categorisation extending Smith and Watson’s model, consisting of the authorial ‘I’, performing ‘I’, narrating ‘I’, narrated ‘I’, and ideological ‘I’. My model divides Smith and Watson’s concept of the *‘real’ or ‘historical’ I* into two distinct roles: the *authorial I* and the *performing I*. The authorial ‘I’ is the figure who authors the text. The performing ‘I’ is the body that physically enacts the text. This division of these terms allows for greater clarity in differentiating separate ‘I’s in live performance.

## **Paratext**

This thesis argues that the full context of spoken word poems informs the way in which they are received: it is not only the (embodied) poem itself which provides meaning but also the myriad factors which frame the poem. In order to clarify my discussion of these factors, throughout this thesis I follow Novak in

<sup>151</sup> The narrated ‘I’ may be distinct from the narrating ‘I’ in many ways, including temporally. It may also shift throughout the piece. For example, in Sara Hirsch’s piece “Death Poem” (described in the Introduction to Chapter 2) the narrating ‘I’ identifies itself early—‘I’m 24’—but later in the poem, the narrating ‘I’ projects to a dream world in which ‘My chair has given way / and the hospital room transforms into a crowded bar’ (“Sara Hirsch - Death Poem”). This narrated ‘I’ is a separate figure from the one which began the narration of the poem.

applying Genette's concepts of 'paratext,' 'peritext,' and 'epitext' to describe contextual factors affecting the perception of live spoken word poems (*Live Poetry* 138). Although Genette's framework is designed for the analysis of print literature and requires adaptation when applied to live performance, it still provides helpful terminology with which to recognise the importance of contextual elements in affecting the meaning of the poetry.

Genette's concept of 'paratext' effectively encompasses all of the contextualising material concerning the art work. In page-based literature, this means 'a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations' (1). This umbrella term is subdivided into the 'peritext' (contextualising features within the book) and the 'epitext' (contextualising features outwith the book). As Novak notes, because 'the different paratextual elements of a live poetry event are not materially separable from each other in the same way as elements inside and outside of a book,' these sub-terms are less applicable within spoken word (*Live Poetry* 139). Thus through this thesis I chiefly use the term 'paratext' as a blanket term indicating all features contextualising spoken word material, from the way poems are introduced to the architecture of the venue.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

As this chapter has described, 'authenticity' is neither a singular nor a static trait, but a constantly evolving, culturally contingent process. The following three chapters propose the first nine strains of 'authenticity' within my taxonomy, indicating how they are performed and contextualised within contemporary U.K. spoken word spaces. I begin in Chapter 2 by considering authenticities of self—the perceptions of originality, autobiography, and veracity—in order to trouble the notion of spoken word as an inherently confessional genre.



## Chapter 2: Authenticities of Self

Poetry is so personal. Regardless of whether it is your experience or not, people are going to assume it is when you're performing it on stage and it's just you and the microphone. And I think there is more of a question about that now – of is it your story to tell? And who should be telling that story?

—Toby Campion, qtd. in Craven-Griffiths et al. n.p.

There is the self who was and the self who is. There is the self who is performed, and the performing self. Which 'self,' then, is being presented?

—Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* 27

In the upstairs lobby of Genesis Cinema in northeast London, a young woman takes the microphone off the stand and begins her poem: 'So recently I've started losing / something I've got into the habit of using / pretty much all the time.'<sup>152</sup> As the poem unfolds, we learn that she is 24,<sup>153</sup> her name is Sara, and she is losing her hearing. Sara does not read from a book but performs from memory, gesturing and making eye contact with the audience throughout the piece. The tone shifts from humorous as she describes how 'the doctors in audiology / have the clearest, loudest voices you've ever heard' to more plaintive as she realises that in the pub with her friends 'I only seem to exist in my head / and they carry on talking like I'm simply not here / and I simply don't hear them talking.' The audience is warmly receptive to the performance, laughing and making empathetic noises at the relevant moments.

<sup>152</sup> This description is based on a video of Sara Hirsch performing "Death Poem" at the Genesis Slam on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September, 2015, uploaded to YouTube by Process Productions ("Sara Hirsch – Death Poem"). It can be viewed in the video library at the link in Appendix B or via <https://youtu.be/WrdlbCCq4sM>. I have lineated the poem here based on a transcript of the poem provided to me by Hirsch ("Death Poem.docx").

<sup>153</sup> In writing this description I am intentionally assuming the poem's originality, autobiography, and veracity to introduce the themes of this chapter; throughout the following analysis I will be more precise in separating the various 'I's performed through the poetry.

In writing this description, I have made three fundamental assumptions: first, that it is an original piece composed by the performer Sara Hirsch; second, that it is autobiographical insofar as the ‘I’ voice refers to Hirsch herself; and third, that the narrative shared within it (i.e. that she is losing her hearing) is true. What grounds these assumptions? What factors of the poem, its performance, and the conventions of the genre encourage the perception of these authenticities of self?

This chapter examines three strains of ‘authenticity’ commonly performed in U.K. spoken word poetry, namely ‘authenticity of origin’ (the perception that the performer of the poem is also its author), ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ (the perception that the poem is autobiographical), and ‘authenticity of narrative’ (the perception that narratives in the poem are true). In this chapter I posit that spoken word poetry as a genre encourages the perception that there is no distance between the author, speaker, and performer of the poem: that the narrated ‘I’ is not a projection of an external character but rather represents the poet performing onstage. I apply Lejeune’s theories of the autobiographical and referential pacts to argue that this genre frames all material under its label as original, autobiographical, and true. However, I also interrogate the conditions of this framing—noting how spoken word poets acknowledge fictionalising material for aesthetic effect, as well as the constructed nature of all performances of self—to urge scepticism in the perceptions of these ‘authenticities.’ This chapter concludes with a case study of Connor Macleod’s poem “Flowers” (introduced at the beginning of this thesis) demonstrating the performance, perception, and centrality of each of these ‘authenticities of self.’

## **Authenticity of Origin**

It’s not the only definition of spoken word but it’s the most useful one I’ve been able to formulate. It is work that is designed to be said by the person who wrote it... I think that’s what it means to do spoken word. To both write it and perform it. It has to have that kind of embodiment, that connection.

—Rachel McCrum (Interview)

I begin by introducing the most basic strain of ‘authenticity’ within spoken word poetry, ‘authenticity of origin.’ This is originality in its literal sense: for a poem to be deemed ‘authentic of origin,’ the poet onstage must have composed the work they are performing<sup>154</sup>. In my extension of Smith and Watson’s language, this means that the authorial ‘I’ and the performing ‘I’ must be the same figure. This strain of ‘authenticity’ is the least subjective of those described in this thesis because it is grounded in verifiable fact rather than perception and functions as a binary: either the performer authored the work or they did not.<sup>155</sup>

Here I argue that ‘authenticity of origin’ is virtually guaranteed within contemporary spoken word because poetry slams require poets to perform original compositions and there is not a culture of ‘covering’ other poets’ material within spoken word more broadly. Breaches in ‘authenticity of origin’ are perceived as plagiarism (unless poets explicitly flag that they are covering another’s work). I contend that the ubiquity of this strain of ‘authenticity’ has led to the perception of spoken word poetry as a performance of the authorial ‘I’ which is conditional upon the physically present body of the author (i.e. the poet needs to be the one performing the poem in order for it to be a complete and legitimate performance).

Because the convention of performing original material is relatively consistent in live poetry performance (not only within spoken word poetry but also at readings of page-based poetry), I spend relatively little time in this section explaining ‘authenticity of origin’ within the spoken word context and instead focus on complicating it. I present new evidence from my research indicating that many U.K. spoken word poets would theoretically be comfortable with other poets covering their work. This implies that U.K. spoken word poets do not perceive their poetry as confessional expression inextricably tied to their selves but rather as crafted art, the integrity of which would withstand being performed by another. These findings

<sup>154</sup> I acknowledge the principle that all art is, to a certain extent, derivative: complete originality is impossible because all creative acts are influenced by their precedents and context. ‘Authenticity of origin’ denotes authorship in its most basic form, indicating that the performing poet is the figure who composed that work and that it was not the product of wholesale plagiarism.

<sup>155</sup> This binary grows more flexible with co-authored works—for instance, team poems—so for the sake of clarity in this section I am referring only to solo performances.

suggest that there is a rift between the common perception of spoken word poetry (amongst audiences and critics) as a direct expression of authorial self, conditional upon the embodied presence of the author, versus poets' perceptions of their work as crafted material which may exist independently of the authorial self. In this section I argue that while 'authenticity of origin' has become central to the spoken word genre, poets' general comfort with the concept of covering indicates the need for a re-conceptualisation of spoken word as less conditional upon the presence of the author.

### **The Convention of 'Authenticity of Origin'**

My concept of 'authenticity of origin' is similar to Dutton's concept of 'nominal authenticity,' defined as 'the correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring, as the term implies, that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named' (259). This strain of 'authenticity' appears frequently in the discourse around visual art; for instance, investigations into whether a painting is an 'authentic Vermeer' concern whether or not Vermeer painted it.<sup>156</sup>

As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, 'authenticity of origin' is conventional in contemporary spoken word: the performer onstage is virtually always also the author of the text. The U.K. spoken word scene does not have a culture of using ghost-writers as some stand-up comedy can, nor is it the norm to 'cover' other artists' material as it can be in the music sphere; while occasionally a spoken word poet may parody another poet or perform their work in tribute, this is rare.<sup>157</sup> This convention developed in tandem with the rules of the poetry slam, which mandate that all poems performed must be original (Glazner 14; Smith and Kraynak, *Stage a Poetry Slam* 36).

<sup>156</sup> Again, in collaborative work there can be some nuance here, such as when artists employ studios of apprentices to assist in their work and thus no single 'authorship' can be allocated.

<sup>157</sup> Sometimes spoken word communities will host events in which poets perform and parody each other's material for comedic effect. In Scotland, for instance, poet and rapper Mark McGhee has hosted several such events titled 'Bards in Their Eyes' (Traffic Cone Records). However, these events are generally geared towards amusing poets rather than the general public; as Rachel McCrum observes, 'it's a slight in-joke ... I don't think there's anything there for an audience that's gonna make it interesting' (Interview).

The audience is thus strongly encouraged to site the authorial ‘I’ within the body of the performer; as Somers-Willett states, ‘audiences commonly conflate the voice of the poem with that of the author’ (32).<sup>158</sup> The presumption of ‘authenticity of origin’ reflects a core distinction between spoken word and theatre: while in theatrical performances the authorial ‘I’ and the performing ‘I’ are distinct figures (unless the playwright is acting within their own work), the conventions of spoken word events mandate unity between the authorial ‘I’ and the performing ‘I.’ As poet Freddie Alexander articulates,

for spoken word audiences, we are very used to seeing the body as a locus of creation and not as a surrogate. A spoken word audience would feel very uncomfortable with a spoken word performer performing someone else’s material. In theatre that is a given, because a theatre audience is trained to accept the fact that the actor didn’t write this. ... A spoken word audience is not trained to do that. Or has not become accustomed to doing that. (Interview)

As Wheeler observes, ‘in spoken word venues, authorial presence is literal and guaranteed,’ so to breach that convention—to rupture the expectation of ‘authenticity of origin’—would likely cause discomfort and confusion (150).

A key reason for the centrality of ‘authenticity of origin’ within contemporary spoken word poetry is the dependence of the poem on the embodied physicality of its author. Poets compose material in and for their own (physical and stylistic) voices: as Rachel McCrum observes, spoken word poetry is ‘written to the vernacular, it is written to the vocabulary, it’s written to the breath of the poet who says it. ... it’s linked to the physicality of the person who wrote it’ (Interview). Furthermore, as explained in the Introduction to this thesis, a spoken word poem consists not only of the text but also the vocal and physical embodiment of the poem—the gestures, audience engagement techniques, etc.—contextualised by the

<sup>158</sup> It is worth noting that ‘authenticity of origin’ has not always been commonly expected in live poetry contexts; in the 1800s and early 1900s in the U.S. and U.K. the typical practice was for others to memorise and recite a poet’s work. Wheeler’s research has detailed how in this era ‘far more commonly, no relationship existed between the author of a piece and its performer’ and charted how over the 20<sup>th</sup> century as poets increasingly began to perform their own work, eventually poetry readings became more understood as ‘manifestations of authentic authorial presence’ (5, 12-3).

visibly and audibly identifiable body of the author. Importantly, this means that *the author is the only person legitimately able to perform the work*. In the following sections I will further explain and somewhat complicate this assertion.

The centrality of the performer's body to the work marks a significant difference between spoken word poetry and page-based poetry. T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (for example) can be printed in various volumes and 'covered' by other performers and still remain "The Waste Land." This is because, with text-bound poetry, *only the text is perceived as constituting the work*:<sup>159</sup> the identity, physicality, and mannerisms of the performer are quirks of its delivery rather than integral elements of the poem. Within spoken word, however, *these performance elements are constitutive facets of the poem*. Because a spoken word poem is intimately dependent upon its author's physicality, it would be very difficult (arguably, impossible) for anyone other than the author to perform given that they would need to replicate elements which generally are not notated within any transcripts or other records of the poem (Novak, *Live Poetry* 69).

This effect is most easily observed in poems which are in some way conditional upon the visible and/or audible characteristics of the author's body. Material which directly mentions aspects of the author's identity would be nonsensical and potentially offensive performed by a poet who does not share these identity characteristics (i.e. a poem referencing the speaker's blackness performed by a white poet<sup>160</sup>). Rowan McCabe, who speaks in a strong Newcastle accent, summarises this effect by describing how if material 'references a particular like subculture or culture, there's a feeling that it should kind of authentically do that' (Interview). Toby Champion's queries in the quotation opening this character—'is it your story to tell? And who should be telling that story?'—are shared by many spoken word participants as core ethical considerations in the genre (qtd. in Craven-Griffiths et al. n.p.).

<sup>159</sup> Text-based poetry still generally adheres to the policy of 'authenticity of origin' in the sense that at a poetry reading, it is typically expected that poets only read original work. However, text-based poems may be recited in educational or social settings without the implication that they are being fundamentally altered with each new delivery.

<sup>160</sup> Such an uncomfortable situation arose when white male poet Taylor Mali covered African-American female poet Patricia Smith's piece "Skinhead" at a tribute event; this poem will be further discussed shortly (Somers-Willett 93).

Furthermore, ‘authenticity of origin’ is critical within contemporary spoken word because of the strong framing of the poetry as confessional, as the next two sections regarding ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘authenticity of narrative’ will discuss. My interview data indicate that U.K. spoken word poets overwhelmingly believe that audiences assume spoken word poetry is not only original to the performer but also autobiographical and true. Consequently, for anyone other than the author to perform a poem would feel less like ‘covering’ this material than (deceptively) claiming the experiences related within it as autobiographical. When asked how she would feel about another person performing one of her poems about her father’s passing, Kate Fox replied, ‘I wouldn’t like it. ... it’s all very personal. And it would be like they were – like *you were taking my experience and making it your experience*’ (Interview, emphasis added). As I will continue to argue in the following sections, because the conventions of the spoken word genre heavily contextualise material as autobiographical, encouraging spectators to perceive work as confessional and ‘true,’ to perform a poem in first-person voice in a spoken word context is to implicitly claim narratives shared within it as one’s own. The practice of covering, then, becomes tantamount to impersonation: Michael Pedersen, for instance, ‘wouldn’t see an interest in *performing someone else’s personal experiences* ... without losing a certain degree of authenticity’ (Interview, emphasis added). Pedersen’s language here—‘*personal experiences*’ rather than ‘poems’—reflects this perception that to perform spoken word poetry is to claim the experiences it describes. Thus ‘authenticity of origin’ is central within the genre in part because it intertwines with other authenticities of self.

An additional factor making ‘authenticity of origin’ valuable within contemporary spoken word is the belief that when the author is the one sharing it, this imbues the material with a unique, irreplaceable quality. Novak notes that this is a common effect within live poetry:

authorship is valued highly in our society and as such it makes a difference whether a poem is presented by its author or by a performer who is ‘interpreting’ someone else’s words. The added value created by the author’s presences consists ... of his/her assumed superior rendering of a poem due to his/her first-hand knowledge of

‘what it means,’ i.e. his/her performance is endowed with an exclusive kind of authenticity. (*Live Poetry* 187)

The literal originality of the poetry—the fact that it is emitting from its origin (its author)—is perceived as a powerful marker of its ‘authenticity’ which allows performances to take on a quality of testimony and confession, placing the audience in the position of witness. The centrality of the principle of ‘authenticity of origin’ to the genre has led to the perception of spoken word as an art of self-proclamation in which poets are directly expressing their internal ‘selves’ for the audience.

The importance of ‘authenticity of origin’ within this art form may appear anachronistic; as Middleton writes,

[i]t ought to be surprising that an author is still the cynosure of every contemporary poetry reading, usually uttering the words of a written text as if every single one bore the indelible mark of their composer. This fixed element might appear to depend upon beliefs about authorship well past their sell-by date. It’s not surprising that some critics blame it for the limitations of much contemporary poetry. (*Distant Reading* 33)

And indeed, the high value placed upon the perception of authenticities of self within contemporary spoken word has often been used to discredit the genre.<sup>161</sup> However, in this live, embodied art form, the fact that material has an authorial context cannot be ignored: it is difficult (if not impossible) to perceive this poetry as independent of its originating context when it is literally emanating from its creator.

Furthermore, I posit that ‘authenticity of origin’ is valorised within contemporary spoken word in large part due to its celebration of marginalised voices. Much of the rhetoric within contemporary spoken word champions the idea of ‘speaking one’s truth’ and sharing stories of identity and oppression which have previously been silenced.<sup>162</sup> As Bohdan Piasecki observes, spoken word poetry often offers itself as an artistic and activist forum as well as a social community for

<sup>161</sup> The valorisation of ‘authenticity’ as an aesthetic and moral quality and its troubling effects for the development of a critical discourse for U.K. spoken word will be discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>162</sup> See Bearder; Eid; Somers-Willett. The Chapter 4 section on ‘authenticity of identity’ discusses in detail the nuances of marginalised identity expression and perception with the U.K. spoken word scene.



marginalised people:

it's such an inclusive platform, and I think people see it not just as a purely kind of artistic arena but as a way to work through anger or trauma, or to find a community, or to establish their identities: the other absolutely vital social functions that it performs that are not too bothered with, you know, the death of the author. (Interview)

Genres characterised by performances of selfhood have historically been exclusionary; as Heddon observes of historical autobiographies, 'only some people's lives were held to be representative of "a life", and, therefore, only certain "selves" were written (historically male, white and middle class); other remained marginalised or invisible' (92). Spoken word poetry's emphasis on the importance of 'authenticity of origin'—the value of witnessing the actual author delivering their poem with all of the contextualising features of their identity—can be perceived as asserting the importance of the embodied, fully contextualised author, particularly when that author's voice may have been previously silenced due to societal prejudice.

### **Devices for Performing 'Authenticity of Origin'**

Although I argue that 'authenticity of origin' is implicit within spoken word spaces—any poem described as 'spoken word' will generally be assumed to be an original composition by its performer—there are also several mechanisms poets may use to indicate the originality of their work. Poets may reference the act of composition (either composing that specific poem or composing poetry more generally) within the poem to strengthen the audience's perception that the authorial 'I' and performing 'I' are the same figure. For example, Sara Hirsch's "Death Poem" (described at the beginning of this chapter) concludes with this self-reflexive, meta act—'A friend asks me if I've finished my deaf poem yet'—establishing Hirsch as the poem's author ("Sara Hirsch – Death Poem"). Poets may also make claims to having written the material while verbally introducing to the work onstage, for instance stating 'I wrote this piece last week.' Wheeler has commented on the commonality of 'self-referential language,' such as poets 'describing the situation or condition of the artist while composing the piece or declaiming it from the stage' and

posits that this practice not only adds to the perception that the performer is the poem's author but also helps to emphasise spoken word's accessible, meritocratic reputation (151). By reinforcing the already implicit notion of 'authenticity of origin' through directly referencing the composition process, spoken word poets emphasise their active role in crafting the material they are performing.

Poets may also perform 'authenticity of origin' meta-textually through directly referencing the audience's reactions to their material within the text and/or performance of their poems. This practice of anticipating the audience's reaction to the performance is common within the verbal arts (i.e. storytelling) and can relay meaningful contextual information influencing spectators' perceptions of the event and performer (Bauman and Briggs 69-70). This technique can be observed in Kevin Mclean's poem "Man in My Mirror," in which he performs a self-deprecating yet humorous section regarding clichés and stereotypes regarding larger people, then anticipates the audience's reaction by stating 'It's OK to laugh' ("Re: Research question"). This technique 'deliberately blurs the boundaries between speech and writing, making [the] writing sound extemporare,<sup>163</sup> and making explicit references to itself,' and in so doing reinforces the audience's perception that the poet-performer has full authorial control not only over the text of the poem but also over its performance (Middleton, *Distant Reading* 43). Furthermore, by actively incorporating the audience and performance context into the poetry, this practice may also increase spectators' perceptions of other strains of 'authenticity': specifically, the 'authenticities of presence' discussed in the next chapter and 'authenticity of engagement' in Chapter 5.

### **Theoretical Comfort with 'Inauthenticity of Origin'**

Thus far, this section has argued that 'authenticity of origin' is central to the spoken word genre not only because of the convention of originality but also because the poems are dependent upon the embodied actions of the poet who composed and performs them. However, my interviews with U.K. spoken word poets reveal a major difference between how this material has been perceived—as integrally sited within

<sup>163</sup> This technique of making apparently spontaneous asides to the audience also performs 'authenticity of temporal state' and will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

the body of the author—and how poets consider their own material: as potentially able to be ‘covered’ by others. This is consistent with the majority of the authenticities I discuss throughout this thesis: the perception of the art form by audiences and critics is at odds with the beliefs and practices of its artists. My data indicate that while spoken word poets in practice adhere to the principle of ‘authenticity of origin,’ in theory many of them would be comfortable with another poet covering their work and thus with their work existing ‘inauthentically of origin.’

When I asked spoken word poets whether they would be comfortable with their work being covered by another person, the majority replied that yes, it would be flattering and they would be curious to see how someone else would verbally and physically interpret their work.<sup>164</sup> Some frame the composition and performance practice as a means of processing and externalising challenging experiences and thus perceive their work as separate enough from their self to be covered by another poet. Rose Condo, whose work often draws upon the autobiographical, explains that ‘if it’s stuff that’s really, really close to me ... part of the point of writing has been to manifest it outside of myself, as a way of having it exist outside of myself. So, if someone then takes that and carries it in a different direction or something, that’s kind of OK’ (Interview).

Several poets note that since they attempt to write relatable poetry which conveys universal emotions, this material could be effectively conveyed by a performer who did not have the personal experiences referenced within the material. Kevin P. Gilday clarifies that although he does sometimes compose material ‘that’s really personal to me,’ he has also ‘made sure that I haven’t kind of used language where it’s so specific that no one else could really use it ... or say it or kind of connect with it’ (Interview). Jess Green similarly describes her work as ‘communicating an emotion... and a lot of those emotions [are] quite universal,’ meaning that they could be validly covered by another poet who was not drawing

<sup>164</sup> There are limits here: naturally, spoken word poets are not comfortable with the idea of their material being plagiarised without credit. Several also clarify that they would not be comfortable with another poet covering their work for commercial gain: Ben Fagan specifies that he would be comfortable with others covering his work ‘as long as someone’s not selling it as their own [laughs] so you know citing sources and not making loads of money of it’ and Lucy English claims, ‘I would be pissed off if they were winning a slam with my poems’ (Interviews).

upon the memory of the experiences the poem detailed (Interview).

There are multiple ways in which my data could be interpreted, and ultimately more precise research is required here to analyse this effect.<sup>165</sup> One possibility is simply that spoken word poets are curious about how their work can be transformed by others within the creative community; that ‘authenticity of origin’ is a core principle within the genre, but poets are still able to be playful with their own and others’ work within that ethical and aesthetic framework. However, I interpret my data to indicate that while spoken poets understand the importance of their audiences *perceiving* material as ‘authentic of origin,’ they are more ambivalent about the *actual presence* of ‘authenticity of origin.’ The comfort that spoken word poets express regarding the idea of being covered suggests that they do not perceive this material as inherently and inextricably tied to their selves (i.e. being a direct performance of self) and rather perceive it as crafted art which would withstand being performed by another. Ultimately, while more data are required to examine this effect, the fact that the majority of U.K. spoken word poets theoretically accept the idea of their poetry being covered indicates that there is some flexibility regarding the necessity of the author in the performance of the poem. This suggests that even on the most basic level, assumptions that spoken word poetry is a direct, ‘authentic’ expression contingent on the live presence of the author require scepticism.

### **Section Conclusion**

This section established the convention of ‘authenticity of origin’ within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry, demonstrating how poets within this genre are expected to have composed the material they perform. It analysed the importance of authorship within spoken word and contextualised this strain of ‘authenticity’ as interconnected with the other strains proposed in this thesis. However, it complicated the ubiquity of ‘authenticity of origin’ within this genre by indicating that spoken word poets are at least theoretically flexible about work being performed by

<sup>165</sup> This could entail interviews with spoken word poets asking more specific questions about the value of originality and authorship within this genre, for instance: ‘Are you the only person who can legitimately perform your poetry?’

someone other than its author. The next section continues to analyse the centrality of the poet's self in spoken word poetry by considering the extent to which material is performed and perceived as autobiographical.

## **Authenticity of Autobiographical Self**

Spoken word poetry forces the student to leave behind labels and false identities; all falsities are revealed when spoken aloud. ... The truth of the performer's identity becomes apparent in the performing of the poem.

—Dooley, “Beautiful Words: Spoken Word Poetry and a Pedagogy of Beauty” 84

As this quotation effusively demonstrates, spoken word poetry is often characterised as a confessional genre in which poets bare their souls for the audience's enjoyment. The perception that this poetry is autobiographical—i.e. the allocation of any experiences, opinions, or other statements made in the first-person voice in these poems to the person performing them—is what I refer to as ‘authenticity of autobiographical self.’<sup>166</sup> While the previous section considered the assumption that the onstage poet-performer is the *author* of the poem, this section considers the assumption that they are the *speaker* of the poem. Using my extension of Smith and Watson's terminology, this is the perception that the authorial ‘I,’ the performing ‘I,’ and the narrating ‘I’ of a poem are the same person, united within the body of the poet-performer. For instance, when Sara Hirsch claims in “Death Poem” ‘I'm losing my hearing,’ the audience would perceive her claim as ‘authentic of autobiographical self’ if they believe that Hirsch is actually losing her hearing (“Sara Hirsch – Death Poem”).

<sup>166</sup> Implicit in the term ‘autobiographical’ is the expectation of factual accuracy (i.e. that autobiographical narratives are true). The next section, regarding ‘authenticity of narrative,’ will focus more closely on the expectations of truth-telling within this genre; this section simply establishes the implied relationship between the poem's speaker and the poet-performer.

In this section I describe how the performance and perception of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ has become commonplace within contemporary spoken word: audiences are encouraged to perceive material performed in first-person voice which is feasibly autobiographical<sup>167</sup> as autobiographical. I apply Lejeune’s concept of the autobiographical pact to the genre to describe how this expectation of autobiography is an implicit contract between poet and audience. I also describe several techniques poets may use which encourage the perception of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self.’ Ultimately, this section engages with the common concept of spoken word as an inherently autobiographical medium and instead suggests that the performance of selfhood through this poetry is more nuanced and constructed.

### **The Convention of ‘Authenticity of Autobiographical Self’**

While this section complicates the notion that all spoken word poetry is confessional, it is worth acknowledging that the stereotype of the genre as mainly autobiographical is based in fact. The majority of the U.K. spoken word poets I interviewed characterise their work as being grounded in their personal experiences to varying degrees. Several claim that their autobiographical poems comprised their best material, such as Kieren King: ‘I think that definitely the best of my work, it’s got a lot of me in there, and it is quite confessional’ (Interview).

Cyclically, the tendency for poets to perform (at least apparently) autobiographical material has led to the expectation of confessional material at spoken word events. Existing spoken word scholarship contends that the perception of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ is not only encouraged within spoken word but fundamental to the genre.<sup>168</sup> Through the rhetoric surrounding spoken word poetry, the conventions of live events, and the actions of the poets, audiences are encouraged to perceive the figure onstage as not only the authorial ‘I’ but also the performing ‘I,’ narrating ‘I,’ and narrated ‘I’ of the material. The liveness of contemporary spoken word poetry further encourages the perception of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self,’ since ‘the physical presence of the poet makes it more

<sup>167</sup> Later in this section I discuss exceptions for surreal, hyperbolic, or otherwise obviously non-fictional material.

<sup>168</sup> See Somers-Willett (33); Wheeler (149); Gregory; Hoffman.

difficult to distance them from the experiences and beliefs which they voice’ (Gregory 102). If we term an actor in a play a ‘representative figure’ because they are representing a character, a spoken word poet could be considered a ‘non-representative figure’ in that they are not perceived as representing a separate character but rather as performing their ‘self.’<sup>169</sup>

My research corroborates this scholarship: most of the U.K. spoken word poets I interviewed believe that their audiences automatically assume ‘authenticity of autobiographical self.’<sup>170</sup> Carly Brown explains that there is an ‘underlying assumption that the “I” is you when you’re onstage, particularly because that person’s there,’ emphasising the significance of the embodied, co-present poet-performer in encouraging the perception of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ (Interview). Lucy English shares that ‘certainly when I do spoken word in places that have a spoken word audience, if I do an “I” poem, people will immediately assume it’s my experience’ (Interview). English’s statement illustrates how the level of familiarity an audience has with the conventions of the spoken word genre—the extent to which they are conscious of the framing devices characterising this material as ‘autobiographical’—affects the readiness with which they perceive and value these types of ‘authenticity’ in the poetry.

### **Lejeune’s Autobiographical Pact**

As discussed previously, each spectator’s horizon of expectations informs their perception of the performance: the way in which material is framed through inclusion in a specific genre influences expectations for autobiography, veracity, and other forms of ‘authenticity.’ For instance, if two spectators watch the same performance but one is told that it is theatre and the other told that it is spoken word poetry, they are likely to have different perceptions of the autobiographical nature of

<sup>169</sup> I utilise this term throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapter 5, in which I analyse how spoken word spaces encourage the perception of the poet-performer as a non-representative, ‘authentic’ figure.

<sup>170</sup> As with other instances within this thesis where I rely on statements from artists regarding their audiences, this evidence is indirect. However, it is meaningful that artists so strongly maintain that their audiences believe in ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ because this assumption will affect the way in which poets compose and perform their material.

the work (recall Lisa Mead's anecdote regarding her friend's experience of Lemn Sissay's performance). This is the concept at the heart of Lejeune's theory of the autobiographical pact, which frames autobiography as a 'contractual genre' (29). Here I follow Novak's suggestion that this theory is applicable to spoken word poetry and I extend Lejeune's characterisation of the 'autobiographical pact,' originally conceived for text-based materials, to the live spoken word context. I argue that an implicit autobiographical pact is constructed through poets' actions and the conventions of spoken word events: that audiences within these spaces are encouraged to assume the 'authenticity of autobiographical self' of this poetry.

In 1975, Lejeune theorised that the assumption of material as 'autobiographical' relies on the establishment of a (theoretical, non-material) contract—the 'autobiographical pact'—between the text and the reader. In the first part of Lejeune's model, the essential component enabling the autobiographical pact to be established is the 'identity of name between author, narrator, and protagonist': the proper name must be consistent across these three figures (14). Applied to textual materials, this means that the reader can determine whether the text is meant to be read as autobiographical by comparing the author's name on the book jacket with the narrator's name in the text of the book. Lejeune describes two ways in which this identity of name may be established: first, 'implicitly' through the use of titles or initial sections of the text which make the autobiographical nature of the work clear; and second, 'in an obvious way,' in that the name of the narrator-protagonist given in the narrative is the same as the name of the author on the book's cover (14).

Of course, in the live performance field of spoken word poetry, the space of the 'text' is different: there is no front cover, and the name of the author may not necessarily be given within the poem. In applying Lejeune's theory to contemporary spoken word, I argue that the critical factor securing the autobiographical pact is less the proper name (although that may still be a present and helpful factor) but more so the physically present body of the performer. The poet's body is the physical core in which each of these identities (authorial 'I,' performing 'I,' narrating 'I,' narrated 'I') are sited. Novak has emphasised the importance of the embodiment and co-presence of the spoken word poet as the site for unification of these 'I's': 'the fictive speaker of a poem, as a textual function, is experienced by the audience simultaneously with,



and through, the physically present poet-performer in a concrete space and time' (Novak, *Live Poetry* 177). The centrality of the embodied co-presence of the poet and the audience within spoken word poetry thus encourages the perception of (first-person, feasibly autobiographical) material as 'authentic of autobiographical self.' In Chapter 5 I further consider how the conventions of live spoken word events aid in the construction of the autobiographical pact and in encouraging the perception of all of the strains of 'authenticity' discussed throughout this thesis.

However, Lejeune also argues that a work is characterised as autobiographical not due to elements within the work itself, but due to *the way in which it is interpreted*:

The problematic of autobiography proposed here is thus not grounded on a relationship, established from the outside, between the extratextual and the text – because such a relationship could only be one of resemblance, and would prove nothing. Neither is it grounded on an internal analysis of the functioning of the text, of the structure, or of aspects of the published text; but upon analysis, on the global level of publication, of *the implicit or explicit contract proposed by the author to the reader*, a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text and engenders the effects which, attributed to the text, seem to us to define it as autobiography. (29, emphasis added)

Essentially, there is no way to guarantee that text (or performance) is autobiographical simply by examining that work devoid of its context. A book may have the same name for the author, narrator, and protagonist but still be a work of fiction: unity of names does not guarantee autobiography, just as the physical presence of the performing spoken word poet does not guarantee autobiography. Thus the most significant factor in determining material as autobiographical is the labelling of that material as autobiographical through the characterising it within a specific genre and through the material's paratext (i.e. reviews of the work, artists' statements regarding the work, etc.). I argue here that an implicit autobiographical pact overlays contemporary spoken word poetry as a genre: that the conventions of spoken word spaces and the rhetoric of the genre (as well as the genre's history as an

activist<sup>171</sup> and often confessional art form) have led to the implicit assumption that this material is autobiographical.

### **Techniques for Performing ‘Authenticity of Autobiographical Self’**

Although the autobiographical pact frames all material performed within contemporary spoken word spaces as autobiographical, poets may also assert the confessional nature of their work through various direct and/or paratextual devices. On an obvious level, the tendency for much spoken word material to be composed in the first-person voice encourages the perception of the poet as the narrator of the poem. Somers-Willett observes that the majority of poems in the U.S. slam sphere utilise first-person voice, and based on observation this effect is consistent in the U.K. spoken word sphere (33). First-person narration encourages the audience to assume unity between the authorial, performing, and narrating ‘I’s, as Jemima Foxtrot explains: ‘if I say in a poem “I did this, I feel this, I” you know – they expect that “I” to be you’ (Interview). However, the use of first-person voice is not essential for autobiographical writing: although it is less common, autobiographical material may be composed in the second and third person voices (Lejeune 7). As Gregory observes, due to the strong assumption of confessional narration within contemporary spoken word poetry (i.e. the presence of the autobiographical pact), ‘even second or third person pieces may be viewed as autobiographical’ within spoken word spaces (102).

The poet’s physical presence onstage may serve to ‘verify’ claims to ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ made within spoken word pieces. If the poem refers to visible or audible characteristics of the poet-performer’s body, the audience is able to ‘confirm’ these characteristics by witnessing them live. For example, in her poem “I Think She Was A She,” Leyla Josephine names several physical features that she predicts she would have passed down to her daughter: ‘she would have

<sup>171</sup> I do not imply that every spoken word poet identifies as an activist; rather, I am referring to the way in which the genre has often been utilised by counter-cultural movements for the expression of marginalised identities and social justice advocacy (see Bearder).

looked exactly like me / full cheeks, hazel eyes, and thick brown hair.’<sup>172</sup> The audience is able to ‘verify’ that Josephine’s physical features are consistent with this description. Poets may also reinforce this strain of ‘authenticity’ by gesturing at, referencing, or otherwise emphasising their bodies. For instance, in the same poem, Josephine repeatedly clutches at her abdomen and repeats the phrase ‘This is my body,’ signalling that the authorial ‘I,’ performing ‘I,’ narrating ‘I,’ and narrated ‘I’ are all sited within her body.

Poets may also reinforce the autobiographical pact by making paratextual framing comments prior to or following a poem. For example, a poet might preface a piece by claiming ‘This is the story of my first kiss,’ encouraging the audience to perceive the physically present authorial ‘I’ as the narrating ‘I’ sharing an autobiographical narrative. Within the poem itself, poets may add asides (spontaneously or not) claiming the autobiographical nature of the material they are performing. They may also reference their own name within the poem, reinforcing the unity between the authorial ‘I’ and the narrated ‘I’; for example, in “Death Poem” Sara Hirsch briefly assumes the character of the hearing examiner and addresses her narrated self, ‘So, Sara, this test shows you are indeed losing your hearing’ (“Sara Hirsch – Death Poem”).

On the epitextual level, poets may frame their work as autobiographical (using that term or related terms such as ‘true,’ ‘honest,’ ‘sincere,’ etc.)<sup>173</sup> in public interviews, on their websites, or in other promotional materials. Additionally, the common practice of performing under one’s own name in the U.K. spoken word scene constitutes a performance not only of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ but also ‘authenticity of origin’ and ‘authenticity of persona’ (which will be discussed in Chapter 3). In the U.K. context, while some spoken word poets adopt

<sup>172</sup> In my analyses of this poem throughout this thesis I am relying on three video recordings: “I Think She Was A She by Leyla Josephine | Spoken Word,” “BBC Poetry Slam, Edinburgh - Unborn Child - Leyla Josephine,” and “TEDx Whitehall Women Leyla Josephine | Leyla Josephine | TEDxWhitehallWomen.” Each of these videos is available via the link in Appendix B.

<sup>173</sup> As previously noted, the strains of ‘authenticity’ performed and perceived in contemporary U.K. spoken word intersect heavily; an epitextual claim that a first-person narrative in which the speaker’s name is consistent with the poet’s name is ‘true’ encourages the perception not only of ‘authenticity of narrative’ but also ‘authenticity of autobiographical self.’ I discuss these intersections further in the next section.

stage names and onstage personas, generally the custom is to use one's given name (or at least one's first name) in performance contexts. Of the 67 spoken word poets I interviewed, to my knowledge eleven use stage names<sup>174</sup> (some throughout their practices, some just when assuming specific personas, as will be discussed in Chapter 3). Of those, six use their given first names. Although some of these poets adopt pseudonyms to explicitly develop an onstage persona, others do so more for personal safety, privacy, and professional ease.<sup>175</sup> The use of one's given name (or even a name which appears to be one's given name in that it is not an obvious stage name, such as 'Sara Hirsch'), helps to establish the poet-performer as a 'real' person, rather than as a character, and thus emphasises 'authenticity of autobiographical self.'

The contemporary norm of performing under one's given name in spoken word contexts reflects a shift from the earlier generations of performance poets, when as Rachel McCrum observes, 'there was a lot more character-based work ... there was a very clear division between the self as a person and what was being presented onstage' (Interview). In the 1990s, those aligned with the punk poetry and Ranting movements tended to adopt stage names and personas, such as Attila the Stockbroker (John Baine), Salena Saliva (Salena Godden), and Seething Wells (Steven Wells). Michelle Madsen describes how the tendency to adopt exaggerated stage personas exemplified by these 'spitting punk poets ... seems to have kind of like gone out of vogue a little bit' and speculated that 'maybe that's because everything's about reality and confession these days' (Interview).

### **No Guarantee of Autobiography**

While I argue here that spoken word poets often share narratives derived from personal experience and that audience members are encouraged to perceive this work as autobiographical due to the conventions of the genre, this is not to say that all spoken word poetry *is* autobiographical. Poets may strategically adopt character

<sup>174</sup> I am not listing these stage names here in order to protect the anonymity of those with less obvious pseudonyms who adopt them in part for personal privacy.

<sup>175</sup> A further exception is those poets who are influenced by the hip-hop and rap scenes, where it is more commonplace to assume a pseudonym. Examples include Kae Tempest, Polarbear, and Craft-D.

personas (as will be discussed at the conclusion of this section) or fictionalise narratives (as will be further discussed in the next section, on ‘authenticity of narrative’). More fundamentally, following Goffman’s dramaturgical model of selfhood, the notion that one’s ‘true’ self can be transparently, directly expressed to an audience glosses over the complexity and nuance of performances of selfhood (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*). Because there is no singular, unified ‘authentic self’ which may be fully communicated to the audience—as autobiography theorists Smith and Watson summarise, one’s ‘true self can never be discovered, unmasked, or revealed because its core is a *mise en abyme*, an infinite regress’—all autobiographical acts are inherently performative, no matter how sincerely intended (206).

Furthermore, because ‘all autobiographical productions involve processes of selection, scripting, editing, revising, etc,’ it is vital to consider autobiographical material as *crafted* self-performance in which the relationship between the authorial ‘I’ and the narrated ‘I’ is inherently indirect, incomplete, and performative (Heddon 9). Building upon Goffman’s work, Bauman has characterised ‘first-person narration as a reflexive act on the part of the subject, a process of expressive self-fashioning’ which is fundamentally influenced by social interaction (“Ed Bell, Texas Storyteller” 187). Additionally, all autobiographical acts are influenced by pre-existing models of self-performance, whether or not artists consciously seek to follow these models. Smith and Watson have commented on the inescapability of external influence in artistic self-expression:

People tell stories of their lives through the cultural scripts available to them, and they are governed by cultural strictures about self-preservation in public. In this sense, then, there is no autonomous, agentic subject outside of discourse, and no freely interpreted or fully controlled self-narration. (56)

The institutions and art forms which ‘elicit, screen, fashion, and variously highlight personal narratives’ are highly influential: for instance, factors including the tendency for first-person speech and the celebration of ‘authenticity’ within spoken word poetry fundamentally influence the way in which poets express their selves onstage (Gubrium and Holstein 164). This effect can particularly be observed within

the spoken word sphere in that poets' performances of self are influenced by other apparently autobiographical poems, leading to trends and conventions of self-performance within the genre.<sup>176</sup> Thus it is important for spoken word scholarship not to 'assume any easy or transparent relationship between a lived life and its portrayal' but instead to consider the ways in which the narrated 'I's performed onstage are inherently crafted performances of self (Heddon 9).

### **An Exception: Persona Poems**

Finally, an exception indicating the rule: while I argue here that there is an implicit autobiographical pact in contemporary U.K. spoken word spaces encouraging audiences to perceive this poetry as autobiographical and that this perception is valued within the spoken word sphere, there are modes of spoken word performance which are obviously non-autobiographical but still accepted. These are poems in which the narrating 'I' is a separate figure from the authorial 'I' and performing 'I': poems in which the poet is not presenting themselves but instead portraying a distinct character. These are generally termed 'persona poems' because the poet adopts an obviously non-autobiographical persona for the duration of the piece (they may also be called dramatic monologues).<sup>177</sup> In this mode of performance, the performing 'I' and the narrating/narrated 'I's may be radically different, since spoken word 'poets are not necessarily bound to perform identities easily rendered by their [sic] skin colors and physical markers of gender, although many often do' (Somers-Willett 70).

An oft-cited<sup>178</sup> example of this is U.S. poet Patricia Smith's acclaimed piece "Skinhead," in which the African-American female performer adopts the persona of a white male racist and homophobe ("Patricia Smith Skinhead"). This glaring breach of the assumption of 'authenticity of autobiographical self' is the source of much of

<sup>176</sup> The Chapter 4 section regarding 'authenticity of voice' further discusses how models of self-performance can be learned and reiterated through this genre.

<sup>177</sup> Here I am chiefly referring to individual persona poems in which a spoken word poet adopts a character for a single piece. However (although this is rare in the U.K.), some spoken word poets employ consistent onstage personas throughout their sets and/or careers: for instance, Mel Bradley performs under the guise Ms. Noir for her burlesque poetry and Gerry Potter has performed in drag as Chloe Poems.

<sup>178</sup> Somers-Willett and Hoffman have written in detail about Patricia Smith's "Skinhead," and it is often mentioned by other scholars as a striking example of persona work.

the poem's power; as Hoffman remarks regarding "Skinhead," '[t]his immediacy of voice can be particularly shocking when the imagined speaker of a poem is so different physically from the actual performer' (224). Spoken word poets may thus manipulate the convention of 'authenticity of autobiographical self' by breaking it in obvious manners, such as by performing 'selves' radically different to their own.

Because persona work constitutes an obvious departure from the autobiographical pact, it is the spoken word poet's responsibility to establish that they have assumed a distinct persona. They may do this either while introducing the poem or during the poem itself, either verbally or using body language. As Gregory explains, because there is a blanket assumption that the performer is the poem's speaker within spoken word contexts (i.e. the autobiographical pact),

[t]he onus is thus on the poet to make clear to the reader where a poem is not a direct account of their own experiences or beliefs. They may do so through a variety of strategies, including presenting an explicit disclaimer, adopting an accent, using humour or including obviously fictional events in the piece. (102)

Sometimes this indication is explicit whereas at other times the use of a persona is obvious from physical cues (i.e. in "Skinhead" Smith's blackness serves as this marker). In my research, several poets indicate the importance of signalling that a piece is in the voice of a character in order to avoid deceiving or otherwise inappropriately manipulating the audience. Ross McFarlane states, 'I think it's important to some extent, and in particular sets of circumstances, that if you're going to present yourself as a character that you make it clear that it's a character' (Interview). Poet-performers can also indicate their breaking of the convention of 'authenticity of autobiographical self' more implicitly, such as through performing material that could not feasibly be autobiographical; this will be discussed further in the next section, on 'authenticity of narrative.'

### **Section Conclusion**

This section has argued that an implicit autobiographical pact overlays spoken word events: that audiences are encouraged through the conventions of the genre (the rhetoric, actions of poets, and framing devices of live events) to perceive

all feasibly autobiographical material as confessional. The next section extends this argument by claiming that there is a general expectation that this material is not only autobiographical but also true.

## **Authenticity of Narrative**

Poetry is interesting because it's non-fiction, but it's not factual....  
Donald Trump ... talked about truthiness, or that people cared more about the feeling of authenticity or truth than facts. And he's absolutely right. And actually with poetry it's all about – it's always been, you know, about authenticity, that feeling of truth, rather than the facts. You know, we are – we are dealers in truthiness.  
—Francesca Beard (Interview)

Spoken word poetry is often framed as a forum to 'speak your truth': a conduit for radical, even emancipatory honesty. But how 'true' does this material tend to be? How can we tell? And (why) does it matter? The next strain of 'authenticity' valued within contemporary U.K. spoken word spaces is 'authenticity of narrative': the perception of a poem's veracity. A poem is perceived as 'authentic of narrative' if the audience believes that any narratives within the poem are true. Where in the previous section I applied Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact to argue that audiences are encouraged to believe first-person narratives are autobiographical, here I apply Lejeune's related concept of the referential pact to argue that audiences are encouraged to believe that any feasibly 'true' narratives are true. I argue that audiences—and poets—generally hold strong expectations of 'authenticity of narrative' in this genre, and that breaching these expectations (i.e. performing a fictional narrative under the guise of non-fiction) is generally perceived as ethically problematic.

However, I also complicate any simple idea of all spoken word poetry as inherently 'true.' Relying upon scholarship regarding self-expression, life writing, and verbal arts, I indicate the instability of any singular notion of veracity in communicating narratives of self. Furthermore, while my data reveal that U.K.



spoken word poets generally believe in the importance of ‘authenticity of narrative’ within their genre, the majority admit to at least partially fictionalising their material. This indicates first that total ‘authenticity of narrative’ should not be assumed in the genre—not all material is ‘true’ (insofar as ‘truth’ can even be conceived of as a measurable quality)—but second that ‘authenticity of narrative’ may be perceived by audiences even where it does not exist. I apply Bauman’s theories on ‘expressive lying’ in verbal arts to demonstrate the ways in which bending the ‘referential pacts’ may be ethically permissible for aesthetic reasons. Finally, I note some exceptions to this general expectation of truth-telling in U.K. spoken word poetry, including markedly surreal, comedic, persona-based, or otherwise obviously fictional material, arguing that actually the existence of these pieces demonstrates the power of the referential pact.

### **Expectations of Veracity**

The scholarship regarding contemporary spoken word poetry has generally agreed that audiences automatically assume ‘authenticity of narrative’: that they believe any (feasibly true) narratives shared onstage to be true (and, building upon ‘authenticity of autobiographical self,’ autobiographical to the poet performing them). Gregory’s research into U.K. and U.S. slam cultures argues that ‘[w]hen slam poems are written in the first person, the events and opinions which they describe are invariably read as non-fiction’ (102). Similarly, Wheeler finds that within spoken word contexts, ‘the presumption of autobiographical truth-telling is strong,’ (indicating the presence of both ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘authenticity of narrative’) and youth spoken word (YSW) researchers Weinstein and West conclude that ‘audiences sometimes take YSW poems literally’ (Wheeler 150; Weinstein and West 293).<sup>179</sup>

My data collection corroborates this scholarship: when I asked spoken word artists whether they think that audiences assume that everything they share onstage is

<sup>179</sup> This expectation of ‘authenticity of narrative’ is relatively consistent in the U.K. stand-up comedy scene: Double contends that ‘[t]ruth is a vital concept in most modern stand-up comedy because of the idea that it is “authentic.” The boundary between offstage and onstage is blurred and, in many cases, the audience believe that the person they see onstage is more or less the same as the person they might meet offstage. ... there is an assumption that what the person onstage says about his or her life is more or less true’ (97-8).

‘true,’<sup>180</sup> the majority of them replied in the affirmative.<sup>181</sup> Sophia Walker emphatically asserts that audiences believe that this poetry is ‘true’ ‘100% of the time,’ and David Turner describes an instance in which he performed an outlandish narrative and the audience ‘believed everything. ... a certain level of truth is demanded of poets [that] isn’t of other performance’ (Interviews). I will note later in this section some exceptions for markedly surreal material, but my data suggest that overwhelmingly U.K. spoken word poets believe that audiences will assume that their poetry is ‘authentic of narrative.’

As with all of the strains of ‘authenticity’ within my taxonomy, the perception of ‘authenticity of narrative’ occurs in relation to the perception of other strains. Notably, the perception of ‘authenticity of narrative’ often depends upon the perception of ‘authenticity of origin’ and ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’: in order to believe that a first-person narrative is true, the audience generally also needs to believe that the poet-performer wrote it and is its speaker/subject.<sup>182</sup> As Bohdan Piasecki indicates, the commonality within contemporary U.K. spoken word of confessional first-person narratives has led to the linked assumption of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘authenticity of narrative’:

I think audiences assume that everything that you say in the first-person is definitely about you. ... I think people take poems quite literally. I think there’s an assumption of truth because of what the genre is and what it represents. And I think that’s why people also feel so strongly about telling somebody else’s story. (Interview)

The assumption of each of these strains can compound, giving some audience members a sense of certainty that a narrative is fully ‘authentic.’ Kevin Mclean describes this effect in the reaction of audiences to his performances of “Evelyn,” a

<sup>180</sup> I deliberately left the term ‘true’ undefined for artists to articulate their own position in relation to it, and generally used scare quotes around it (i.e. saying aloud ‘quote unquote true’) to acknowledge the contextually contingent nature of the term.

<sup>181</sup> As previously discussed, this evidence is indirect: it technically only indicates that poets believe that their audiences assume ‘authenticity of narrative,’ not directly that audiences believe it. However, many poets interviewed cited consistent incidents of audience members expressing this assumption, indicating that this is a relatively widespread and constant effect.

<sup>182</sup> There are potential exceptions here—for instance, a poet could cover a third-person non-fictional poem about World War II which the audience perceived to be ‘authentic of narrative’ but not ‘authentic of origin’ or ‘authentic of self’—but given the general expectation of those two strains, such a scenario would be unlikely.

first-person autobiographical poem concerning the loss of his mother:

I did that poem during the [2015 Edinburgh] Fringe, and almost every night after the show, a stranger came up and hugged me.<sup>183</sup> ... No question of whether that poem is real. Not even, not even, 'Is that written by someone whose mother did die?' Like that's one question, of like, 'Is there a dead mum behind the writing of that poem?' Cos what if I was like, 'No, No, I'— But also, that it isn't my mum. You know, there's like two distinct levels of authenticity to that. There is, 'Yes I wrote that poem about my mum,' and 'Yes, she did pass away.' Like - and they never ever question that. (Interview)

As Piasecki and Mclean suggest, the assumption of the autobiographical and referential pacts ('authenticity of autobiographical self' and 'authenticity of narrative') can be heightened when the poems concern trauma, oppression, or otherwise personally challenging topics.<sup>184</sup>

### **The Referential Pact**

Lejeune's theories of autobiography as a contractual genre are again helpful in analysing the framing of spoken word poetry as 'authentic.' His concept of the 'referential pact' refers to the notion of truth-telling within autobiographies. Autobiographical poems 'claim to provide information about a 'reality' exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of verification': they open themselves up to scrutiny from the audience, who may (at least theoretically) attempt to verify any claims made within the text (22). The referential pact is 'coextensive with the autobiographical pact, difficult to disassociate': the two pacts work in tandem to reinforce one other, in a manner parallel to the way in which the perceptions of 'authenticity of autobiographical self' and 'authenticity of narrative' function within contemporary spoken word spaces (22).

<sup>183</sup> This also indicates the level of intimacy that some spectators feel with spoken word poets; they may interpret the poet's performance of vulnerability literally (i.e. perceive 'emotional authenticity') and thus believe that since they were granted that level of 'access' to the poet during the performance, they may also access it offstage. This perception of the poet as fully present and directly engaging with the audience will be further discussed in the Chapter 5 section on 'authenticity of engagement.'

<sup>184</sup> This effect will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

I argue that just as an autobiographical pact is implicit within spoken word spaces, so too is a referential pact: audiences are likely not only assume that the poet-performer is the author and narrator of the material, but also that any feasible claims they make in reference to the external world will be ‘true.’ The majority of poets interviewed express this belief, with several directly characterising the assumption of truth-telling within spoken word spaces as contractual: an unstated agreement between poet and audience. Asked whether she believed audiences assume veracity in poets’ work, Catherine Wilson explains

Oh yeah... I don’t know why that is, because no one even tells you going in ‘These are all true.’<sup>185</sup> It’s never explicitly said, but there is some kind of unspoken assumption that everything you hear is true. And it’s different to like a poetry reading, and it’s different to a short story reading or a scratch night. I just assume that everything I hear, unless I’m told otherwise, is a true story. (Interview)

Thus the genre of contemporary spoken word poetry has evolved to include an implicit expectation of truth-telling, cultivating a relationship in which spectators trust performing poets to uphold that expectation. As Harry Baker frames it, ‘something that characterises spoken word is the capacity for honesty and vulnerability’ and because of that audiences are ‘investing a certain amount of trust that I think you have to be careful with’ (Interview).

Just like the autobiographical pact, the referential pact is rooted in and confirmed through the body of the performing poet. Lejeune describes the referential pact as including ‘a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the text lays claim’ (22). Within printed materials, this can include any statement of adherence to factuality; for example, ‘This memoir refers to the first sixty years of my life and was written to the best of my memory.’ However, given that spoken word is a live performance art, generally performers will not have time nor opportunity to delineate the scope of the

<sup>185</sup> In some contemporary live literary forms, it is typical to explicitly frame performances as ‘true’: for instance, in competitive storytelling (such as the series ‘The Moth’), the rules dictate both that ‘stories told must be true and those stories must be taken from the teller’s personal experience’ (McMaken 135). In that genre, then, the autobiographical and referential pacts are directly drawn; although, as McMaken observes, there remains no guarantee of the autobiographical or factual nature of the stories shared.

‘field of the real’ that they are referring to in their work. This is particularly true in the slam context, where performers are given no opportunity to contextualise their work through paratextual comments, as they are given only three minutes and the convention is to immediately begin the poem with no introduction. Thus the referential pact is generally not established verbally (nor textually) in spoken word spaces. Instead it functions in the same way as the autobiographical pact: the perception of the referential pact is implicitly encouraged by the conventions of the genre, rather than individually created for each poem (although of course poet-performers may reinforce this implicit pact by establishing their own pacts with the audience; for instance, a poet may introduce his/her poem by claiming ‘This is a true story’).

### **Bending the Pact: Nuances in Veracity Performance**

The establishment of the referential pact within contemporary spoken word poetry raises complicated questions about the extent to which this poetry can actually be characterised as ‘true,’ and the metric through which this could even be established, if at all. As with all of the strains of ‘authenticity’ I present here, the perception of ‘authenticity of narrative’ is fundamentally a *perception*; it is not conditional upon the actual veracity of the poem (insofar as veracity is measurable, as will be discussed shortly). As Lejeune states, within autobiographical material, factual ‘accuracy has no essential importance. In autobiography, it is indispensable that the referential pact be drawn up, and that it be kept; but it is not necessary that the result be on the order of strict resemblance’ (23). This is firstly because the audience generally lacks the ability to ‘verify’ any information within the poem in anything other than the crudest fashion. For instance, they may easily understand that a first-person poem in the voice of a dinosaur is intended as surreal persona poetry and thus not ‘authentic of narrative,’ but ascertaining whether a poet’s claim that their dog died last summer is true is less straightforward. It is plausible that, as Wheeler speculates, ‘many poems that seem deeply personal could be partly or entirely fictive’: the audience’s perception of a poem’s ‘authenticity of narrative’ can never truly be certain (150).

The second, more central, reason that the perception of ‘authenticity of

narrative’ cannot be contingent upon actual ‘veracity’ is that the concept of veracity itself is unstable. As established in Chapter 1, the performative turn in the social sciences and humanities discredited over-simplified notions of the direct, transparent expression of one’s ‘authentic’ self (see Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*). Life writing and storytelling theorists have built upon Goffman’s work to articulate how the rendering of completely ‘true’ narratives through any art form is not technically possible (Anderson; Heddon). In particular, Bauman’s extensive scholarship regarding contemporary verbal arts (particularly his research in Texas on storyteller Ed Bell and communities of dog traders) exposes the instability of truth claims by analysing their performative nature (“Ed Bell, Texas Storyteller”; *Story, Performance, and Event*).<sup>186</sup> As he argues, ‘[a]bstract, a priori, and universalistic truth-value criteria or classificatory systems for oral narrative based on them’ are not ‘empirically productive,’ and thus rather than considering *how true* a story (or spoken word poem) is, it is much more relevant to consider *how truth* is performed, measured, and valued within a specific cultural context (*Story, Performance, and Event* 11-12).<sup>187</sup>

One of the reasons complete veracity in recounting narratives is not possible is the fallibility of the life writer’s memory. This necessitates creative recollection: as poet Dean Atta notes, ‘my memory isn’t 100% on everything, so I may have had to take poetic license’ (Interview). Jemima Foxtrot, whose long-form shows have drawn upon her life experience, also acknowledges the impossibility of total factuality within artistic work:

[My spoken word shows are] all influenced by my experience, but no, not like everything is a true story. They’re all sort of based on true stories, but I think, you know, for instance in my show I’ve got up here [at the 2017 Edinburgh Festival Fringe], there’s lots of memories

<sup>186</sup> Although the specific verbal art Bauman analyses in this scholarship—Texan storytelling in the 1980s generally outwith theatrical settings—is quite contextually distinct from U.K. spoken word poetry, many of the observations he makes are remarkably apt to this context as well. Throughout this section (and at points later in this thesis) I apply his theories to illustrate the nuanced, performative nature of self-expression and truth claims in verbal arts.  
<sup>187</sup> This, of course, parallels my approach to ‘authenticity’ in this thesis: to consider it as culturally constructed and thus not to ask ‘how authentic’ but instead to gauge the criteria through which ‘authenticity’ is assessed.

of like very specific things. And for me that's not really how it is. ....  
It's important to be able to not need everything to be strictly true.  
(Interview)

Schmidt's description of autobiography as 'mediated memory' provides a helpful term indicating the inevitable instability of fact within artistic self-expression (87).

Smith and Watson's scholarship on life writing also provides a helpful framework for analysing the perceptions of 'truth' in (purportedly) autobiographical material as a social negotiation between the artist and their audience, and as such is worth quoting at length:

autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life ... If we approach such self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within a dialogic exchange between writer and reader/viewer rather than as a story to be proved or falsified, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. It redefines the terms of what we call 'truth': autobiographical writing cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple fact. As an intersubjective mode, it resides outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood. (16, 17)

Within the context of spoken word poetry, this dialogic exchange occurs between the poet and each audience member, informed by the conventions of the space including the unspoken framework of the autobiographical and referential pacts. Like 'authenticity' more broadly, 'truth'—'authenticity of narrative'—is not a stable quality but a subjectively perceived effect co-created by the participants of the performance.

With this in mind, how do spoken word poets navigate the referential pact overlaying the genre: to what extent do they consider their work to be 'true' and how do they assert these claims? A minority of the poets I interviewed claim that everything they share in spoken word spaces is true; for instance, Rachel McCrum's statement 'I would never lie' demonstrates her belief that to perform fictional material is tantamount to deception because it breaches the audience's contractual

expectation of authenticity of narrative (Interview).<sup>188</sup> However, the majority of the spoken word poets I interviewed qualify the veracity of their work, acknowledging that it is not completely ‘authentic of narrative.’ Some characterise their work as true within a definition of truth which acknowledges its subjectivity from different perspectives, such as Bibi June: ‘I think I write stuff that can be interpreted in many ways, and I think one of them’s definitely my truth’ (Interview). Several poets, including Dominic Berry and Dean Atta, describe their work as being ‘emotionally’ if not factually true (Interviews).

Based on my data, the majority of U.K. spoken word poets consider it acceptable to alter factual details in order to present a narrative which on the whole *feels* true to themselves and/or their audiences. As Carly Brown explains,

Sometimes you need to use fiction as a tool to reveal something of the truth of what it was like to experience that then, or through the lens of fiction you can reveal something about maybe your subjective experience of like what happened. And that in some ways can be more illuminating than ... factual truth. (Interview)

In her practice Brown feels comfortable altering minor details of narratives to achieve this effect: ‘I might highlight some things for comic effect or be a little bit—you know, just maybe shape the experience slightly to convey what the tone that I want to convey, but not dramatically’ (Interview). Hannah Chutzpah establishes a moral distinction between adjusting facts and what she characterised as ‘lying’: ‘I will tweak aspects if I think it makes it a better story. I don’t think I go up and lie. I think some things – I wouldn’t say they’re untrue, I think things can be embellished or moved around a bit to make the better story’ (Interview).

Chutzpah’s semantic choices indicate a spectrum in terms of what is acceptable as a ‘tweak’ versus a ‘lie’ to the audience, and thus illustrate the nuances of bending (if not breaking) the autobiographical and referential pacts. Bauman’s research into ‘expressive lying’ and the nuances of truth performance in the verbal arts has documented this effect:

<sup>188</sup> Generally data in this section were drawn from replies to the query ‘To what extent would you say that everything you say onstage is “true”?’ I deliberately left the term ‘true’ undefined and verbally used scare quotes with it in order to allow artists to define the term individually.



The aesthetic considerations of artistic performance may demand the embellishment or manipulation—if not the sacrifice—of the literal truth in the interests of greater dynamic tension, formal elegance, surprise value, contrast, or other elements that contribute to excellence in performance in this subculture (*Story, Performance, and Event* 21)

In this sense, the referential pact can be flexible, with manipulations of the ‘truth’ for aesthetic reasons considered acceptable (at least in the perspective of the poets creating the work).

For some spoken word poets, the emotional or broader truth is more important to them than the factual accuracy of the work, to the extent that they feel comfortable constructing and performing a fictional narrative in a spoken word space. When asked whether or not her work was ‘true,’ Kathryn O’Driscoll describes one of her pieces:

I have one poem for example which is called “The Flowerbed” which is about losing a lover to death. And I use elements of having actually been in love and lost that person, but not through death. And I use elements of having grieved for my sister. So the emotions are real but the narrative isn’t, for example. ...I didn’t feel like it was going to trick people or emotionally fool them in that way. It was just a poem about loss. ... For me the emotional truth is more important than the specific wording. (Interview)

Overall, my data indicate that U.K. spoken word poets have varying relationships with ‘truth’ in their work, varying from considering any alteration to a life narrative as ‘lying’ to feeling comfortable borrowing or fabricating others’ narratives and performing them in first-person voice. This flexibility around truth-telling in this genre indicates that spoken word material should not be assumed to be entirely factually correct, despite the rhetoric surrounding spoken word often implying that it is.

### **Reactions to Fictitious Material**

Despite the majority of U.K. spoken word poets incorporating flexibility

regarding the referential pacts into their practices—i.e. being comfortable bending the ‘truth’ for aesthetic purposes—they generally do not consider breaking the pact to be ethically acceptable. The majority of the U.K. spoken word poets I interviewed express deep frustration at the idea of a fellow poet sharing significantly fictional material under the guise of non-fiction<sup>189</sup> and contend that such an act represents a conscious betrayal of the ethics of spoken word spaces.

In this section I specifically discuss poets’ perspectives regarding their peers’ actions (rather than assessing poets’ perceptions of their audience’s assumptions of veracity in this poetry, as I have done previously in this section). This is in part to analyse the ethics of ‘authenticity of narrative’ within the community of spoken word poets, but also in recognition that, as insiders, poets’ ethical perspectives on their peers’ work may differ from audiences’ perspectives.<sup>190</sup> Theoretically, poets’ reactions to fabrication may be stronger because they understand themselves to be bound by the pacts and feel frustrated when a fellow poet treats them flippantly. Conversely, poets may be more understanding of fabrication because they themselves understand the autobiographical and referential pacts to be flexible. Rachel McCrum shares her belief that ‘I think spoken word artists who are in the audience are probably deeply sceptical [of the veracity of peers’ poems] ... because we know what we can get away with’ (Interview). Bauman’s research into Texan dog traders revealed traders’ hesitancy to publicly challenge fellow traders’ fabrications:

by not challenging the truthfulness of another's stories, one may reasonably expect to be accorded the same license in presenting one's own image-building narratives and crafting one's own artful performances. ... To call another man a liar in this context, then, is to

<sup>189</sup> Here I am referring to significant breaches in the pacts—for instance, performing a fictional first-person narrative concerning personal trauma—rather than mostly ‘true’ narratives with some minor alterations. As Smith and Watson remark, spectators and readers generally do not expect exact factual truth in all life writing: ‘Certainly we allow that memories, and the experience made out of memories, can be inconsistent (as they are in much life writing), probably because we experience our own as inconsistent. We understand that the source text - the memories of the author - is not accessible or verifiable in any literal sense. But we are less willing to accept intentional duping’ (37).

<sup>190</sup> As previously discussed, this indicates the need for direct audience research to further evidence the claims I make regarding audience perceptions throughout this thesis.

threaten his "face," with some risk and no possible advantage to oneself; whereas to give apparent acceptance to his accounts is to store up interactional credit toward the unchallenged acceptance of one's own tales. (*Story, Performance, and Event* 22)

In criticising a fellow spoken word poets' bending of the referential pact, one jeopardises one's own ability to bend the pacts; thus arguably it benefits spoken word poets not to call out poets who have apparently performed fictional material if they too wish to fictionalise their work.

However, based on my data the majority of U.K. spoken word poets are uncomfortable with breaches in the expectation of 'authenticity of narrative.' Catherine Wilson describes her surprise at learning that some material performed in spoken word spaces was not entirely truthful: 'And I was – not just like shocked but like completely flabbergasted, like really, really taken aback, when people would say "No, that's fictional"' (Interview). Others use stronger language to express their surprise and frustration at the rupturing of autobiographical and referential pacts. Keith Jarrett describes hearing a spoken word poet perform essentially the same poem two years apart, but the narrative in the poem significantly changed (thus indicating that one of the performances was fictional). His reaction was intense:

I felt really angry at the person. It's like, no, I shouldn't, it's a poem and they worked on it and whatever. But suddenly, like—it brought up a lot of stuff. And then—and that's where I'm like, this is really dangerous cos you're dealing with people's live poetry, you know. Words have the potential to really get to the heart of a person. And when you're doing that—I felt manipulated. (Interview)

Jarrett's reaction reveals his belief that spoken word poetry is crafted art which should be appreciated without concern for how accurate it is, yet simultaneously his deeply felt sense of betrayal at the breaking of the referential pact. This is a core tension in how 'authenticities' are perceived and valued by spoken word poets: while poets recognise the constructed, performative, subjective nature of these authenticities, many nonetheless value perceiving them in their own and their peers' work.

The rupture of the autobiographical and referential pacts is perceived by

many in the spoken word community as not merely as bad practice but a significant breach of the ethics of the space. Rachel McCrum, for instance, argues that spoken word poets who consciously break the pacts are ‘lying’:

People lie sometimes. And I hate it. And I hate watching it. ... I would never lie. I don't understand how anybody could say something had happened to them that hasn't and get up onstage in front of a bunch of people and perform that. And there are people who do. And it drives me nuts. Because I just think it's – I think you're abusing an audience. You're abusing a trust that they're placing in you. Because you're squeezing something out of them that you have no right to at all... it's so dishonest and it's so corrupt in so many ways.

(Interview)

McCrum later clarifies that not all spoken word poetry needs to be autobiographical: in her opinion it is good to branch out creatively and ‘do a first-person piece that's talking about another issue’ (Ibid). The issue for her lies in the claiming of the experience that she considers implicit when one performs a first-person piece within a spoken word space: ‘but it's the presenting it as “and this happened to me.” I find it unacceptable’ (Ibid). McCrum's statement implies that the pacts are so strong in spoken word spaces that to break them constitutes an act of conscious deception, and thus an abuse of the audience's (and other participants') trust.

Many artists frame breaches in ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘authenticity of narrative’ as appropriative acts: they consider the implicit autobiographical and referential pacts to be so strong within spoken word spaces that to perform any first-person material is equivalent to claiming the experiences within it as autobiographical and true (as was discussed in the section on ‘authenticity of origin’ regarding covering). Anita Govan strongly condemns ‘inauthenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘inauthenticity of narrative’ in these terms: ‘I believe if you're writing about that and you're saying that on the stage, then you're claiming authorship of that experience. And I think that is really important to live that experience and not just take it as a mask for you to be popular’ (Interview). She argues that the audience would ‘like to assume’ that narratives performed onstage are true and shares:

I am shocked when people go up and then I realise that's not really their experience .... I just think it's disingenuous to go up there and talk about something that you don't really – you could talk about a concept you have an idea about and you think about, but if you're claiming an experience as yours, as you've not experienced that experience, I think it's awful. (Ibid)

Thus because the spoken word genre contains implicit autobiographical and referential pacts encouraging spectators to perceive material as autobiographical and true, to perform fictional narratives within these spaces (without flagging them as fictional) is considered ethically suspect.

For many of the spoken word poets I interviewed, the crux of this issue is the poet's motivation for performing a fictional narrative. This effect will be discussed further in Chapter 4's section on 'authenticity of motivation' but warrants a brief discussion here. Catherine Wilson describes hearing a poem which may be Connor Macleod's "Flowers" (although she did not directly identify it) and explains that her acceptance of the poem's fictional nature was based in her perception that the poet's motivation for writing the piece was emotionally legitimate:

there is one poet who I know in England who did a poem about his, his dad dying, and I thought it was amazing. And I was told later it wasn't – it's not based on a true story, but it's based on his worst fear. ... And I don't actually – it's really odd, I don't have a problem with that, because I can really understand it. It's his way of vocalising something that he really struggles with. But if he did that – if he wrote that poem for a slam and not for that reason, I would have an issue with it. So I guess what I'm trying to say is, authenticity does matter ... but it's also necessarily linked to subject matter and intent of the poem you're performing. (Interview)

Thus for Wilson, 'inauthenticity of narrative' may be forgiven if the work is 'emotionally authentic,'<sup>191</sup> but not if it is 'inauthentic of motivation.' Sara Hirsch similarly argues that some instances of 'inauthenticity of narrative' are acceptable, but to perform such pieces in competitive contexts is 'exploitative' (Interview).

<sup>191</sup> The conception of 'emotional authenticity' will be discussed in the next chapter.

Hirsch's ethical framework is grounded in her belief that within poetry slams, audiences and judges directly reward traumatic narratives,<sup>192</sup> so to perform poems with fictional traumatic narratives in a slam is effectively leveraging fictionalised trauma against other poets' (assumedly) genuine trauma.

However, as with all of the strains of 'authenticity' proposed here, spoken word poets have varying opinions regarding the extent to which they matter aesthetically and ethically. A minority of the poets I interviewed are either apathetic regarding the importance of veracity in their peers' and their own work or actively dislike how highly valued 'authenticity of narrative' is within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry. Luke Wright expresses frustration with audiences who he perceives as prioritising 'authenticity of narrative' over aesthetic concerns. When asked whether audiences expect truth-telling more in spoken word spaces compared with other art forms, he replied,

Yeah. And I think I'm annoyed about that and that's why I have this attitude. I think a lot of people like spoken word because it's so true. And people want to come along and hear biography ...they're looking for authenticity. And I think that's a bit – annoys me. I like art. Good art. 'Is that story true?' Like – things like 'Is it good? Is the writing good?' Doesn't matter whether it's true or not. (Interview)<sup>193</sup>

Several other poets also express the opinion that breaches of the autobiographical and referential pacts are acceptable for aesthetic reasons. Colin Hassard shares that he has several non-autobiographical poems which could be construed autobiographically, including one in the first-person voice about the speaker's father having Alzheimer's. He describes hearing stories from friends and family and incorporating them into his own material as first-person narratives, 'put[ting] the word "I" in front of that story. Because I think that has more of a reaction with the audience' (Interview). Hassard seems to prioritise the audience's appreciation of (or

<sup>192</sup> Narratives of trauma could be considered shortcuts for performing 'authenticity' within the contemporary U.K. spoken word sphere, as they often involve highly emotional performances and audiences may believe that the poet would not 'lie' concerning such severe material. I further discuss this effect in Chapter 6.

<sup>193</sup> In Chapter 6, my argument roughly follows Wright's here: I contend that the critical preoccupation with spoken word poetry's 'authenticity' has distracted from aesthetic concerns regarding the craft of the work.

connection with, or empathy for) the poem over any perceived edict to only perform non-fictional poems. Ultimately, for these poets, the *perception of* ‘authenticity of narrative’ and subsequent enjoyment of the work is more important than any actual adherence to the truth. As Ash Dickinson articulates,

It doesn’t matter that it’s not true. It feels true, because the comedian or the poet is telling it well enough and there’s believability in what’s being said and related ... in terms of authenticity, I think – no, you don’t have to have lived that. But I think you have to – you have to deliver it as though you have. ... There has to be honesty in your writing. And if there isn’t, you can smell it a mile off. (Interview)

Dickinson’s implication that the poet can be honest while sharing fictional material demonstrates the complex ethical and aesthetic nuances of ‘inauthenticity of narrative.’

These differences in ethical perceptions of breaches in ‘authenticity of narrative’ indicate variations in the priorities of the poets engaging in this art form. Significantly, although further research is required to corroborate my findings, my research indicated that opinions regarding the importance of adhering to ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘authenticity of narrative’ divided down demographic lines. The majority of the spoken word poets I interviewed who consider it ethically acceptable to breach these pacts and believe the focus on autobiographical truth-telling to be potentially aesthetically restrictive are white men. As I have discussed previously, the emphasis on ‘authentic’ self-expression in contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry derives in part from the genre’s roots in various artistic activist movements which championed the radical power of self-expression, particularly for those with marginalised identities. For those approaching the art form as a politicised forum for sharing personal narratives, fashioning and performing identity in an empowering manner, and having these expressions witnessed and affirmed by others, the importance of ‘authenticities’ within the genre serves a social function: to ensure mutual trust enabling these sensitive exchanges.<sup>194</sup> However, I posit that for those

<sup>194</sup> As I will discuss further in Chapter 6, however, simply because the performance and perception of these ‘authenticities’ serves an important social function within the genre does not mean that they are not constructed, nor that they are necessarily benign. It is still vital to

whose identities are less marginalised, who do not utilise spoken word poetry in this politicised manner, the autobiographical and referential pacts overlaying the genre may feel unnecessary and constrictive in limiting their ability to perform non-‘authentic’ narratives. The way in which marginalised identity impacts spoken word poets’ ‘authenticities’ will be further discussed in the Chapter 4 section regarding ‘authenticity of identity.’

### **Exceptions: Surreal and Humorous Material**

Although ‘authenticity of narrative’ is a valued and established factor within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry (for most poets—those cited above being in the minority), there are modes of performance in which degrees of falsehood are acceptable. Again, as with all ethical pacts concerning ‘authenticity,’ the dividing lines between acceptable and unacceptable fiction are blurred and will differ amongst poets and spectators.

First, the value audiences place in the autobiographical and referential pacts will vary based on the content of the work: a spectator may not care about the veracity of a light-hearted comedic poem about rhubarb, for instance, whereas they are likely to care about the veracity of a sombre poem divulging that the speaker has cancer. Comedic material is less likely to be held to the same standards of truth-telling; Mark Grist posits ‘I think it’s completely possible for you to lie and fabricate all the way through a spoken word set if people understand that it’s like a comedy kind of thing’ whereas he expresses feeling a sense of discomfort when poets fabricate ‘trauma, or relating something that, uh, is kind of a life-changing moment’ (Interview). Similarly, Catherine Wilson claims ‘it’s OK to write a comedy piece that’s not at all based on true life, because it’s bizarre and surreal and everyone knows it’s not true’ describing a comedic poem of hers that ‘obviously people know it’s not true, it’s a comedy piece, you’ve entered a different social contract’ (Interview). This flexibility of the autobiographical and referential pacts is consistent in stand-up comedy: while the genre is similarly contingent on the performance of ‘authentic’ self, ‘audiences have no problem accepting material that is obviously

investigate the ways in which the implicit acceptance of ‘authenticities’ as aesthetic markers within contemporary U.K. spoken word affects poets, audiences, and the critical discourse.



fictional if it is fantastical and surreal’ (Double 98).

Secondly, spoken word poets may skirt the autobiographical and referential pacts by performing fantastical, hyperbolic, or otherwise surreal narratives, although these explicitly non-autobiographical poems are less common within the spoken word sphere than material grounded in personal experience. Here I refer to poems that are overtly fictional because they could not feasibly be true: as Kevin Mclean quips, ‘I could write a poem about having a dinner party with Abraham Lincoln, right. And people aren’t going to be like, “You know Abraham Lincoln was dead!”’ (Interview). Ross McFarlane similarly argues that spoken word audiences are capable of identifying surreal narratives and ‘disconnect[ing]’ from the autobiographical pact for the duration of those pieces: ‘in general I think that the, the vast majority of the spoken word scene is able to make that disconnect’ (Interview). However, because of the implicit autobiographical and referential pacts overlaying the space, poets need to somehow indicate prior to or during these poems that they are consciously breaching the pact, either through directly claiming the work as fictional or otherwise making this obvious.<sup>195</sup>

The existence of surreal spoken word poems does not disprove the existence of the autobiographical and referential pacts but rather indicates their strength: the comedic power of this material derives from the way in which it transgresses the expectations of the space. Sam Small shares that he enjoys playing with the audience’s expectations in his poetry:

I think what’s interesting is using something that’s kinda true and putting in wee elements of it. And then you can see people going on board with you, going like ‘That was a real thing that really happened to him’ and then you can say something that’s nonsense and they’ll be like ‘Wait – but that was—’ [laughs]. (Interview)

His poem “You Kept My Heart in a Jar in the Fridge”<sup>196</sup> demonstrates this effect. It

<sup>195</sup> This is consistent with how poets need to indicate when they are breaking the ‘autobiographical pact’ by performing persona material, as discussed in the previous section.

<sup>196</sup> I have witnessed Small perform this poem live many times. I am basing my analysis here on my memories of those performances, on a video of a performance at which I was present (“Loud Poets Glasgow Sam Small You kept my heart in a jar in the fridge,” accessible via the link in Appendix B), and on a transcript of the poem published in Small’s collection *Pure Toilet* (Speculative Books, 2017).

tells the story of a romantic relationship which, at least initially, could feasibly be autobiographical: 'We've been going out six years now / We got engaged last spring.' However, over the course of the poem the speaker alleges that his partner is becoming unhinged in increasingly extreme ways: first lying, then burning down the kitchen four times, then killing their pets, then murdering a child and feeding him to their friends. Finally it is revealed that the speaker's partner is a serial killer and the poem is being narrated from beyond the grave: 'I know you must have loved me / cos you killed me in your sleep.' The poem concludes with the horrifying yet somehow touching idea that his partner 'ripped out my heart / put it in a jar / and stored it in the fridge.' When I have witnessed this poem performed live, it generally elicits first concern from the audience at the troubling events it recounts, then laughter as they gradually realise that it cannot be true. As Small indicates in his discussion of his practice, this poem may be rooted in something 'true'—perhaps his experience or observation of abusive relationships. However, the way in which he manipulates the audience's expectations makes the poem humorous and elicits a different 'truth' through the mechanism of fiction.

The way in which Small's poem—and others similar to it—subverts the audience's expectations of truth-telling established through the autobiographical and referential pacts is consistent with Bauman's characterisation of tall tales (although of course the context in these narratives are performed is significantly different). Bauman describes how tall tales initially perform 'authentic' autobiography, then gradually the deception is revealed:

The use of the first person brings the tall tale closer to personal narrative; it allows the story to masquerade for a while as a "true" personal narrative, until the realization that what is being reported is impossible shatters the illusion. In other words, these first-person tall tales are what Goffman calls "fabrications": "the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on" ([Goffman] 1974:83). (*Story, Performance, and Event*

Ultimately, such surreal spoken word poetry does not discount the existence of the autobiographical and referential pacts but rather relies on them for its humorous effect.

### **Section Conclusion**

In this section I established the common expectation of ‘authenticity of narrative’ within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry, describing how the referential pact established within this genre frames material as ‘true.’ However, I demonstrated the instability of this notion of ‘authenticity’ by noting how spoken word poets commonly fictionalise aspects of their work for aesthetic purposes. This section discussed the potential ethical ramifications when material is perceived as ‘inauthentic of narrative’ and observed instances where this ‘inauthenticity’ is acceptable (i.e. surreal, comedic poetry). In the next section I analyse a poem which could be perceived as ‘inauthentic of narrative’ and indicate both the nuances in projecting ‘truth’ through poetry and the complex ethics of this scene.

### **Case Study: Connor Macleod’s “Flowers”**

I close this chapter with a case study of Connor Macleod’s poem “Flowers” indicating the nuances of the authenticities of self within it.<sup>198</sup> As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, “Flowers” conveys a fictional narrative: the speaker recounts the loss of his father, but Macleod’s father is still alive. While the poem is ‘authentic of origin’ (Macleod is both the author and performer) it is technically ‘inauthentic of autobiographical self’ and ‘inauthentic of narrative’ (on a broad level, in the sense that the basic facts of the narrative are not consistent with Macleod’s

<sup>197</sup> Bauman also closely examines the mechanics of the tall tale in his article “Ed Bell, Texas Storyteller: The Framing and Reframing of Life Experience” (see especially 211).

<sup>198</sup> For this case study I am relying upon my memory of having seen Macleod perform “Flowers” live at UniSlam 2018 and a video recording of this live performance (unpublished; emailed to me by Tyrone Lewis, who filmed the performance), as well as an additional video recording of the poem performing straight to camera in a live context (“the itch season 1 episode 1: Connor MacLeod [sic] ‘Flowers’”). Both of these videos are available via the link in Appendix B.

lived experience as he describes it). This piece provides a useful case study in part because it seemed to be referenced, unprompted, in my interviews with four separate poets, including Macleod himself.<sup>199</sup> As a researcher of spoken word himself, Macleod reflects thoughtfully upon on the ethics and aesthetics of breaking the autobiographical and referential pacts, and his comments provide insight into motivations behind and justifications for performing fictional narratives in this space. His perspective has also evolved considerably since our 2017 interview—he no longer performs “Flowers” because he considers it ethically fraught—and in this case study I cite both our original discussion and a more recent statement from him taking into account this shift.<sup>200</sup>

As I described the piece fully in the Introduction to this thesis, here I do not detail it again but rather analyse the reactions to and justifications for performing it as an example of non-fictional work. Finally, to reiterate: as with the entirety of this thesis, in this section I am reporting and analysing the expectations of ‘authenticity’ within the genre based on my data. I do not advance any moral (or aesthetic) judgments on Macleod nor any other poets for performing fictional material; rather, I use this case study to indicate the range of reactions to a breach in the unstated ethics of this art form.

First, “Flowers” is consistent with the conventions of contemporary U.K. spoken word in that it is ‘authentic of origin’: Macleod both wrote and performs the piece. Secondly, the piece performs ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘authenticity of narrative’ convincingly, even though it is technically neither. It consistently utilises first-person voice. The poem also heavily performs authenticities of presence—authenticity of persona, temporal state, and emotion, as will be

<sup>199</sup> I refer here to comments made by Sara Hirsch, Catherine Wilson, and Joelle Taylor cited within this section. While these interviewees did not name the poem nor Macleod in their comments, and thus theoretically could be discussing other poems, their comments seemed to directly describe Macleod’s situation. Regardless of whether or not their comments directly concern that specific piece, they are relevant to discussions regarding fictional narratives within spoken word spaces.

<sup>200</sup> I reached out to Macleod in mid-2019 after hearing that he no longer performed this poem, as I was curious as to whether his perspective on the ethical ramifications of performing fictional spoken word pieces had shifted. He replied with a detailed account of how his approach to that poem and fictional narratives within spoken word more generally has evolved; the quotations later in this case study come from that email conversation (“Re: PhD interview: transcript & audio”).

discussed in the next chapter—in that Macleod assumes a range of emotional affects onstage and repeatedly appears to be speaking in an extemporaneous fashion. This performed sense that Macleod is ‘genuinely’ emotional and fully present further encourages the perception that the events he recounts in the poem have affected him personally.

When interviewed in 2017, Macleod was still performing “Flowers” and discussed with considerable nuance his rationale for presenting a fictional narrative at spoken word events which implicitly encourage the perception of authenticities of self. Explaining his motivations for composing “Flowers,” Macleod implies that in his creative praxis, ‘emotional truth’ is equally valid to, if not more important than, factual truth. He explains that in his poetry there is ‘very little fabrication of the emotion’ but ‘there might be fabrication in terms of story elements’ (Interview). While the narrative of “Flowers” is not autobiographically factual, for Macleod it *is* emotionally ‘true’:

My dad’s alive. But at the time, I was dealing with a lot of people leaving me.... And so the feeling of that poem was the feeling of loss and the feeling of just grief and not really understanding what’s going on. And so that’s – the emotion that I try to capture within it and the only way I thought to explain it without just standing onstage and listing off the things that happened to me, which would be boring and just really depressing, would be to look at it from the perspective of the ultimate, uh, loss. Which is the loss of a parent, really, and having that fear. (Interview)

Thus from Macleod’s perspective, the use of a fictional narrative can be both more aesthetically interesting and closer to the emotional truth of the experience he is seeking to convey. For him, spoken word poetry can hold these contradictions non-problematically: ‘you can write things that aren’t true without being fake. You can capture grief without needing to just be autobiographical ...I try to keep things truthful. But not everything is factual’ (Interview).

However, as this chapter has documented, the breach of expected ‘authenticity of narrative’ is not acceptable for many within the spoken word sphere

regardless of how ‘emotionally authentic’ the narrative is for the poet-performer.<sup>201</sup> In her interview, Sara Hirsch describes hearing this piece (or a similar fictional poem in which the speaker has lost his father). She has a mixed perspective on the poem, in part praising it for being a ‘very beautiful poem’ which ‘really affected the audience’ and being impressed by the poet’s ability to compose this work without any direct personal experience informing it (Interview). However, she also expresses scepticism at the motivation behind constructing such work, based in part on her own experience of loss: ‘as someone who has got a lot of material about, you know, my father, who passed away ... I can’t imagine writing one about my mum dying. Because like it’s such an awful thing to happen, losing a parent. Like why would I – why would I make it up?’ (Interview). Joelle Taylor spoke more strongly against the intentional creation of fictional material within the spoken word sphere, specifically when the poet is motivated less by creative innovation and more by potential career success:

I hate when people create an absolute lie to win a slam. Which we all talk about. Things like, “Here is my sad one, it’s about my dad.” He’s actually really close to him, but it makes everybody cry. That’s cynical and manipulative and doesn’t deserve the right to be called poetry, which has at its heart an honesty and an authenticity to it.

(Interview)

Again, the poet’s perceived motivations in crafting the material affect strongly whether or not any fictional material they perform is considered acceptable or appropriate, as will be further discussed in the Chapter 4 section regarding ‘authenticity of motivation.’

When we spoke in 2017, Macleod was conscious of the expectation of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘authenticity of narrative’ within the genre, sharing that ‘I think they [the audience] do think everything that I’m saying is correct, is true’ (Interview). By extension, he was aware that audiences may feel a sense of betrayal when the autobiographical and referential pacts are breached. Macleod shared an experience of performing the poem during a lecture, then revealing to the students that ‘that “Flowers” poem, it’s not true in terms of facts, my

<sup>201</sup> The concept of ‘emotional authenticity’ will be more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 3.

dad's still alive. They were not happy. There was someone in the audience [who said] "You lie!" (Interview). At the time, Macleod distinguished between the charged space of performance and 'real life,' clarifying that if an audience member were to directly ask him following a performance whether or not the poem was autobiographical, he would reveal its fictional nature. However, he generally did not advertise the fictional nature of the poem because of his prioritisation of the audience's emotional engagement with the work: 'if they don't want to know, or they just don't ask, the way that I see it is that they have had the experience of feeling like this. I'm not going to take that away from them just to do it for the sake of truth. Because it's – it is still true how they feel. And I wouldn't want to remove that away just because a fact is wrong' (Interview). Thus for Macleod in 2017, the effect of the poem on the audience—their reception of it as autobiographical and the emotional catharsis that may have provided for them—was the priority, regardless of the actual veracity (or lack thereof) of the poem.

However, in the two years between my interview with Macleod and our correspondence in mid-2019, he significantly altered his perspective on the ethical ramifications of breaching the autobiographical and referential pacts and no longer performs "Flowers." He explains that:

Whilst I still believe that you can, and should, feel able to embellish your truth with metaphor or with allegory in poetry, there is a line that I believe that poem crossed. Since [our original] interview, I've come to the conclusion that, because spoken word audiences expect and infer authenticity from a spoken word performance, you have to ensure that they understand when something is a story about a feeling and a story about an event. ("Re: PhD interview: transcript & audio")

Thus his realisation that the autobiographical and referential pacts overlay spoken word spaces has prompted Macleod to alert audiences to any breach of these pacts (i.e. persona-based or otherwise fictional material).

Additionally, Macleod came to recognise that audiences seemed to be appreciating the poem more due to their perception of its veracity than its aesthetic qualities: 'people weren't coming up to me after events and saying "That was a beautiful piece," they were coming up to me and saying things like "I'm so sorry that

happened to you” or “My father died in a car accident as well” (Ibid). This illustrates both the power and potential danger of the autobiographical and referential pacts within contemporary spoken word poetry. As previously discussed, spoken word events often serve as platforms for confessional expression in which poets may find catharsis and community in sharing traumatic experiences.<sup>202</sup> However, when audiences interpret all material literally as the true, autobiographical expression of the poet—when they unquestioningly accept the autobiographical and referential pacts—emotional reactions (i.e. empathy) may trump considerations for the poem’s craft. I do not criticise audiences here: these reactions to be expected when the genre self-markets as confessional. However, as the expectation of confessional expression continues to establish itself as a defining feature of spoken word poetry, we face the prospect that belief in the veracity of a poem is not only an ethical concern but also a matter of aesthetics. Chapter 6 further analyses the problematic effects the valorisation of ‘authenticity’ is causing for the critical discourse around contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry.

In our recent correspondence, Macleod concludes:

I realised that I was appropriating a very specific grief, and the intention of the poem had become completely lost. *Flowers* is a manipulative piece because of the explicit and needless inclusion of “Dad” at the end, which changes the poem from a perfectly fine extended metaphor with a death twist, into a perceived real-life narrative. (Ibid)

I have analysed this poem and quoted Macleod at length here not to indicate that this is the correct trajectory for any poet’s perception of the ethical framework in spoken word to take—i.e. to imply that Macleod is now correct whereas before he was wrong—but rather to emphasise the flexibility, subjectivity, and constantly evolving

<sup>202</sup> While the body of psychotherapeutic research into the effects of performing spoken word poetry on mental health is currently small, several studies have indicated that this practice can benefit mental health, particularly in terms of processing and moving beyond trauma (Maddalena; Alvarez and Mearns). There is also anecdotal evidence and media articles touting the positive effects of participating in this genre (English, “The Growing Popularity of Performance Poetry is a Boost for Mental Wellbeing”). However, further research is required specifically analysing the effects of identity expression and development through this genre.



nature of ‘authenticity’ within contemporary spoken word poetry. As with all of the strains of ‘authenticity’ analysed in this thesis, there is no singular ‘correct’ ethical stance (nor even a singular ethical or aesthetic framework) when it comes to authenticities of self: these politics are multifaceted and ever-shifting.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter analysed the ways in which selfhood—specifically, authorship, autobiography, and veracity—is performed in contemporary spoken word. I analysed the ways in which poets’ actions and the framing devices of spoken word events encourage the expectation that material will be original, personal, and true, regardless of the actual relationship between the poet’s life and the way it is projected onstage. The next chapter builds upon this exploration of performative selfhood within spoken word by investigating how poets perform ‘presence’ onstage.

### Chapter 3: Authenticities of Presence

It's really interesting that there's so much choreography often in spoken word, where there's also such high premium put on authenticity, and the choreography is clearly artificial. But then, if you think about it a little more, I mean the – it's not improvised, right? So – it's a constructed authenticity anyway.

—Bohdan Piasecki (Interview)

One of the major attractions of spoken word poetry in today's increasingly mediatised environment is its liveness: the genre's alluring offer of an unpredictable, dynamic exchange between the poet and audience in real time. This is not a canned recording, nor a solitary reading experience, but a chance to witness poets baring their souls live onstage, emoting with no filter other than the microphone!

... or so the rhetoric goes. This chapter more thoroughly examines the notion of the spoken word poet's presence: the sense that they are completely *there in the moment*, not just physically but with all of the mystical, emotional energy 'presence' denotes. In this chapter I problematise the common perception of spoken word poets as transparently emotional, spontaneous, unfiltered figures by demonstrating the extent to which poets adopt distinct performance personas, moderate emotional displays, and rehearse their performances.

The intertwined concepts of *presence* and *liveness* are similar to the concept of 'authenticity' in that they are powerful, highly valued forces in performance which are nuanced, situationally contingent, and challenging to analyse. The performer's live presence is often considered to imbue the performance with a magical, indescribable virtue; as Power writes, '[t]raditionally, presence in theatre has been seen as that which lies outside representations; the presence of the actor, the "liveness" of an event or the "energy" that is sometimes said to connect actors and audience all lie beyond the province of signification' (8). The senses of 'unmediated communication, the idea of being in the moment and experiences of the mysterious or ineffable' that the artist's live presence is believed to evoke are considered to make the live interaction more *real* for both artist and audience (Ralley and Connolly

51). Consequently, an event's liveness has long been culturally associated with inherent 'authenticity': this is the 'common assumption is that live events are more 'real'<sup>203</sup> due to their ephemerality and thus quasi-originality (i.e. the event has not occurred in that exact state before and will not ever again) (Auslander, *Liveness* 4).<sup>204</sup>

Specifically within poetry, as discussed in Chapter 1 oral transmission has been celebrated as 'the ideal of unfettered access, of sincerity and integrity,' and subsequently spoken word poetry has often been considered more 'authentic' than print-based poetry simply on the merit of its liveness (Hoffman 206). Consequently, some poets and scholars consider the live, embodied presence of the poet onstage to inherently confer 'authenticity' within contemporary spoken word; including Bearder, who vividly claims that 'on stage, the poem inhabits the flesh, and the flesh inhabits the poem. In this sense, the piece is integrated and *authentic*; that's to say, the author is *present* in the fullest sense' (208, emphasis added).

Certainly when one examines spoken word performance critically, there are senses in which the physical and temporal co-presence of poets and spectators increases the likelihood that spectators will perceive performances as 'authentic.' For instance, spectators may feel as though their presence in the audience is directly affecting the poet's performance onstage through their active participation. Additionally, as will be discussed in this chapter, the audience may perceive the poet as behaving extemporaneously during a live performance (what I term 'authenticity of temporal state'), whereas viewing recordings of the same poem performed on different occasions would reveal the staged, rehearsed nature of the poet's actions.

However, I follow Power's scholarship regarding presence and Auslander's scholarship regarding liveness in treating both concepts with considerable scepticism, rather than reifying them as inherently 'authenticating' forces. Just as this thesis considers 'authenticity' itself to be a dialogical, inherently constructed process rather than a stable trait, it also treats presence and liveness '*as a function of*

<sup>203</sup> The inverse is also true: mediatised (i.e. recorded, digitised, or otherwise copied) material is often perceived as artificial or otherwise 'inauthentic' (see Auslander, *Liveness*).

<sup>204</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, the allure of 'authenticity' increases with the extent of mediatisation: in this regard, the 'authenticating,' transcendent qualities associated with liveness grow more powerful in societies which are heavily mediatised (see Cobb).

theatrical signification' rather than some mystical, incidental factors (Power 8, emphasis in original). As Auslander has asserted, orality and liveness themselves *do not in and of themselves* guarantee a more 'real' artistic experience: while a live context may enable the spectator to perceive the work as 'authentic' on various levels, it does not inherently imbue the poetry with 'authenticity' (*Liveness*). I follow Wheeler in recognising that '[a] live slam poem is not more *real* than the printed or recorded variety' (152). Ultimately, liveness, presence, and 'authenticity' intersect, reinforce, and undermine one another in a constant process of performance and perception.

Following recent performance studies theorists, I believe that 'the focus ... needs to shift away from locating liveness within performance a priori (within an ontology of liveness) and instead to careful consideration of the particular and contingent relationships between performance and audience' (Reason and Lindelof 4-5). Thus in this chapter (and thesis more generally) I do not reify the liveness of spoken word events as making the experience of participating in a spoken word event more 'real' or otherwise 'authentic' than the experience of silently reading a poem on the page or watching a video of a spoken word performance. Rather, I consider the ways in which spoken word poets can utilise certain techniques and capitalise on sharing a physical and temporal space with the audience to *perform* presence, spontaneity, and active engagement.

This chapter investigates the extent to which poets are 'present' onstage during their performances and considers how this may affect audiences' perceptions of poets' 'authenticity'. It begins by introducing the concept of 'authenticity of persona,' which is the perception that the poet is truly 'being themselves' onstage, rather than adopting a distinct persona or otherwise mediating their presence. It then discusses 'authenticity of temporal state,' or the perception that the poetry is not pre-composed or choreographed but rather issuing from the poet in an extemporaneous manner. Third, it describes how 'emotional authenticity,' or the perception that poets' emotional displays onstage correlate to their actual internal emotional states at the moment of performance, has become a core element of the genre. This chapter concludes with a case study of Jack Macmillan's poem "Paracetamol" demonstrating each of these authenticities of presence.

Across the intersecting authenticities of presence discussed below, I argue that although spoken word poets often perform as though they are speaking without any filter in a spontaneous, emotive fashion, this act belies the intensive preparation poets undertake prior to performances. While the illusion of the poet's full, extemporaneous presence and unfettered emotional expression is a core element of the genre drawing many to it, often critics fail to appreciate the preparatory work and instead interpret the poetry as easy to perform and overly emotional. As I suggest in this chapter and further analyse in Chapter 6, this contributes to the notion of spoken word as inherently 'authentic' and thus uncrafted, rather than the recognition of the genre as an art form requiring considerable skill and rehearsal.

### **Authenticity of Persona**

I very much feel like myself [onstage]. Because I think that's what people – that's what people sort of want. You know. An audience kind of wants to see you.

—Jemima Foxtrot (Interview)

When a spoken word poet takes the stage and begins performing, are they truly themselves in that charged moment? Can they remain in their 'natural' state—if such a state exists—or is the adoption of an onstage persona (however similar to their 'natural' self) unavoidable? This section discusses the nuances of poets' onstage performative selves through introducing the concept of 'authenticity of persona.' This is the perception that the poet is 'being themselves' onstage: that they are not 'acting' or adopting a character, but rather offering the audience access to their 'true' nature. The performance of this strain of 'authenticity' may make the audience feel an increased sense of intimacy and kinship with the poet because they seem to be 'open' and 'vulnerable' to them, facilitating an atmosphere of trust.

In this section I distinguish between various notions of 'being oneself onstage' to parse the feasibility of 'authenticity of persona' and analyse how it can be performed. First I apply Goffman's dramaturgical model of performativity, describing how all social interactions inherently entail varying performances of

selfhood, to recognise that no spoken word poet can ever be truly ‘themselves’ onstage: that full ‘authenticity of persona’ is not possible. Instead I consider how spoken word poets consciously mediate their onstage presences: the extent to which they adopt a distinct character onstage or attempt to ‘be themselves.’ My data indicate that while U.K. spoken word poets recognise that ‘authenticity of persona’ is valued in the genre—they think that audiences want to believe that poets are ‘fully themselves’ onstage—poets generally do not consider themselves to be ‘authentic of persona’ while performing. Instead, the majority of poets I interviewed stated that they assume a distinct character while performing (usually an amplified version of themselves). This section reinforces my greater argument in this thesis that ‘authenticity’ is a performed characteristic rather than an inherent trait within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry.

### **The Convention of ‘Authenticity of Persona’**

Because the phrase ‘being oneself onstage’ is vague and contains multiple possible connotations, the notion of ‘authenticity of persona’ needs specifying. The most fundamental version of being oneself onstage would involve no performance nor filters; simply the poet being ‘natural.’ As I have established previously, following Goffman’s dramaturgical model of social performativity, that is arguably not possible: all interactions inherently entail performativity and thus cannot be construed as ‘natural’ (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*). There is no singular, core ‘self’ that can be shared externally without filter; rather, we perform multiple iterations of selfhood within different social contexts. Thus I take as fundamental here that, on the most fundamental level, the concept of ‘authenticity of persona’—that the poet is able to completely ‘be themselves’ onstage without any filter—is not possible, due to the fundamental multiplicity of selves and the performative nature of social interaction.

The discussion in this section goes beyond these matters of quotidian, inherent social performativity to focus on whether or not the spoken word poets consciously adopt a distinct persona or character for the duration of their performance. To perceive ‘authenticity of persona’ is to believe that the poet has not assumed a separate persona but instead is performing ‘as themselves.’ In my extension

of Smith and Watson's terms for the performing self, when the audience perceives a poet to be 'authentic of persona,' they interpret the performing 'I' as a direct expression of the authorial 'I' rather than a filtered character. The section on 'emotional authenticity' later in this chapter elaborates further on this idea, specifically regarding the emotional presence of the spoken word poet as 'genuine.'

To determine the extent to which spoken word poets feel that their practice involves being 'authentically present' onstage, I asked them 'When you're performing, do you feel as though you adopt a persona or as though it's "really you" onstage?' A small minority of poets interviewed claim the latter: that they are fully themselves during their performances. Anthony Anaxagorou claims, 'it's me. There's nothing ... there's no character shift, there's no alter ego, there's no "let me be this person"' (Interview). Similarly, in her practice Anita Govan is 'not putting up a persona. I don't – some people do that, they take on a name ... And that's the mask... that's the barrier. I'm trying to get rid of the barrier, it's the whole point. I find for what I do, or what I think I do, it's – it's naked' (Interview). Govan's response implies that spoken word poetry necessitates the lack of any filter between the poet and the audience: that it requires complete presence and unimpeded communication. For these poets, their practice entails being as natural as possible when onstage.

However, the majority of the U.K. spoken word poets I interviewed claim that they adopt a persona onstage, with many reflecting that this behaviour is inevitable within live performance (i.e. one cannot be 'natural' onstage). Most characterise their onstage selves as an enhanced or otherwise mediated version of their 'actual' selves: not a distinct character but rather 'an elevated version of myself' (Claire Trévien) or 'a heightened version of who I like to present myself as' (Matt Abbott) (Interviews).<sup>205</sup> They assert that this onstage persona, while

<sup>205</sup> This effect is paralleled within stand-up comedy; Double argues that stand-up audiences 'have come to expect stand-up to be a form of self-expression, so we tend to assume that the comedians we see onstage are more or less playing themselves' (73). However, as with spoken word persona performances, these onstage identities are necessarily mediated to various degrees. Double cites comedian Milton Jones' claim that 'even people who appear to be themselves, it's a *heightened version*' (qtd. in Double 77, emphasis added).

‘amplified’ or ‘exaggerated,’<sup>206</sup> is still an iteration of themselves; Leyla Josephine articulates that ‘it’s a persona of myself... it’s a heightened state of myself. But that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s not myself’ (Interview). Jenny Lindsay characterises her performing self as ‘a parody of myself onstage. I’m totally myself onstage and everything I’m saying is authentic and “truthful” [JL indicates quotations] and all of the rest of it. But aye, it’s a parody of me. It’s the best self I can bring to the audience’ (Interview). Although these poets’ work may be ‘authentic of autobiographical self’ in terms of the performing ‘I’ corresponding to the narrating ‘I’—i.e. they are not performing distinct characters—there is still a slight distinction between what they characterise as their ‘natural’ selves and the personae they assume for performance.

As previous sections have articulated, any performance of self within art is inherently crafted: the ways in which one expresses selfhood are not entirely ‘natural’ nor ‘original’ but rather sculpted in relation to existing social models of selfhood. Although poets may appear to be ‘authentic of persona’ onstage, the fictive speaker (the narrating ‘I’) and the actual person onstage (the performing ‘I’) are distinct functions within the performative act. The real person Sara Hirsch, for example, is physically onstage performing “Death Poem,” but she is not in a completely ‘natural’ state: rather, she assumes a distinct performance persona for the duration of the poem. As the following sections will explain, spoken word poets vary in the extent to which they consciously craft these onstage personas: however, a common factor is that most try to make it appear that they are fully natural onstage. This again engages with the paradox of performative authenticity: poets work (craft personas) in order to make it appear that they are not working (being ‘natural’ onstage).

For many of the spoken word poets I interviewed, consciously crafting this persona is a part of their artistic practice. Hannah Chutzpah describes her onstage persona as ‘a more confident, *choreographed* version of myself’ and Dan Simpson observes that ‘there’s definitely some *conscious choices* around who I am onstage’ (Interviews, emphasis added). For Pete the Temp and others, spoken word craft

<sup>206</sup> Dan Simpson and Bohdan Piasecki describe their onstage presences as ‘amplified;’ Peter Hayhoe characterises his as ‘exaggerated.’



generally involves not only the composition and rehearsal of the poetry, but the preparation and rehearsal of the onstage performance persona, including paratextual elements such as poem introductions, audience interactions, etc.:

I don't think I can 100% say that it's 100% me. Cos we all project, you know? Idealise. Sometimes people come up to me after me gig and they're like 'That was amazing!' and I'm like 'Yeah, but I have just been giving you a twenty-minute rehearsed, idealised version of the best verbal me I can be with all of my performance tricks that I've nicked off other people and, you know, worked on, rehearsed, memorised it.' (Interview)

Similarly, the Repeat Beat Poet describes his performance self as a 'mediated persona' constructed around 'what I emphasise and where I choose to put my preferences'<sup>207</sup> (Interview).

The adoption of an onstage persona functions as a central element of many spoken word poets' stagecraft. Dan Simpson argues that the adoption of an enhanced stage persona is part of the poet-performer's duty as an entertainer: 'It feels *less authentic* to not put on your performer hat, shoes, and jacket [laughs]. I think you need multiple things to be a performer, clearly. It also feels disrespectful to an audience' (Interview, emphasis added). Somewhat paradoxically, as Simpson's comments suggest, the adoption of an onstage persona may feel more 'authentic' to an audience because we are accustomed to seeing more polished performances, rather than 'raw' selves acting 'naturally,' at least in a live literature environment. Similarly, Jim Monaghan describes how the performance persona can actually facilitate increased intimacy with the audience, because the poet can craft an easily recognisable persona:

You can't help but create a character. That's you the spoken word artist, you the poet. And I think that helps, because it also gives you a familiarity that - with your audience, that people will sort of - maybe they expect you to be a certain way ... I don't think my persona is the

<sup>207</sup> The Repeat Beat Poet's onstage persona entails performing under a separate name and thus arguably involves more explicit persona development than most U.K. spoken word poets' practices.

same all the time. But I do tend to have a sort of persona. (Interview)  
Thus the adoption of an onstage persona may serve as a mechanism to better communicate with and relate to the audience.

Spoken word poets can also adapt their onstage personas to suit the performance context; for example, adopting an accessible, humorous affect for a casual event in a pub versus a formal composure for a professional event in an institutional context. As Gregory observes, spoken word poets are ‘actively engaged in navigating their way through complex, multifaceted identities, and able to mobilise different aspects of these identities to meet the requirements of specific contexts’ (96).<sup>208</sup> Poets may also play with adopting different onstage personas during different performances of the same material, in order to experiment with how the piece will be differently received or as part of their creative practices. Caroline Bird, for instance, rejects the notion that she is ‘being herself’ onstage because ‘I want to be different people on different days performing it too’ (Interview). Thus the adoption of an onstage persona is not a singular act but a performance re-negotiated each time a poet takes the mic.

Because spoken word is a live performance medium, the audience’s perception of the poet’s ‘self’ is influenced not only by the poem’s text and how it is performed but also by the poet’s physical appearance, including clothing and style choices. As Somers-Willett contends, ‘[e]mbodied aspects of identity provide lenses through which an audience receives a poem, sometimes causing a dramatic shift in the poem’s meaning and effect’ meaning that the poet’s ‘speech, dress, gestures, voice, body, and so on all reflect in some way on the poem at hand’ (70; 18). The importance of physical appearance in affecting a poem’s reception is demonstrated when a poet’s appearance significantly changes between performances. For instance, Clare McWilliams shares that, while pregnant, she felt as though she could not appropriately perform some of her more sensual material: ‘the persona when I was pregnant, I couldn’t get up and read my own work. Because I was a different person. ... I wasn’t svelte with a – with the fancy gear. I was wearing a butterfly top and I

<sup>208</sup> Gregory’s argument here builds upon Goffman’s aforementioned dramaturgical model of social behaviour; in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* he theorises that individuals actively tailor their public identities to different social contexts.

had a big bump, you know? I couldn't get up there and go, "Oh yeah, I'm wanking away here!" (Interview). Spoken word poets' stylistic decisions regarding their personal appearance affect the way in which audiences perceive them, and thus the extent to which audiences perceive them as 'authentic of persona.'

Some poets choose their performance apparel in order to convey a certain expression of self onstage. For instance, the Repeat Beat Poet characterises his styling choices as 'a mediation of my persona,' describing:

I will always wear when I'm onstage a vaguely loud overprinted shirt. I will have my headphones ... around my neck. ... that's what I wear when I'm onstage because that's the image that I want to give across. Headphone, I'm listening to music, whatever, loud shirt, I'm here to be noticed and to take up space and I want you to like pay attention to me. (Interview)

Although again this is dependent on the individual performer's style, generally spoken word poets style themselves in a relatively quotidian manner, avoiding obvious costuming.<sup>209</sup> Here again the conventions of the poetry slam may have influenced the broader spoken word scene: slam rules generally prohibit competitors from wearing costumes (or utilising props) in their performances, so poets must appear not be specially dressed or they risk being disqualified.<sup>210</sup> Cultivating a seemingly 'normal' appearance rather than styling oneself as a distinct character can serve as a means of reinforcing one's status as a non-representative figure who is 'authentic of persona.' If the performer is not wearing a costume or otherwise remarkable apparel, it is easier to perceive them as being a 'natural,' 'authentic' figure onstage. This is consistent with other performance art forms: describing the U.K. comedy circuit, Double observes that '[s]ome comedians prefer more casual clothes than [Mick] Miller's or [Eddie] Izzard's, and this reinforces the idea that the

<sup>209</sup> The norm of avoiding explicitly assuming a separate visual character through costuming is consistent across the spoken word and text-based poetry spheres. Describing a gathering of the Association of Writers and Writing Programmes in the U.S., Wheeler describes how '[poetry] readers may wear street clothes or business clothes, but avoid any suggestion of costume' (140).

<sup>210</sup> In the U.K. scene where the stakes for slam success are less lucrative, this rule seems slightly less important than in the U.S. context, where fierce debates have been held over such issues as whether a poet's pregnant stomach counted as a prop (Elinson).

performer we see onstage is more or less the same person offstage' (91). Similarly, by avoiding wearing costumes or otherwise remarkable outfits and instead dressing in a relatively quotidian manner, spoken word poets can encourage the audience to perceive them as behaving naturally and without filter, thus performing 'authenticity of persona.'

### **Performing, not Acting**

Notably, although the majority of spoken word poets I interviewed admit to adopting a distinct persona during their onstage performances (thus technically being 'inauthentic of persona'), the majority of them balk at the idea that this constitutes acting. When asked whether they are acting onstage, most poets say no: that although they use techniques also common in acting (i.e. projecting, gesturing, etc.), they are not acting because they do not assume a distinct character onstage. They distinguish between their practice of adopting an onstage persona which is an elevated version of their 'natural' personality versus the acting practice of assuming a completely distinct character. Sara Hirsch, who has experience both as an actor and a spoken word poet, articulates the differences between spoken word performance and acting:

They're very different. In acting you know you're pretending to be someone else. Or if you're – even if you're not, even if you're playing yourself, you're still playing yourself, and that's the point. ... Poetry's really different. It's like, you're – you're yourself. And then your playing things are the poems. (Interview)

Similarly, Colin Hassard rejects the idea that his onstage performance practice constituted acting because onstage he adopts 'a persona, but it's an extension of me' rather than a distinct character (Interview). Most of the poets I interviewed associate acting with 'inauthenticity'—because the practice involves falsifying one's identity, albeit for artistic purposes—and thus sought to clarify that it was not a part of their spoken word practices. Elizabeth McGeown claims that onstage 'you do do certain things... [but] not in this sort of fake way that acting is' and Kate Fox describes 'I exaggerate my voice or my gestures or how strongly I feel about something in order to – so actually that is of course equally a sort of faking. But – yeah. Exaggerating not acting' (Interviews).

These poets' dislike of the idea that they might be acting, and thus 'faking' or otherwise being 'inauthentic' onstage, indicates the extent to which spoken word poets themselves perceive authenticities of self and presence to be integral to the spoken word genre. Leyla Josephine, who trained in theatre, justifies her use of acting techniques in spoken word performance by making a claim to the 'authenticity' of the exchange between the performer and the audience:

even if you're acting I feel like I still want to give the audience like – I want them to have a good experience and I want them to get whatever they need out of the poem. So in that way it's like, yeah I'm acting, but this is still a really true exchange. Like it's still - a point where I want you to, you know, receive what you need from it. And I think that that kind of makes me feel all right about doing the acting, it makes me feel all right about manipulating the audience slightly, because I want them to have a good experience. (Interview)

Ultimately, Josephine prioritises the audience's enjoyment of the work, rooted in their perception of the experience as a 'true exchange' between performer and audience, over her actual level of 'authenticity of persona' (in her perception<sup>211</sup>). The ways in which this apparently dynamic connection between poet and spectators is established and valued will be further examined in the Chapter 5 section on 'authenticity of engagement.'

### **Inauthenticity as Self-Care**

Finally, several of the poets I interviewed consider 'inauthenticity of persona'—in the sense of the deliberate adoption of a separate onstage persona—to not only be a core aspect of entertaining the audience but also a vital act of self-protection. The use of an onstage persona can empower some poets to share material onstage which they might not feel comfortable divulging if they felt truly 'present' onstage. Aliyah Hasinah observes that 'using a persona helps a lot of people,

<sup>211</sup> As with all of these strains, I am not arguing here that Josephine's actual 'authenticity of persona' exists or can be measured—authenticity is a subjective perception, rather than a singular, stable quality. My point is that Josephine's conscious persona mediation and manipulation of the audience as a means to facilitate an 'authentic' experience for them illustrates how constructed performances of 'authenticity' actually are, and again evidences that 'authenticity' cannot be understood as an implicit facet of this poetry.

especially those who struggle with mental health' because this separate persona serves as 'a safety net' and 'a barrier' meaning that the poet does not need to become entirely vulnerable onstage (Interview). In this sense the onstage persona may operate as a distancing mechanism, a distinct identity which the poet assumes in order to shield themselves from fully emotionally engaging with or taking responsibility for the material they perform. In Daniel Cockrill's experience, the ephemerality of the performance act—and thus the ability to adopt and discard this performance persona at will—allows spoken word poets to distinguish between their onstage and offstage selves: 'it's probably better if you want to live a normal life to be a different person onstage. Cos you can leave that person onstage and then you can come back and be someone different after' (Interview). The technique of distancing oneself from the emotional context of one's poetry while performing by adopting a distinct persona will be further discussed later in this chapter in the section regarding 'authenticity of emotion.'

### **Section Conclusion**

This section analysed the extent to which U.K. spoken word poets consider themselves to be 'authentic of persona' onstage and discussed the nuances of performing self through live poetry. It indicated that poets generally adopt onstage personas which are not distinct characters but rather heightened versions of their identities. In the next section I continue to explore the nuances of onstage 'presence' in U.K. spoken word poetry by analysing the extent to which poets perform 'spontaneity' and how this effect is valued in this genre.

### **Authenticity of Temporal State**

Sometimes you can be so convincing with your spontaneity that people ... don't appreciate how long it took to write. ... I read in this school, and a teacher came up to me afterwards and said 'Do you write them down or do you just say them into a dictophone?' about these – about these poems that I'd read and I was just thinking, f—,

no. Took me months. I did like 15 drafts of that one. But then another way you could interpret it is as a compliment, that it just sounds so natural.

—Caroline Bird (Interview)

Although spoken word poems are pre-composed and often pre-rehearsed works, much of the rhetoric surrounding the genre speculates as to—or even asserts—its extemporaneous nature. Stein, for instance, inaccurately describes spoken word events as occasions at which ‘poets recite their poems in spontaneous, sometimes partially ad-libbed performances’ (113). This section examines this assumption through proposing the concept of ‘authenticity of temporal state’: the perception that the poet is completely present onstage to the extent that they are spontaneously generating the material they are performing. While the previous section analysed the general sense that the poet is ‘being themselves’ onstage sans persona or filter, this section analyses the more extreme notion that material performed is not pre-composed or pre-choreographed, but rather extemporaneously issuing directly from the poet in real time.

‘Authenticity of temporal state’ is the perception of total unity between the authorial ‘I,’ performing ‘I,’ narrating ‘I,’ and narrated ‘I’ in the same temporal plane: the assumption that the poet is not recalling a pre-composed, pre-rehearsed poem but rather being completely present in the moment when they are onstage. This perception of the poet’s complete presence, even to the extent of composing or at least adapting material for that specific audience, may increase the audience’s general sense that the performance is ‘genuine’ rather than rote or apathetic. Within this section I argue that while many spoken word poets *perform* ‘authenticity of temporal state’ through various devices to make their material appear spontaneous, due to the convention of pre-composing and rehearsing material, these poets cannot actually *be* completely ‘authentic of temporal state.’ In the following analysis I describe the range of preparatory practices spoken word poets employ, from memorising, choreographing, and rigorously rehearsing poems to only pre-composing text to avoid becoming too familiar with the material. I observe that a certain level of spontaneity onstage is inevitable due to the unpredictability of live

performance but emphasise that often these performances are *designed* to appear casual and ‘natural.’ Again, somewhat paradoxically, to perform ‘authenticity’ in this regard—to appear casual and confident onstage while performing poetry—entails a great deal of rehearsal and skill.

### **The Legitimacy of ‘Authenticity of Temporal State’**

To what extent is any spoken word spectator’s perception of ‘authenticity of temporal state’ legitimate? In other words: to what extent do U.K. spoken word poets generally pre-plan their actions onstage versus consciously leaving them unplanned to allow for spontaneity in live performance? It is useful first to separate the text of the performance from the physicality involved. In the U.K. contemporary spoken word scene, poems are almost always pre-composed: freestyling or other means of ‘spontaneously’ generating material onstage are not typical practices.<sup>212</sup> Poets may make small alterations to poems onstage, or of course forget material or otherwise perform a slightly different text intentionally or accidentally; however, generally the text of the poems is fixed prior to the act of performance. Thus, using a simple definition in which pre-composition indicates ‘inauthenticity of temporal state’ and spontaneous improvisation indicates ‘authenticity of temporal state,’ the majority of U.K. spoken word poetry is technically ‘inauthentic of temporal state.’

Of course, as verbal arts scholarship has indicated, there is no binary dividing pre-composed and spontaneously improvised performance narratives, and thus no stable means of determining ‘authenticity of temporal state’ in this regard. Parry and Lord’s research into epic oral literature and ensuing theory of ‘oral formulaic composition’ revealed the extent to which even modes of apparently spontaneous composition such as freestyling are generally based on pre-rehearsed structures, thus rendering even these performance modes effectively ‘inauthentic of temporal state’ (see Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*). As Bauman recognises, the range of pre-composition in verbal arts is better represented as a spectrum: ‘completely novel and completely fixed texts represent the poles of an ideal continuum, and that between the poles lies the range of emergent text structures

<sup>212</sup> A small number of U.K. spoken word poets do freestyle as part of their practices, including Jah-Mir Early and Matt Panesh; however, they are in the minority.



to be found in empirical performance’ (“Verbal Art as Performance” 303). As with all of the strains of ‘authenticity’ introduced in this thesis, the extent to which spectators perceive a spoken word poem as pre-composed and thus ‘inauthentic of temporal state’ is dependent on the manner in which that poem is performed, rather than on the poet’s actual composition practice.

While the text of U.K. spoken word poems is generally pre-composed, the poet’s physicality—including vocal inflections, gestures, and overall body language—tends to be less premeditated. As previously discussed, many spoken word poets memorise their work, allowing them to make eye contact with the audience, freeing their hands for gestures, and arguably enabling participants’ experience of interpersonal engagement (Burnett 58); however, this is not a requirement of the genre. The majority of the U.K. spoken word poets I interviewed do not include movement and vocal planning as part of their regular practices.<sup>213</sup> My findings here echo Novak’s conclusion that within the U.K. live poetry scene, ‘few poets will choreograph their pieces in such a way as to include pre-planned symbolic gestures’ (*Live Poetry* 160). Many (including Lucy English and Leyla Josephine) characterised their movements onstage as ‘natural,’ occurring without conscious thought (Interviews). Sophia Blackwell describes her movements as ‘not choreographed. I watched myself in photos doing these gestures and I just think – why? You know, where does that come from?’ (Interview). In this sense, Blackwell’s onstage physicality could be considered ‘authentic of temporal state’ in that it is not pre-rehearsed and rather arises spontaneously within the moment of live performance.

Many spoken word poets choose not to choreograph the physicality for their poems because they personally value ‘authenticity of temporal state’: they want to be as ‘present’ as possible onstage in order to fully engage with their audiences. Sophia Walker holds this philosophy; when asked the extent to which she pre-plans her onstage act, she replied that she ‘always memorise[s] it’ and records herself in order

<sup>213</sup> The extent to which spoken word poets choreograph their movements and pre-set their vocal intonations, timings, etc. is culturally variable. Somers-Willett’s research on the U.S. slam scene suggests a higher level of prior movement preparation: she observes that ‘[s]lam poets may appear to improvise or spontaneously recite their work, but in actuality most of their performances are the product of painstaking hours of composition, memorization, choreography, and rehearsal’ (Somers-Willett 17; see also Aptowicz 204).

to fine-tune the vocal elements of the work, but seriously dislikes the idea of choreographing gestures (Interview). She explains that within this genre,

*what I like is sincerity, and I like – I like when we connect in, in this moment and I feel like this is a thing that’s happening to you in the same way that it’s happening for me. And it’s new to the both of us. And it’s not going to be repeated 900 other times. And it’s a thing that actually has weight and honesty and vulnerability. And it’s – it’s just a moment. You know? And as soon as it’s practised choreography, it’s not a moment. (Interview, emphasis added)*

For Walker, as well as many other U.K. spoken word poets, pre-planned physicality constitutes a filter distancing the poet from the audience and preventing ‘authentic’ interaction between them. Thus for some poets, performing ‘authenticity of temporal state’—or at least a state relatively close to it—is an integral element of their performance practice and closely related to their sense of ‘authenticity’ as artists.<sup>214</sup>

### **Techniques for Performing ‘Authenticity of Temporal State’**

Many of the poets I interviewed think that their audiences value perceiving ‘authenticity of temporal state’: poets think that audiences want to believe that the poet is behaving relatively spontaneously onstage. Spectators familiar with the genre may recognise the pre-composed, rehearsed nature of this work; however, they likely still appreciate the *illusion* of natural, extemporaneous creativity onstage. Consequently, poets who wish to be perceived as ‘authentic of temporal state’ may pre-plan verbal and physical elements of their performances to try to appear spontaneous (paradoxically).<sup>215</sup> A common technique for performing ‘authenticity of temporal state,’ as Middleton observes, is that ‘many poets read as if they were uttering the lines for the first time’ (“The Contemporary Poetry Reading” 280). This effect is facilitated when spoken word poets perform from memory: if the poet is

<sup>214</sup> Through introducing the concept of ‘authenticity of engagement,’ Chapter 5 will further examine techniques spoken word poets and event organisers can use to reinforce the perception of active, genuine interaction between participants during spoken word performances.

<sup>215</sup> Double finds a similar effect in the U.K. stand-up comedy scene, arguing that ‘in almost every stand-up comedy act ... the pre-planned is passed off as the spontaneous’ (178; see 175-99 for further discussion on planned and genuine spontaneity within that genre).

reading from a book (or other prompt), it is obvious that the text has been pre-composed, whereas when the poet has no book, the audience may entertain the notion that their speech is unsourced and extemporaneous.

Spoken word poets may also encourage spectators to perceive them as fully present onstage by adapting material to the specific performance context. This can include changing the text of the piece for the context (i.e. changing any referenced locations to the performance city or venue), inserting seemingly spontaneous asides to the poem, and engaging with the audience directly during the poem. Poets may also insert intentional ‘mistakes’ in their work in order to enhance the notion that it is extemporaneous, rather than thoroughly rehearsed. Novak observes this effect in her analysis of Jackie Hagan’s poem “Coffee or Tea.” At one point in the poem Hagan ‘pauses for a moment as though she were struggling for words,’ leading Novak to comment that ‘[t]his phrasing makes her speech appear hesitant, spontaneous and authentic ... This apparent authenticity also forges a stronger connection between Hagan’s performance self and the experiences of her fictive speaker, who thus appears not quite as fictive after all’ (*Live Poetry* 226). I will further discuss this technique in my case study of Jack Macmillan’s “Paracetamol” at the conclusion of this chapter.

Another technique spoken word poets may use to perform ‘authenticity of temporal state’ is to segue as seamlessly as possible between the introduction to a poem and the poem itself. If a poet physically distinguishes between the introduction and the poem (i.e. stepping back from the mic then forwards again, exhaling deeply, pausing and shifting gaze, etc.) then there is a clear physical and temporal break between ‘normal’ behaviour (the introduction) and the poem. If, however, the poet rolls directly into the poem without altering their physicality, this may encourage the perception that the poems are spontaneous speech acts, thus reinforcing not only total ‘authenticity of temporal state’ but also ‘authenticity of origin’ and ‘authenticity of persona.’ Leyla Josephine’s performance of “I Think She Was a She” at TEDxWhitehall provides an example of this technique: she flows directly from her contextualising remarks into the first line of the poem without physically distinguishing between the two speech modes (“TEDx Whitehall Women Leyla

Josephine | Leyla Josephine | TEDxWhitehallWomen”).<sup>216</sup>

American poet Neil Hilborn’s piece “OCD,” one of the most highly viewed spoken word poems on YouTube,<sup>217</sup> exemplifies the performance of ‘authenticity of temporal state.’<sup>218</sup> The poem is a first-person description of the speaker’s romantic relationship dissolving due to the effects of their OCD. Hilborn’s performance in the version of the video which went viral (and across other iterations of the poem online) displays emotional extremes (from joy to distress) and includes a performance of the verbal and physical tics common to OCD. As van der Starre observes in her analysis of viewer engagement with this viral video, much of the online engagement (i.e. YouTube comments, blog posts, etc.) concerned the ‘authenticity’ of Hilborn’s narrative and performance: ‘some conclude that Hilborn’s story is “real”; others complain that the tics are “fake”’ (62). Regardless of whether viewers perceive ‘authenticity of temporal state’—i.e. believe that Hilborn is genuinely tic-ing during the live performance rather than performing choreographed motions—his performance of ‘authenticity of temporal state’ reinforces the authenticities of origin, autobiographical self, narrative, and persona within the poem by encouraging the viewer to perceive Hilborn as not only the performer but also the author, narrator, and (fully present) narrated subject.

### **‘Authenticity of Temporal State’ as Dependent on Liveness**

The perception of ‘authenticity of temporal state’ is largely dependent on the ephemeral context of live performance. Spectators watching recordings of spoken

<sup>216</sup> American spoken word poet Buddy Wakefield is renowned for using this technique. He frequently performs sets in which he speaks for the majority of the time without any indication of where a poem begins or ends, leaving it ambiguous whether he is extemporaneously speaking to the audience versus reciting pre-composed material.

<sup>217</sup> Since it was uploaded in July 2013, the single most popular recording of the poem has been viewed over 15 million times (as of August 2020) (“Neil Hilborn - “OCD” (Rustbelt 2013”).

<sup>218</sup> While Hilborn is not part of the U.K. spoken word scene and thus technically outwith the scope of this thesis, I use “OCD” as an example because it is an excellent indicator of ‘authenticity of temporal state’ and because, due to its popularity, there is considerable documentation of spectators’ reactions to the poem (i.e. online comments across various platforms) and some scholarship on it (van der Starre). I do not mean to imply that the U.S. and U.K. scenes are identical—as I have noted, popular styles and themes differ culturally—but in my opinion the performance and perception of this particular strain of ‘authenticity’ is similar enough across cultural contexts to warrant the use of this example.

word poetry online are often able to access multiple recordings of the same poem in different performance contexts. This allows them to compare these iterations of the poem and potentially to observe that what they initially perceived as spontaneous is actually a scripted, choreographed facet of the poem. For instance, using the previous example, one may access multiple iterations of “OCD” online and view Hilborn performing tics in a relatively consistent manner across separate performances, suggesting that these tics are not spontaneous, uncontrollable manifestations of OCD but instead choreographed elements of the poem.

This reiterates an important point: the notion of consciously planning and rehearsing these techniques for conveying ‘authenticity of temporal state’ is paradoxical, as it effectively constitutes the premeditation of spontaneity. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that by planning these gestures, the audience will actually interpret them as spontaneous; instead, this practice might backfire and reveal the rehearsed nature of the work. Finally, as with all of the strains of ‘authenticity’ discussed within this thesis, the perception of ‘authenticity of temporal state’ is not conditional on the poet’s actual level of preparation or spontaneity. For instance, in her interview Jenny Lindsay admires what she perceives as Caroline Bird’s highly pre-planned physicality: ‘[Bird] doesn’t, you know, throw herself around the stage or anything, everything is very thought through, the hand gestures, where she even looks in the audience, all of that is like totally rehearsed’ (Interview). However, in her interview Bird states that she deliberately *does not* prepare gestures, illustrating again the subjectivity of the perception of ‘authenticity’ within this art form.

### **Section Conclusion**

‘Authenticity of temporal state’ is perhaps the most constructed of the ‘authenticities’ presented in this thesis: poets are rarely behaving entirely spontaneously onstage (particularly during poems), but the performance of spontaneity is commonplace in the genre. While displays of apparent extemporaneity are impressive and may attract audiences excited about the live, dynamic presence of the poet, the prevalence of performative ‘authenticity of temporal state’ in contemporary spoken word also has a more concerning side effect. As Caroline Bird

describes in the epigraph to this chapter, when poets appear to easily ‘compose’ material in the moment, some spectators may take this at face value: literally believing that material is freestyled rather than meticulously pre-composed and rehearsed. This assumption, alongside the assumption of the other ‘authenticities’ detailed in this thesis, can lead to the perception of spoken word as a relatively easy, non-skilled practice: effectively, the effort it takes to make an act appear effortless is a double-edged sword. This concerning effect, unfortunately prevalent within much of the rhetoric concerning contemporary spoken word in the U.K., will be further analysed in Chapter 6.

## **Emotional Authenticity**

You may not be feeling that emotion, you may not be feeling your mother dying when you walk into the auditorium, but you’ve got to embody that.

— Pete the Temp (Interview)

When Connor Macleod appears joyous, reflective, deeply mournful onstage during “Flowers,” is he experiencing those emotions in real time? Does the act of performing a poem inspired by personal loss automatically conjure these emotions in him as he performs? Or is his onstage emotional affect a calculated act, a display designed to manipulate the audience to sympathy?

This chapter investigates the nuances of emotional affect in live spoken word performance. I propose the concept of ‘emotional authenticity’: the perception that the poet’s outward displays of emotion during their performance are ‘genuine’ rather than acted. Effectively, this is the assumption that whatever emotion the poet is showing onstage, they are feeling in real time during the performance. As the audience cannot access the poet’s internal emotional state, there is no way for them to accurately gauge whether the poet’s emotional display is ‘authentic’ or performed (nor, possibly, for the poet themselves to gauge how ‘authentic’ this display is). Equally, there are no guaranteed effective mechanisms for projecting ‘emotional authenticity,’ as its perception is highly subjective and there may be little parity

between the poet's sense of their 'emotional authenticity' versus an audience member's perception of it. What one spectator perceives as the poet's voice breaking due to sadness could be interpreted by another spectator as the poet deliberately acting choked up in order to elicit the audience's sympathy.

Despite the subjective and unpredictable nature of 'emotional authenticity,' the data I collected yielded several interesting conclusions regarding its performance and perception. First, 'emotional authenticity' appears to be highly valued within the U.K. spoken word sphere: audiences and poets alike appreciate the notion (even if illusory) that poets being genuinely, transparently emotional onstage. Furthermore, this strain of 'authenticity' is morally fraught among U.K. spoken word poets, with many considering 'emotionally inauthentic' performances—for example, making oneself cry onstage—to be a breach of the ethics of the genre. However, the majority of the spoken word poets I interviewed revealed that they 'act' emotions or consciously prompt themselves into a certain emotional state prior to performing. In this sense, most spoken word poets acknowledge using the practice which in others they consider somewhat suspect. Ultimately, this section emphasises the constructed nature of 'emotional authenticity' within contemporary spoken word poetry and the range of practices for performing it and thus (as with all of the strains of 'authenticity' discussed here) urges scepticism in perceiving it.

### **Valuing 'Emotional Authenticity'**

Spoken word poetry is often described as a platform for unfiltered emotional expression; poetry slam founder Marc Smith characterises it as a 'sounding board for [the poet's] free voice and unfettered emotions' (Smith and Kraynak, *Take the Mic* 32). Sometimes the act of performing spoken word is conflated with expressing undiluted emotions: a *Wall Street Journal* article exclaimed that at the U.S. National Slam Final in 1998, the poets were 'still *emoting* after three gruelling nights of preliminary rounds' (A. S. Lewis n.p., emphasis added). Reviews of spoken word often call attention to the performance of emotion within this work and tend to assume the poet's 'emotional authenticity.' For instance, a review of Sara Hirsch's solo show at the 2015 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, "How Was It For You," compliments '[t]here's something very real and raw and authentic about what she's

doing' (Peacock n.p.). The reviewer terms the performance a 'confessional,' describing it as 'heartfelt and truthful as she puts words to the emotional and sexual conflicts going on inside' (Ibid).

However, this review also criticises that 'people love the baring of a soul, but one senses she might still be too close to her subject to fully do it justice' (Ibid). This review interprets the performance of emotions in Hirsch's show as 'authentic' and, while praising this perceived vulnerability to a certain extent, also uses it as evidence that Hirsch is not emotionally detached enough from the material to make high quality artwork. Hirsch is a highly trained actor and experienced spoken word poet, and "How Was It For You" was completely scripted, blocked, and otherwise carefully crafted.<sup>219</sup> Regardless of Hirsch's actual emotional presence during performances, I argue that her personal attachment with the subject matter of the show should not be perceived as a hindrance to her ability to craft high-quality artistic material. Thus the perception of poets as 'emotionally authentic' can be a double-edged sword: on one hand (as I go on to argue) it can garner the poet praise for being fully 'present' and vulnerable with an audience, while on the other hand it can be used as apparent evidence of a poet's lack of craft: a sense that they are 'diarising' and being raw onstage rather than crafting professional, polished performances.<sup>220</sup>

Although the perception of spoken word poets as emotionally effusive has been considered a weakness of the genre by some critics, perceptions of 'emotional authenticity' appear to be valued by spoken word audiences and the poets themselves. 'Emotional authenticity' intersects with the other strains detailed in this thesis to reinforce an overall sense of the poet's 'authenticity.' Novak has argued that the perception of the poet's emotional engagement in their work encourages the audience to enter the autobiographical pact: 'a poet's performance style, especially his/her perceived emotional involvement in the material, gives the audience more or less reason to assume a biographical connection between author and text' (*Live*

<sup>219</sup> I base this assessment on my experience viewing the live show twice during the 2015 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, on informal conversations with Hirsch regarding her creative process, and on my 2017 interview with Hirsch.

<sup>220</sup> This effect—perceived 'authenticity' being considered mutually exclusive to craft—will be discussed further in Chapter 6.



*Poetry* 193). For instance, when Kathryn O’Driscoll appears angry and grief-stricken during her poem “Something Special” concerning the bullying of her disabled sister and her sister’s passing, the audience is encouraged to believe that she is emotional because she is actively recalling and/or experiencing her actual anger and grief. Because her emotional performance appears consistent with the poem’s sombre narrative, this encourages audiences to perceive the poem to be autobiographical and true. If O’Driscoll were to perform the material with a flat affect—or, more bizarrely, expressing joy or whimsy—the performance would likely appear ‘inauthentic,’ causing the audience to consider whether the material is actually important to O’Driscoll, or even whether it is autobiographical.

Based on my data, the majority of U.K. spoken word poets believe that their audiences want to perceive them as emotionally connected with their work rather than distant from it while performing. Rob Auton indicates that audiences at his solo shows appreciate perceiving his emotional vulnerability: discussing a section of his 2018 show “Hair Show,” he explains

I was in bits every single time... And people seem to get off on that... People want to see something genuine. Because there’s so many shows at the [Edinburgh] Fringe that people are just performing and not putting any heart in it. If you connect with your heart in your show, then people think that you’re exposing yourself fully to them, then they really appreciate it. (Interview)

The valuing of ‘emotional authenticity’ is not limited to spoken word audiences but shared by poets themselves: many of the poets interviewed upheld the importance of ‘emotional authenticity’ within their practices. They believe that actively engaging with the emotional tone and content of their material while performing it generally yielded a better performance.<sup>221</sup> Many poets deem this live emotional engagement with the material to be an essential component of their artistic practice. Lucy English claims that ‘you do have to connect to the original emotion, cos that’s what you’re

<sup>221</sup> The interview data cited here were generally gathered in response to the queries ‘When you’re performing a poem, do you feel as though you need to connect to the emotions that the piece is about, or the emotions that you felt while writing the poem, in order to deliver an effective performance?’ and (if the poet replied ‘yes’ to that query) ‘Do you retire poems if you feel as though you can’t emotionally connect with them anymore?’

expressing and that's what people pick up on ... if I'm telling a story about my mother dying or something like that, it's a sad story. ... I have to feel that sadness for it to be an effective performance' (Interview). English's claim that audiences 'pick up on' her level of connection with the emotions which prompted the poetry suggests her belief that the audience can perceive—and values—'emotional authenticity.' She and others indicate that this re-engagement with the emotional context of the material is necessary to convey that emotional context to the audience; that simply 'acting' or 'performing' the emotion would not be sufficient in order to express this emotion.

Several poets interviewed consider having an emotional connection to the material to be so important that they regularly retire material to which they feel they can no longer connect. As Peter Hayhoe describes, the ability to connect emotionally with a poem can 'dissipate, in a way; it slowly gets weaker' as time passes and the poem becomes more rote (Interview).<sup>222</sup> For poets who value 'emotional authenticity' in their practices either because they believe it yields better performances or for moral reasons, losing this ability to 'connect' to material is sufficient reason not to perform it. Pete the Temp shares that he 'definitely need[s] to reconnect with the emotion. And if it's not there anymore, then it's out of the set,' and describes poems to which he can no longer emotionally connect as 'dead'<sup>223</sup> (Interview). He explains that 'it's not a text I'm delivering - it's not a physical script I'm delivering as much as an energetic performance,' suggesting that the poet's reconnection with the emotional content of the poem is an integral element of the poem itself (Ibid).

However, not all U.K. spoken word poets feel that this emotional re-connection is essential to their performances. Some contend that they do not need to be fully emotionally present onstage because they have already performed the emotional labour of the poem while composing it. Dominic Berry claims that he 're-

<sup>222</sup> Maddalena's psychotherapeutic research into the effects of spoken word participation on various aspects of mental health in the U.S. also discovered this effect: 'participants in this study noted that they can repeat the emotional experience of performing a "special poem" so many times that they feel divorced from the original emotion of the poem and that their performance can become rote' (227).

<sup>223</sup> Michelle Madsen also used this language, claiming that 'if you're not having a connection with a poem, then it is dead, in a way' (Interview).

embod[ies] the emotions at home when I'm writing' and consequently does not feel the need to revisit any memories in the act of live performance (Interview). Additionally, as was the case with 'authenticity of persona,' some spoken word poets actively avoid being fully 'emotionally authentic' because to do so would be detrimental to their mental health. Although the U.K. spoken word poets I interviewed vary in the extent to which they value and perform 'emotional authenticity,' they all agree that audiences appreciate *perceiving* it.

### **Subjectivity of Perceiving 'Emotional Authenticity'**

As with all of the strains of 'authenticity' discussed in this thesis, the perception of 'emotional authenticity' is highly subjective; as mentioned earlier, what may appear to one spectator as a poet 'baring their heart' onstage by choking up during a sad poem may appear to another as a poet crassly faking an emotional performance in order to achieve success. There are thus no clear techniques for the performance of 'emotional authenticity,' other than generally for the poet to maintain an emotional performance which matches the emotional tone of the material (i.e. to not laugh during a poem about grief), although even then there may be exceptions based on the material. Additionally, the act of fully emotionally engaging with material may not necessarily yield a better performance; as Ben Fagan shares, 'depending on circumstances, I definitely kind of reengage with [the emotions in the piece] and sometimes it's added to the performance and sometimes it's detracted from it' (Interview). If, for instance, fully emotionally engaging causes a performer to forget the poem or to lose the ability to speak clearly, the performance arguably becomes less effective. Francesca Beard emphasises that effusive displays of emotion may detract from the audience's ability to enjoy the performance:

I don't think that people really want to see someone performing something that may be emotional and basically breaking down as they're performing it. Because that's sort of, again, it's a form of, if you like, emotional blackmail from a performer ... if you're overly emotionally engaged with it, or it has its hook right in you, then it's – you can't really perform' (Interview).

In Beard's perspective, it is important for spoken word poets to find a balance

between expressing emotion and not allowing oneself to become overwhelmed by it to the detriment of their performances.

Furthermore, to be fully emotionally present within a poem during live performance is arguably not possible. When performing, the poet's 'authentic' emotional state may be nervousness, boredom, apathy, or simply a lack of focus on the emotional tone of the material; they may be preoccupied with remembering the poem, scanning the room, adapting material suitably, etc. As Francesca Beard describes, 'emotional inauthenticity' can actually be conducive to effective performance technique: 'ideally, when you perform, you know something so well that it can almost be on autopilot. Because that's when you can actually listen to what's happening in the room' (Interview). Thus it is more apt to argue that, *rather than appreciating 'emotional authenticity,' audiences appreciate emotional displays which seem appropriate to the performed material.* Spoken word poets who are conscious of the valuing of emotional expression within spoken word are thus incentivised to perform in a manner which will appear emotionally appropriate to the material, even if this means creating distance between their 'actual' internal emotional state and their projected emotional state. Again, this is consistent with each strain of 'authenticity' analysed within this thesis: what matters is not the *actual* 'authenticity'—in this case, the actual emotional state of the performer onstage—but the *appearance* of the performer as 'authentic.'

Because there is no way to ascertain a performer's 'true' internal emotional state, the presence or absence of actual 'emotional authenticity' is inconsequential to the audience's perception of 'emotional authenticity.' Although many spoken word poets articulate the importance of attempting to be 'emotionally authentic' within their own practices, several admit that the audience may not be able to distinguish between 'emotionally authentic' and 'emotionally inauthentic' performances. Kate Fox and Keith Jarrett both shared experiences in which they felt emotionally disconnected from the material they were performing, yet their audiences expressed feeling deeply affected by the material. This reinforces the fact that, in Fox's terms, 'there's not always a complete correlation' between the performer's experience and the audience's perception of 'emotional authenticity' (Interview).

## Consciously Prompting ‘Emotional Authenticity’

Somewhat paradoxically, for the majority of the spoken word poets I interviewed, performing ‘emotional authenticity’ onstage does not come naturally. Instead, they share that it requires the poet’s conscious effort to enter an ‘appropriate’ emotional state for the performance of a certain piece. For instance, Kevin P. Gilday has developed a practice of doing ‘visualisations onstage of what it is I’m kind of discussing’—memories, images, or feelings—in order to ‘tap into’ the emotions of his work (Interview). Kate Fox similarly describes working to evoke certain emotional states prior to performing certain material. Describing her practice performing a poem regarding her father’s passing, she claims:

I have become adept at being about to access the emotion of the poem that – or the basically real sort of deep sadness and loss that I feel about my dad dying. To access it just enough so that I can feel it and not get overwhelmed by it. And sometimes I will think quite consciously onstage ‘Ooh, I must make sure I do that and access the emotion just enough.’ (Interview)

She describes this emotional engagement as a means of enhancing the experience for the audience: ‘I think poems can work perfectly well without me attempting to access some of that stuff. They can work well enough. But if I was to seek to do something a bit more alchemical and transformative, I’m aware that it’s worth investing more’ (Ibid).<sup>224</sup>

The majority of the spoken word poets I interviewed frame their attempts to be ‘emotionally authentic’ as somehow re-embodiment, recalling, tapping into, or otherwise accessing a latent or previously held emotional state, rather than acting or otherwise ‘faking’ these emotions. As Connor Macleod articulates, ‘I don’t feel like I’m lying to an audience. I feel like I’m just trying to capture the exact emotion that I

<sup>224</sup> In a rather extreme example of spoken word poets consciously working to enter a more emotionally charged state for live performance, during the preparations for the U.S. National Poetry Slam in 2016, ‘at New York University, coach Mahogany Browne put her team through an eight-week poetry boot camp that included three-minute wall-sits while reciting poetry. “I want them to tap into the urgency and pain of the piece in a way that’s more genuine,” she says’ (Elinson n.p.). While most spoken word poets in the U.K. use less physically rigorous techniques, such strategies illustrate the high value placed upon ‘emotional authenticity’ within the genre.

had when I was writing these pieces' (Interview). Bibi June expands upon this idea:

When I get up onstage and do a sad poem, that's—that is still—maybe not who I am at this very moment, but it is the person who I was when I wrote that poem, or the person who I was in learning how to perform that poem. And it - they are always my emotions I'm tapping into, *they are always very personal sort of reactionary emotions rather than put-on emotions.* (Interview, emphasis added)

However, some poets do characterise this practice of emotional performance as 'acting;' for instance, Colin Hassard's preparation process involves 'rehears[ing] the lines, the breaths, the movements. The emotion, if you can rehearse emotion' (Interview). He describes how, while performing a poem regarding his friend's father's illness,

I'm not thinking about – oh, that my friend's dad has Alzheimer's. I'm not getting sad about that. ... I suppose you can fake it in some way. Probably shouldn't be telling that. Yeah, you can fake that emotion. Because you've rehearsed it so much. When you're writing it, you've dealt with those emotions yourself, so you're able to project them on the audience when you've got to that point. (Ibid)

Hassard's sense that revealing his practice of rehearsing emotions is a taboo topic—'probably shouldn't be telling you that'—illustrates the deeply held valuing of 'emotional authenticity' within the spoken word sphere.

### **The Ethics of 'Emotional Inauthenticity'**

As with many of the other strains of 'authenticity' within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry, the performance or lack of 'emotional authenticity' is ethically fraught. For some poets, to in any way alter one's 'natural' emotional state in order to perform a poem is considered disingenuous and a breach of the ethics of the space. These poets consider 'emotional authenticity' to be a core element of the genre and a mark of respect for the spectators who want to perceive the poetry as confessional and true. For instance, Dean Atta characterises the idea of 'forc[ing] myself back into the emotional space just to add something to the performance' in negative moral terms: 'I think that's really phony and dishonest ... You're cheapening your

experience' (Interview). Specifically, many spoken word poets decry what they perceived as a trend to act sadness onstage. Jenny Lindsay describes witnessing fake tears, pretending that you have tried to commit suicide when you haven't, pretending you have experienced sexual violence when you haven't, all of these things I've seen in spoken word and they are horrible. Because an audience will assume that they're true. (Interview)

Kate Fox characterises this 'pretending to cry' style as 'the performance of extreme authenticity signalled via emotional markers that are embodied in the face, voice, and gestures' and claims that this style seems to have grown more prevalent in the U.K. spoken word scene (Interview). Fox strongly condemns this performance technique, summarising that she 'would much rather that someone didn't fake it and just gave me a slightly distanced performance, than performed it and I perceived they weren't really really feeling it. ... I hate being acted at' (Ibid).

As these statements indicate, the perception of 'emotional authenticity' does not only have aesthetic implications but also influences moral judgments of the poet's integrity. Some (such as Gilday) consider performances resulting from actively prompting oneself into an 'appropriate' emotional state to be more 'authentic,' whereas others (such as Atta) consider attempts at altering one's emotional state for a live performance to inauthentic the emotional performance. The distinction between allowing oneself to naturally be overcome by the emotions evoked in one's poem versus purposefully 'acting' or adopting those emotions in order to engage the audience is as blurry as it is ethically fraught. Joelle Taylor's description of her experience performing her piece "Everything You Have Ever Lost," concerning the suicide of one of her students, illustrates these complications. While Taylor usually avoids fully emotionally engaging with her more traumatic material, she describes one occasion in which she decided to

completely remember it. Completely remember the process I went through when I got the phone call that my lovely boy had took his life. Which meant that I cried. And I could tell that people were a bit horrified. And it's like, mate, crying is OK. Poet – it's not put on. If I'm going onstage and being like [whimpers] and it's artifice, then

that's disgusting. But if you're getting onstage and you're getting yourself – for me, it's about inhabiting a piece. (Interview)

Again, poets' perceptions of their peers' 'emotional authenticity' are no more scientific than spectators' perceptions; there is no way of accurately ascertaining whether or not a performer's external emotional display is 'genuine' (or even whether being 'genuine' in this fashion is possible).

The wide range of practices for evoking and/or performing 'emotional authenticity' within spoken word poetry, and the variety of perspectives on what is ethically acceptable, lead to no simple conclusions: as with all of the 'authenticities' examined in this thesis, 'emotional authenticity' is a complex, contradictory concept which is simultaneously central to the genre and utterly subjective in its expression and discernment.

### **Section Conclusion**

This section analysed the complex notion of 'emotional authenticity' in contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry: I explained the various ways in which this strain is defined and valued, observed the range of techniques for performing it, and noted the ethical ramifications for perceived 'emotional inauthenticity.' Throughout this chapter I have emphasised the distinction between the performance and perception of fully embodied onstage presence. I have indicated that the extent to which spoken word poetry which appears spontaneous, effortless, and emotionally experienced generally entails intensive composition, rehearsal, and prompting (or distancing). In the next section I provide an example demonstrating how the three strains of 'authenticity' proposed in this chapter can be performed, perceived, and contextualised.

### **Case Study: Jack Macmillan's "Paracetamol"**

I conclude this chapter with a case study of Jack Macmillan's poem "Paracetamol," which performs each of the authenticities of presence detailed above to compelling effect. Here I rely upon two video recordings of live performances of



the poem at UniSlam 2018 in Leicester and at UniSlam 2019 in Birmingham,<sup>225</sup> a transcript of the poem sent to me by Macmillan (“Paracetamol”), and a brief email interview with Macmillan concerning his performance practice.<sup>226</sup> These multiple iterations of the poem allow for comparisons across different contexts, which is helpful for the purposes of this chapter as it indicates which elements of the poem may be consistent and/or fixed (and thus possibly pre-planned) and which vary across contexts and thus could be more extemporaneous.<sup>227</sup>

“Paracetamol” is a first-person poem in which the speaker gradually describes, through extensive use of metaphor, his sister’s suicide attempt and the aftermath. It begins by humorously describing the speaker’s dislike for several concepts—the lack of train digital displays, disappointing meals, broken party poppers, and paracetamol—then as the poem progresses and the tragedy is revealed, these concepts are recast metaphorically in a more sobering light. While the poem has no set metre, it makes frequent use of internal rhyme and has a strong sense of rhythm. In terms of performance, the piece is highly dynamic and physically engaged. It is quick-paced and almost rap-like at times,<sup>228</sup> as when Macmillan quickly rattles off plosives: ‘We would pop a couple paracetamol pills / before we went to the park to play / because that way, we could play all day.’<sup>229</sup> It uses dramatic, frequent shifts in volume for effect: at times Macmillan is literally shouting, at times at a near whisper.

The two performances I draw upon here employ similar vocal dynamics but differ slightly in Macmillan’s physical actions. The deviations are likely influenced by the different performance contexts: the 2018 performance took place in a small

<sup>225</sup> The video from 2018’s UniSlam is not available publicly online, but the video from 2019’s UniSlam is (“UniSlam 2019 | Team Strathclyde | Paracetamol”). Both are accessible via the link in Appendix B.

<sup>226</sup> As I did not interview Macmillan in 2017 as part of my primary data collection, I conducted a targeted interview with him via email in March 2019 for the purposes of this case study (“Re: Research questions”).

<sup>227</sup> Of course, as these videos were recorded one year apart, feasibly Macmillan might have edited the choreography between these two performances, rather than the differences between them being indicative of spontaneity; however, his communications with me clarify that this is not the case.

<sup>228</sup> This piece is indicative of a performance style that has emerged recently in the Glasgow spoken word sphere characterised by fast pacing and widely varying vocal dynamics. Much of Sam Small’s work uses this style, as well as some of Leyla Josephine’s, Ross McFarlane’s, and of course Jack Macmillan’s.

<sup>229</sup> I have lineated the excerpts quoted here based on my perceptions of Macmillan’s breath patterns and pauses.

lecture hall with no microphone, whereas the 2019 performance took place in a large theatre, on a stage with a microphone on a stand. In the 2018 performance, Macmillan moves constantly, pacing and gesticulating seemingly wildly, his gaze shifting around the room restlessly. In the 2019 performance, however, his physicality appears slightly less frenetic: he still gestures extensively with his hands, but he is rooted to a single spot by the microphone stand, occasionally grasping the mic as if to anchor himself there. His focal points shift as he makes eye contact around the theatre, but he appears more settled, his performance seemingly more controlled.<sup>230</sup>

It is challenging to gauge the extent to which “Paracetamol” performs ‘authenticity of persona,’ given that both videos I draw upon here were performances at poetry slams, and thus Macmillan did not directly contextualise the work prior to performing it. For instance, he was not able to roll directly from speaking ‘normally’ into performing the poem, because at poetry slams one’s time begins as soon as one begins speaking, and thus poets generally do not introduce their poems. However, Macmillan uses first-person voice and performs under his given name, rather than explicitly adopting a separate persona.

The poem strongly performs ‘authenticity of emotion’: in both performances analysed here Macmillan appears to be ‘genuinely’ emotionally engaged with the material (in my subjective opinion). Roughly halfway through the poem, the speaker describes the doctor at the hospital showing the family a medical graph indicating whether or not his sister will survive her suicide attempt: ‘If she’s anywhere above that line she’s fine / anywhere below, then—.’ His speech abruptly cuts off and he looks up and swallows, implying that the prospect of her death is unthinkable and thus impossible to say aloud. In the later sections of the poem concerning the aftermath of the suicide attempt, Macmillan appears agitated, his voice rising to the point of shouting. Then his voice quietens and his demeanour becomes more calm as he delivers the final lines (a refrain of earlier lines) in a sombre tone.

<sup>230</sup> Interestingly, although these performances differ in terms of physical engagement, they have the exact same duration (2:18).



Figure #1: Macmillan performing an ‘error’ during the line ‘She asks me what it’s like to live at home with my mum and my dad / [gesture] / asks what it’s like to live at home with my mum / and her new boyfriend.’ Still from UniSlam 2018, filmed by Tyrone Lewis.

“Paracetamol” also uses several devices to strongly perform ‘authenticity of temporal state.’ First, the poem is performed from memory, enabling Macmillan to gesticulate freely and to make eye contact with audience members, potentially facilitating the audience’s perception that it could be a spontaneous composition. Most notably, the poem performs ‘authenticity of temporal state’ by including deliberate ‘errors.’ Conjuring a memory, the speaker states ‘I remember once / I was having this really disgusting meal / with my mum, my dad, and my sister / [gesture] my mum and my sister’ (“UniSlam 2019 | Team Strathclyde | Paracetamol”). In the 2018 performance, Macmillan snaps his fingers and turns his head in this moment as if he has made a mistake in the poem before immediately correcting it. This device both shares narrative information (the fact that the speaker’s father is absent and that this is recent enough for the speaker to accidentally forget his absence) and implies that the events the poem describes are autobiographical and current. Later in the poem Macmillan repeats this device: ‘She [the doctor] asks her what it’s like to live at home with my mum and my dad / [gesture] / asks her what it’s like to live at home with my mum and her new boyfriend’ (Ibid). This time Macmillan makes the gesture more forcefully, pressing his fist against his forehead as if in frustration and pain

(fig. 1). In the 2019 performance, the gestures are slightly different—the first time, he closes his eyes and shakes his head quickly; the second time, he closes his eyes and seems to quickly mouth a curse—but the text is the same, indicating that these ‘errors’ are deliberate, in fact vital, elements of the poem, rather than the accidents they superficially appear to be.

When interviewed regarding his performance practice, Macmillan indicated that, like the majority of U.K. spoken word poets, he considers his performance while he is composing and rehearsing a piece but generally does not choreograph movements. He shares that ‘there are some movements that I will do every time I perform a piece, but I have never planned anything like that out. It has just come naturally through repeated performances’ (“Re: Research questions”). Thus although the text of the poem may have been pre-set, the performance techniques Macmillan uses arose over time, becoming entrenched elements of “Paracetamol” conveying ‘authenticity of temporal state’ despite their constancy over multiple iterations of the work.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter considered how spoken word poets perform presence in their presentations of persona, spontaneity, and emotional authenticity. It concludes that the appearance of impromptu, emotional expression onstage belies the intensive preparation required to craft these performances: a great deal of work goes into the appearance of spontaneity and engagement. The next chapter pans out to examine how societal value systems and prejudices affect performances and perceptions of ‘authenticity’ within contemporary spoken word, specifically in terms of the poet’s apparent voice, identity, and motivations for performing.

## Chapter 4: Socially Mediated Authenticities

What is at stake in so much public performance poetry is cultural identity itself - markers of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality.

—Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance* 7

As this thesis has demonstrated, ‘authenticity’ is not a stable, singular quality existing independent of context: rather, its nature is wholly dependent on the societal, social sphere in which it is performed and perceived. Stereotypes and other societal perceptions of what is ‘real’ provide the basis for our perceptions of ‘authenticity,’ and thus this concept cannot be analysed independently of the context in which it functions. Within this chapter, I consider how social, moral, and aesthetic value systems have affected what is considered ‘authentic’ within the contemporary U.K. spoken word sphere. Furthermore, I examine how these value systems have shaped the material which poets feel incentivised to perform, including the way in which they express their identities through their poetry and the commissions they feel comfortable taking.

This chapter begins with a relatively short section introducing the concept of ‘authenticity of voice,’ which is the perception that spoken word poets are not copying popular styles but rather writing and performing about topics that matter to them in voices that are ‘authentically’ theirs. The next section, regarding ‘authenticity of identity,’ is the lengthiest, most thorough consideration of an ‘authenticity’ strain in this thesis, due to the complex and sensitive nature of the subject. My concept of ‘authenticity of identity’ contains multiple interlinking theories, but effectively concerns how spoken word poets’ visible and audible identity markers affect both the extent to which they are perceived as ‘authentic; and the material which they feel incentivised to perform. Finally I propose the idea of ‘authenticity of motivation,’ which is the perception that poets are not motivated in their creative practices by the allure of commercial or career success but rather by more ‘pure’ intentions such as creative inspiration and activism. I conclude this chapter with a case study of Keith Jarrett’s poem “Hip Hop Salvation” analysing its

performance not only of the ‘authenticities’ described in this chapter but all nine of the strains in my taxonomy introduced thus far. Again, throughout this chapter I demonstrate how heavily performative and culturally contingent each of these strains of ‘authenticity’ is and foreground how the valorisation of these ‘authenticities’ can be harmful both to individual poets and the spoken word scene more generally.

## **Authenticity of Voice**

There’s a lot of great work which has that poetry voice thing. But—and it’s good, it’s really good, but it just ... I just feel like it then becomes this cultural product that people listen to because they – they like spoken word and this is spoken word, so they consume it in this – this is what I like, so I’m gonna have [it].

—Francesca Beard (Interview)

Just as ‘speak your truth’ is a common invocation within contemporary spoken word, so too is ‘use your voice’: the call for poets not to appropriate clichéd, popular styles and mannerisms, but rather to express themselves in their ‘natural’ voices. In this discourse, ‘voice’ often serves as a synonym for style, but also has deeper connotations; as Wheeler observes in her research into the concept of voice in contemporary poetry, ‘voice is also a metaphor for originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence within printed poetry,’ and, I would argue, spoken word poetry (3). These qualities are highly valued in spoken word poetry, as demonstrated by Aptowicz’s claim that those who consistently achieve success in poetry slams ‘do so not only because their poetry is of the highest quality, but because it is completely recognizable as being original to them. No matter the topic, no matter the tone, these poets’ voices shine through’ (214). The Romantic connotation of the term ‘authenticity’ in part implied this connotation, as to be ‘authentic’ meant to be untainted by societal corruption (Zukin). The expressivist movement particularly emphasised this facet of the term, contending that ‘what it implies to be faithful to who you really are cannot be reached by following the model of someone else’ and that the individual must ‘transcend base and inauthentic

versions of oneself that result from the corrupting, heteronomous influence of others' (Laceulle 196). To be 'authentic of voice' is to be perceived as creative, innovative; not a follower of clichéd forms and trends but an innovative tastemaker (Peterson, "In Search of Authenticity").

This section proposes the concept of 'authenticity of voice': the perception that a spoken word poet is not copying other styles but rather using their (literal and metaphorical) 'natural' voice within their poetry. Here I trace the appreciation for 'authenticity of voice' within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry and detail some commonly perceived tropes associated with 'inauthenticity of voice.' As with all of these strains of 'authenticity,' there is no hard binary between 'authenticity of voice' and 'inauthenticity of voice,' nor are these stable, singularly defined concepts: they are subjectively perceived qualities. As noted in the Chapter 2 section regarding 'authenticity of origin,' all art is to some extent derivative, and consequently copies, adapts, or in other ways draws upon existent styles. However, innovation of style can still be perceived and is highly valued as a marker of a poet's 'authenticity' within the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene.

### **Valuing 'Authenticity of Voice'**

'Authenticity of voice' is the strain of perceived 'authenticity' to which Damon refers in her oft-cited hypothesis that 'the criterion for slam success seems to be some kind of "realness"—authenticity at the physical/sonic and meta-physical/emotional-intellectual-spiritual levels' (329). Damon made this claim based on her experience observing a poet perform a piece at a slam in the U.S. that did not adhere to typical U.S. slam style and receiving high marks. However, for the next round of that slam (a week or so later) the same poet performed a hastily written piece adhering to the stereotype of a slam poem, apparently feeling under pressure to conform to that style. This second poem was scored quite low, leading Damon to the conclusion that slam audiences value what they perceive as 'authentic' utterances—material in a style 'native' to or 'natural' for the poet—more highly than work which has been composed to fit into existing genre conventions. While this hypothesis is challenging to prove—and, as with all strains of 'authenticity,' its perception ultimately depends on the subjective perspective of the spectator—my data indicate

that spoken word poets experience more success when they perform in apparently ‘original’ and innovative styles, at least in comparison to producing material using common, clichéd styles. Many of the poets I interviewed recognise the importance of this strain of ‘authenticity’ within the genre, contending that creative innovation is both a mark of a poet’s ‘authenticity’ and a sign of quality within contemporary spoken word.

Within contemporary spoken word poetry, ‘authenticity of voice’ may be perceived based on the level of adherence to or resistance against common rhythms, cadences, rhymes, poetic structures, performance styles, and/or themes. As Abby Oliveira observes, the structural limitations placed on poems through the conventions of the poetry slam, in addition to poets’ general awareness of what is successful in the slam (and wider spoken word) context, leads to a ‘homogenising effect on how people write and perform’ (Interview). Oliveira, alongside many of the other spoken word poets I interviewed, values poets who, rather than reproducing established forms, have ‘a real individual sort of style about their work’ (Interview). Kirsten Luckins similarly specifies that she appreciates ‘people who are able to vary their form. I look for people who don’t just replicate a standard set of cadences and shove a knee-jerk popular message into those cadences’ (Interview). One common example of ‘inauthenticity of voice’ is the (usually inadvertent) mimicking of the style of prominent spoken word poets. Several poets interviewed mention hearing amateur poets copying the style of popular U.K. poet and musician Kae Tempest—as Luke Wright frames it, ‘shouting and clutching their stomachs’—and express a wish that these poets began expressing themselves in their ‘own voices’ instead (Interview).<sup>231</sup> Mimicking other artists’ styles in order to learn a craft is a typical stage in developing one’s practice, so being ‘inauthentic of voice’ in this manner is relatively common for amateur artists.

‘Authenticity of voice’ can be manifested through a rejection of hegemonic cultural styles, tropes, and ways of speaking in favour of one’s ‘natural’ cultural ‘voice’ (including one’s accent). Because the North American spoken word scene is

<sup>231</sup> Wright does not intend this as a criticism of Tempest’s performance style: he clarifies that the poets copying their style are ‘not doing it anywhere near as well as Kate is doing it. Kate is very good. ... it’s really authentic, you really trust it’ (Interview).



larger and more developed than the U.K. scene, North American styles and cadences dominate the online spoken word video archive. Replication of this style by U.K. spoken word poets can be perceived as ‘inauthentic of voice’ given that it constitutes a reiteration of this hegemonic style rather than the expression of the poet’s ‘native’ dialect, speech patterns, and local issues. Jess Green describes this ‘YouTube slam genre’<sup>232</sup> as

people talking very fast and then pausing, and being very emotional about whatever they’re talking about. So you could have someone who’s quite inexperienced thinking, right, I’m going to write a poem about racism being wrong. And they just copy those kind of key elements of fast and then a dramatic pause and then get very emotional and I’m just gonna repeat the idea that racism is wrong.

(Interview)

As Green observes, ‘inauthenticity of voice’ does not just refer to accent or style but can also indicate the apparent copying of topics (i.e. anti-racism) in conjunction with certain styles. Importantly, I do not imply here that to perform poems on topics which other poets have frequently covered, such as the struggle against prejudice and oppression, is inherently ‘inauthentic.’ Rather, I am observing that as certain issues have become ‘trendy’ within the spoken word scene, poets may feel incentivised to discuss them within their work *because of the popularity of these issues within the genre* rather than because these issues are important to the poet. This effect would also fall under the category of ‘inauthenticity of motivation’ if the poet were predominantly performing poems on these topics in order to achieve success, as will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Glasgow poet Kevin P. Gilday’s comedic critique of contemporary spoken word poetry, “I’ve Fallen Out of Love with Poetry,” expresses frustration with U.K. spoken word poets whose work evidences a heavy influence from American poets:

I’ve fallen out of love with poetry  
with your mid-Atlantic inflections  
and borrowed speech patterns

<sup>232</sup> This set of cadences and tropes is also casually known as ‘Button Poetry style,’ as it has been popularised through the YouTube channel and publisher Button Poetry.

because you all learned to slam  
from Americans on YouTube. (“THE HIGH FLIGHT XMAS  
ADVENT DAY SIXTEEN”)<sup>233</sup>

Gregory’s 2009 research also observes this trend within the U.K. spoken word scene of poetic communities finding their peers ‘inauthentic’ or disingenuous if they appropriate North American spoken word style rather than using their ‘own voices.’ She finds that those ‘U.K. based slammers [who] are considered to have adopted a more American performance/writing style ... were decried by many [U.K.] interviewees as being inauthentic, striving simply to achieve slam success, rather than create high quality, original artworks’ (263). Their sense of ‘authenticity of voice’ refers to rejection of North American hegemonic styles, rather than establishment of any unique ‘British’ spoken word style.

‘Authenticity of voice’ also refers to the literal voice: to the poet using their ‘natural’ accent, tone, emphases, cadences, etc. rather than assuming a distinct voice for the duration of the poem.<sup>234</sup> As Novak observes, poets may adopt alternate voices which ‘clearly mark the poem off from everyday speech,’ which may cause audiences to perceive this work as ‘inauthentic of voice’<sup>235</sup> (*Live Poetry* 107). The use of specific, arguably clichéd cadences becomes obvious to the audience when the poet is performing a set or otherwise introduces their work (unlike in a slam context), because the voice audibly changes between the performer’s ‘natural’ voice in the introduction and the voice they adopt to perform. Anthony Anaxagorou decried this effect: ‘when people just talk normally then when their poem starts they get high and very sing-y and high-pitched and the intonations are all low. And I hate that, that feels disingenuous, that feels like an act. That’s not your voice, I’ve heard your preamble. That’s someone else that’s come in’ (Interview).

A version of this ‘poetry voice’ which O’Sullivan describes as ‘a soft,

<sup>233</sup> As the transcript of this poem is not published, I have lineated this based on my perception of Gilday’s pauses and breath patterns when he performed this at The High Flight in 2015. This video is available through the link in Appendix B.

<sup>234</sup> Unless, as described in Chapters 2 and 3, the poet is intentionally assuming a distinct character for the poem and thus the voice is a part of that act.

<sup>235</sup> The adoption of a distinct voice for the duration of a poem would likely also discourage audiences from perceiving the work as ‘authentic of persona’ and ‘authentic of temporal state.’

breathy, rendering of the line that gradually descends in pitch with each stress before inflecting upward to mark the end of each line or sentence' has become commonplace across spoken word culture (n.p.). However, as the recent spate of articles with titles including "The Linguistics Behind the Insufferably Annoying 'Poet Voice,'" "Poet Voice and Flock Mentality: Why Poets Need to Think for Themselves," and "Stop Using 'Poet Voice'" indicate, the use of this voice is often considered 'inauthentic' and distracting (Petronzio; Basile; R. Smith, respectively). When considering the factors she appreciates within contemporary spoken word, Jenny Lindsay mentions avoidance of this clichéd 'poetry voice' and the use of one's 'authentic' voice:

All of us have poetry voice. All of us, including spoken word poets. And I think the best, best spoken word poets get that out of the way and just use their natural rhythms and their natural cadences and their natural idioms... Because otherwise, if you're not using your own natural idioms and all the rest of it, you're losing the authenticity of the performance straightaway. It's a barrier between you and the live audience. Because they're like 'Why's she pausing there, that makes no sense! Why's she pronouncing that word like that? She's not from Jersey!' (Interview)

Thus the adoption of common stylistic tropes, while often unavoidable particularly as a poet is learning the craft, may be easily identified by veterans of the genre and experienced audience members and deemed 'inauthentic of voice.'

### **Paying Homage to 'Original' Styles**

While I have argued here that stylistic innovation is valued as evidence of 'authenticity of voice,' there are limits to artists' abilities to innovate without risking the perception of 'inauthenticity.' An example of a strain of 'authenticity' *not* valued within contemporary spoken word poetry helps to illustrate this effect. In some artistic cultures, 'authenticity' may be performed through paying homage to the origins of the art form; using classic rhythms or tools, for example, or referencing early icons within the genre. For instance, in popular music, Hess has described how 'the concept of authenticity often centres on the performance's proximity to notions

of an original culture which at one time existed outside the record industry' (374). This effect is strong within contemporary hip-hop, where '[t]o give homage is also an act of showing knowledge of your artistic culture and lineage, and flaunting this knowledge lies at the heart of demonstrating historical authenticity in hip-hop' as well as country music, where artists 'may seek authenticity by claiming an association with earlier artists, types of music, or lifestyles' (A. Williams 145-6; Peterson, "In Search of Authenticity" 1087). However, this strategy of performing 'authenticity' by citing the roots of the genre does not seem to be a factor within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry. While origin stories for spoken word do exist (the most fabled being Marc Smith founding the first poetry slam in the Green Mill in Chicago in 1984), the now globalised nature of the form has meant that no singular origin story or originating individual is considered to be due praise or homage by contemporary spoken word poets, at least not in the U.K. In my observation, poets may reference traditional or popular spoken word styles in parody contexts,<sup>236</sup> but to reference or use these styles non-ironically may come across as 'inauthentic.'

However, this introduces yet another paradox at the heart of performative 'authenticity.' Peterson's model of country music 'authenticity' illustrates this contradiction: to be perceived as 'authentic' means 'being believable relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being original, that is not being an imitation of the model' (*Creating Country Music* 220). Essentially, work must be demonstrably of that genre (i.e. 'authentically' a spoken word poem) in that it fits the basic parameters for that genre, but it should not too exactly follow these criteria (i.e. not a clichéd poem). It must be innovative, but within the accepted parameters. Thus even while, as I argue, spoken word poetry does not require artists to pay homage to 'original' styles within their work, they do still need to create work which generally

<sup>236</sup> The Anti-Slam event format produced in the U.K. by Paula Varjack and Dan Simpson is a forum for such parodies (Lowry). At these popular shows, the value system of the slam is inverted so that the lowest-scoring poet wins. Often poets perform parodies of clichéd trends, techniques, and identities within the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene (for instance, the poet whose introduction is longer than their poem, the shouting political ranter with an unclear message, etc.). In addition to being entertaining, these events serve as effective critical fora for the spoken word community: poets identify, perform, and recognise common stereotypes, thus establishing common aesthetic values through rejection of clichés.

fits within the parameters of the genre in order to be perceived as ‘authentic,’ or at least to be successful. For instance, if a poet were to perform an entirely unique piece at a poetry slam—say, facing the back wall of the stage and shouting the entire time—they would certainly distinguish themselves as innovative, but this innovation might place them outwith the genre, and thus ‘inauthenticate’ their work in the eyes of the audience. This is the catch-22 of performative ‘authenticity’: too much citation of the ‘original’ culture and the work risks perception as ‘inauthentic of voice’; not enough adherence to the stylistic parameters of the genre and the work risks perception as simply ‘inauthentic’ as a product within that art form. This balance is, of course, constantly shifting and heavily subjective.

### **Section Conclusion**

This section introduced the concept of ‘authenticity of voice,’ demonstrating the importance of spoken word poetry being perceived as original, innovative, and ‘natural’ to a poet’s style. In the next section I consider how poets’ identities affect what is considered ‘natural’ for them to perform and other aspects of their craft, generally with troubling consequences for poets with marginalised identities.

### **Authenticity of Identity**

Today’s ‘battle of the books’ is really not so much about books as it is about authors, authors who can be categorized according to race, gender, ethnicity and so on, standing in as delegates of a social constituency. And the assumption that the works they create transparently convey the authentic, unmediated experience of their social identities—though officially renounced—has crept quietly in through the back door.

—Henry Louis Gates, “‘Authenticity,’ or the Lesson of Little Tree,”  
n.p.

A poet approaches the microphone at a spoken word event. Before the poet opens their mouth to speak, the audience is already forming expectations and judgments based on the poet's appearance. They are evaluating not only the clothing the poet wears but also their apparent identity, interpreting the visible markers associated with race, class, gender, ability, and other factors. Once the poet begins speaking, the audience also takes into account their accent, dialect, and vocabulary. By the time the poem finishes, spectators have subconsciously made myriad observations and judgments regarding the poet's identity. As the poet departs the stage, the audience (generally subconsciously) evaluates: did the poet's performance of their identity throughout the poem match what they expected from them? In other words, did it feel 'authentic'?

As previously established, within spoken word poetry the context provided through poets' embodied presence onstage fundamentally influences the audience's interpretation of the work. This is perhaps most apparent in analysing how poets' identity characteristics affect spectators' (and critics') perceptions of the poetry, as well as the expectations and pressures these perceptions engender. This section proposes the concept of 'authenticity of identity,' which encompasses multiple factors but essentially recognises that the extent to which a poet is perceived as 'authentic' is affected by how their identity is perceived and how they engage with their identity onstage. 'Identity' here denotes one's performed and perceived social identity with regard to gender, race, ability, class, etc., as performed by the poet and interpreted by the audience through visible and audible markers. Throughout this section I analyse how spectators' perception of marginalised identity characteristics—specifically those associated with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability<sup>237</sup>—influence how they judge U.K. spoken word poets as 'authentic,' as well as the pressures these judgments and expectations place on these poets.

Several scholars, most notably Somers-Willett but also J. Johnson, Eid, and

<sup>237</sup> I focus specifically on these identities because I have evidence (from my data collection, scholarship, and other sources) indicating their influence within this scene. Theoretically, the arguments that I make in this section regarding the fetishisation of marginalised identity within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry could also be extended to religion, age, and other identity characteristics; however, further research is required to confirm whether these traits function in a similar manner to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and ability.

others, have argued that the performance and perception of (particularly marginalised) identity is a major factor in audiences' evaluations of spoken word performances. Throughout this section I build upon Somers-Willett's research into the U.S. poetry slam scene, which contends that 'marginalized gender, sexual, and racial identities are celebrated' in this sphere (71). She argues that one of the factors informing this value system is deeply engrained prejudice influencing how audiences perceive the 'authenticity' of these identities, and thus considers this to be a problematic system implicitly incentivising poets to perform their identities in stereotypical fashions. In this section I apply Somers-Willett's theories to the demographically distinct context of U.K. spoken word and conclude that, while the markers of identity and 'authenticity' may differ slightly, generally the fetishisation of marginalised identity that she finds in the U.S. slam sphere is also present and harmful here.

Because spoken word poets' visible and audible identity markers are influential in multiple ways (in terms of representative pressures, commercial incentives, audience perceptions, and more), my concept of 'authenticity of identity' contains several interlinking theories. First, I begin this section by recognising that many poets with marginalised identities find agency and empowerment through asserting their identities onstage, leading in part to the commonality of these performances in the U.K. spoken word genre. I then establish the importance of the poet's visible and audible identity markers in informing the audiences' perception of their poetry. Next, following Somers-Willett, I assert that marginalised identity in and of itself is perceived as an inherently 'authenticating' trait within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry, leading to a problematic system in which marginalised poets' identities can be fetishised.

I then demonstrate how spoken word poetry has been associated with marginalised identities in the U.K., particularly with BAME identities, and indicate how this stereotypes and disadvantages marginalised poets without 'inauthenticating,' excluding, or otherwise disadvantaging non-marginalised poets. Here I cite how spoken word poets with marginalised identities often experience a burden of representation to speak on behalf of their demographics. Compounding this, many also feel a related pressure to perform material about their identities, in

part because they feel that this material is incentivised within the U.K. spoken word scene. Because cultural notions of ‘authentic’ identity are grounded in stereotype, these poets report feeling pressure to perform their identities in essentialised manners, effectively undermining and exploiting their lived experiences. I conclude this section by arguing that, due to the fraught interplay between ‘authenticity’ and identity within the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene, non-marginalised poets are not held to the same standard of ‘authenticity’ as marginalised poets.

Ultimately, this section argues that the association between marginalised identity and ‘authenticity,’ alongside the notion of the ‘authentic’ as uncrafted and ‘natural,’ has concerning implications for the criticism of marginalised poets’ work: it is more likely to be perceived as ‘authentic’ (in a general sense encompassing all of the strains examined in this thesis) and thus less artistically sophisticated than the work of non-marginalised poets. Although spoken word is often marketed as a radical platform for the free expression of one’s ‘truth,’ this section indicates the ways in which it can actually fetishise, encourage, and reinforce stereotypical, flattened versions of marginalised identity.

Finally, while throughout the majority of this thesis my arguments have been informed by my status as an insider to the U.K. spoken word scene, and thus my personal experience of the phenomena I describe, I am conscious throughout this section that I lack that insider perspective. As a middle-class, able-bodied white woman, I experience the world with considerable privilege and would not generally self-identify (nor be perceived as) marginalised.<sup>238</sup> Because I am conscious of my lack of experiential knowledge and the sensitivity of the issues discussed in this section, throughout it I am rigorous in citing the perspectives of others to the greatest extent possible (as has been my practice throughout this thesis). I am also aware that while I interviewed many artists of varying identities, my whiteness and middle-class identity may have affected what my interviewees felt comfortable sharing with me.

<sup>238</sup> A slight exception is that because I am female, there are instances in which I have felt incentivised to perform my gender in specific fashions and take certain activist stances within the spoken word sphere. Generally, however, I do not believe my ‘marginality’ in this sense to have had a significant effect on my work. I also would not consider my experiential knowledge of being a female poet in this sphere to make me informed on the experience of being a person of colour or a queer person; lived experiences of marginality are not equivalent.



To supplement my data in this respect, I have sought and cited multiple interviews conducted between poets with marginalised identities (including Binta Breeze et al. and “Let’s Talk About | Black Poems”). The issues discussed below are nuanced, complex, and in continual evolution: the analysis below is not intended as the conclusive account of marginality and ‘authenticity’ within the U.K. spoken word poetry scene but a starting point for further discussion between scholars and practitioners from a range of backgrounds and identities.

### **Identity Performance as Empowering**

While this section considers how the fetishisation of marginality as intrinsically ‘authentic’ has led to problematic effects within the U.K. spoken word sphere, I want to begin by recognising that *performing poetry concerning one’s identity is not inherently problematic*. For many spoken word poets this art form has served as an important platform for self-expression, witnessing, and affirmation. Speaking personally as a woman who has developed confidence through performing poetry concerning my gender identity, I believe it is possible to simultaneously be aware of the potential for one’s identity to be fetishised *and* to benefit from the process of creative self-expression. While poets are unable to control how they are perceived, through their work they are able to control the way in which they articulate self,<sup>239</sup> which can be a deeply empowering act for those whose identities have been consistently Othered. The way in which individuals craft identity through performing life narratives fundamentally influences the way in which they perceive self: as Bauman has recognised (building upon Goffman’s work), ‘sociable narratives are a vehicle for the encoding and presentation of information about oneself in order to construct a personal and social image’ (*Story, Performance, and Event* 21). Francesca Beard shares how powerful this sense of agency felt to her when she began performing:

When you’re doing spoken word you’re standing in front of people

<sup>239</sup> I do not wish to imply here that poets can directly express their ‘true’ selves for audiences; as I established in Chapter 2, the performance of self inherently entails a level of editing, borrowing, and other manipulation. Rather, I am observing that poets have the agency within this genre to craft their onstage selves (including performance personas) and describe their identities in a manner which feels comfortable and ‘authentic’ to them.

and you're saying 'I am going to let you look at me and you will judge me and you'll make all these assumptions about me and I can actually control that in a very interesting way by what I say. And in fact my identity then becomes a co-creation between us.' Which was incredibly liberating because for a long time I think I had struggled with the idea of my identity not being owned by me and being created by other people. And I felt very—as a young woman of mixed race—very angry about that for a lot of the time. And so it was incredibly exciting to me to understand that this was actually, you know, creatively this problem became an opportunity. (Interview)

Through performing spoken word poetry, Lisette Auton similarly experienced a radical shift from feeling 'shame' about her disability to increased acceptance and pride, and advocates the power of spoken word events as 'valuable ... space[s] for other voices to be heard' (n.p.). As bell hooks has written, 'oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subject, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story' (43). Although this process is not free from tensions (as this section will explore), it can nonetheless be empowering for poets not only within their creative practice but in developing their senses of self: through the act of composition and performance they can actively shape and express their identities as they experience them.<sup>240</sup>

In the same vein, while spectators' perceptions of spoken word poetry by marginalised poets are inherently influenced by underlying societal prejudices, witnessing diverse perspectives and narratives through this poetry can still be beneficial. Spoken word events can provide spectators with the opportunity to witness a wide range of poems expressing diverse identities and narratives. These events can be powerful sites of cross-cultural communication: as Matt Abbott shares, 'sometimes you hear a story from somebody who is perhaps from a marginalised group or who has had this particular thing happen to them. That's when it's really valuable. You get to hear about perspectives and hear about stories you wouldn't hear

<sup>240</sup> I am guided in my analysis of contemporary autobiographical performance as both potentially radical and empowering yet also fraught by the scholarship of Heddon (*Autobiography and Performance*) and Anderson (*Autobiography* 81-5).

anywhere else' (Interview). As Heddon writes regarding autobiographical performance, 'the stories performed extend the range of stories available,' with often powerful effects for those who have not yet seen themselves represented within mainstream media (33). Thus while there are systemic prejudices plaguing the U.K. spoken word scene, as this section describes, it is nonetheless important to recognise the important role this genre can play in improving cross-cultural understanding through the sharing of diverse narratives.

### **Significance of Visible/Audible Markers**

Because contemporary spoken word is dependent upon the live presence of the poet (as established in Chapter 2 regarding 'authenticity of origin'), the poet's visibly/audibly apparent<sup>241</sup> identity inevitably affects the way in which they are perceived—and consequently, the way in which their work is perceived. The audience engages not with a context-stripped text but a fully embodied performance, informed by all of the poet's physical characteristics, including gendered, raced, and classed visible and audible traits. Spectators' interpretations of the poetry are necessarily informed by their perceptions of the poets' visual and audible traits, whether or not they are conscious of how these perceptions affect their judgments. These factors also inherently affect how spectators gauge the 'authenticities' of this poetry; as R. Fox observes,

All modes of poetry are performative in some sense; but slam and other forms of performance poetry are unique in how they display and call upon performers' bodies *to provide the proof of the truth of what is spoken*. Verbal texts and the body coconstitute and point at one another. (421, emphasis added)

Consequently, in composing their work spoken word poets will likely be conscious that spectators take these facets into account. Writing in a pedagogical context, Endsley notes that students of spoken word poetry must 'recognize the ways in which their bodies are governed and interpreted by an audience based upon their embodied identities' (114).

<sup>241</sup> By 'apparent' here I mean the poet's identity in the way in which it is interpreted by the audience, not that poets' identities are immediately apparent from a single viewing.

These perceptions—and subsequent judgments and expectations—begin as soon as the poet’s identity is apparent, often before the poem even begins. As Abby Oliveira shares, this can include expectations that poets will address certain themes in their poetry: ‘there’s some strange presumption that because I am a mixed-race woman in Northern Ireland that that’s pretty much what I’d want to talk about in most of my work. And I kind of resent that. Cos I’m like, why would you presume that?’ (Interview). These identity-based limiting expectations exist across U.K. literary expression: the 2015 Spread the Word report on BAME writers in the U.K. publishing sector found that ‘BAME novelists do feel restricted by market expectations of their work. Comments one African Caribbean literary writer: “There is a sense that if you are a Black writer, you should be writing about that— being Black”’ (Kean, *Writing the Future* 13).

The way in which an artist’s identity is perceived is also contextually dependent upon the performance space and the demographic of the audience. For instance, Kevin P. Gilday perceives that his class identity is interpreted differently by audiences with different demographics:

People from a middle-class background tend to think that I’m representative of a working-class background because of the topics of some of my poems and my accent and some of my phrasing and the fact I use a lot of swear words in my poems and I use some like colloquial stuff and – so they go, ‘Oh, this is a working-class poet.’ Whereas working class people probably like think the opposite and they think I’m representative of some kind of middle class poetry. Again, they could both look at the same poem and interpret it in a different way. (Interview)

Ultimately, the collaboratively constituted (i.e. performed and perceived) identity of the poet bears significantly on the interpretation of contemporary spoken word poetry.

### **Marginalised Identity Markers as Authenticating Factors**

Because of societal stereotypes associating marginalised identity with inherent ‘authenticity,’ the mere fact of a spoken word poet having marginalised

identity characteristics (i.e. visibly appearing to be a person of colour, speaking in an accent culturally associated with working-class identity, etc.) can lead spectators to perceive them (and their poetry) as more ‘authentic.’ In this section I develop Somers-Willett’s argument that within contemporary performance poetics, marginalised identity markers in and of themselves have come to signify ‘authenticity.’ While Somers-Willett’s research focuses on the U.S. slam scene, here I provide evidence from the U.K. spoken word scene indicating that these effects are also pervasive in this context.

As explained in Chapter 1, in the 1700s Romantic notions of working-class ‘purity’ as unaffected by societal corruption influenced how the concept of ‘authenticity’ came to be associated with marginalised identities (Guignon; Schwarz). This phenomenon has deep roots in systemic prejudice: the association between marginality and ‘authenticity’ is grounded in the notion that marginalised individuals are more ‘natural’ (and thus childlike, intellectually backwards, inferior, etc.). As Gatchet explains,

In popular cultural forms such as music, an artist’s identity often heavily influences whether or not that artist is perceived as ‘authentic.’ This is particularly true in the blues, where constructions of race and class are used to negotiate authenticity in complex ways. Indeed, the blues’ historical roots in slavery and systemic racism have often led some to link the authenticity of its performers with problematic conceptions of primitive blackness. (208)

The way in which certain identities and behaviours are associated with inherent ‘authenticity’ varies across cultures, but these effects have been documented with identity characteristics including race,<sup>242</sup> class,<sup>243</sup> ability,<sup>244</sup> and other characteristics. Ultimately, this implicit, subconscious association between marginality and ‘authenticity’ has serious implications for how marginalised spoken word poets—in terms of race, class, ability, gender, sexual orientation, and other identity markers—are perceived, as well as how their work is analysed.

<sup>242</sup> See Gatchet; P. E. Johnson; Nguyen and Anthony. See also research into how indigenous peoples are characterised as ‘noble primitives’ (Saminaden et al.; Tennant).

<sup>243</sup> See Beswick; Biressi and Nunn; Schwarz.

<sup>244</sup> See Beveridge; Reid et al.; Richardson; Robey et al.; Waltz and James.

Somers-Willett finds that this effect is heavily prevalent within the U.S. slam circuit: within this culture, marginalised identity characteristics are perceived to denote inherent ‘authenticity.’ She explains that through a cycle of identity performance and affirmation, ‘slam poets and their audiences have, consciously or unconsciously, come to rely on marginalized identities as authentic narratives in and of themselves’ (76-7). Specifically, she argues that within the U.S. slam scene, performances of black masculinity score more highly, leading that identity to be ‘especially rewarded’ (71).<sup>245</sup> Given that, as I have argued throughout this thesis, ‘authenticity’ is valued within the contemporary spoken word poetry scene (in both the U.S. and U.K. spheres), this would indicate that the association of marginality with ‘authenticity’ means that marginalised identity is advantageous within this culture. In this sense, within spoken word poetry, ‘the politics of authenticity can trump the traditional status structure, assigning value to those with the least social and cultural capital’ (Fine 176). As several scholars have observed,<sup>246</sup> this inversion of typical societal power structures within contemporary spoken word events make them ‘carnavalesque’ in the Bakhtinian sense.<sup>247</sup> However, as I will argue shortly, any temporary status granted within the carnivalesque, charged performance space does not necessarily equate to greater cultural capital, power, or success outwith that space.

While Somers-Willett’s claims regarding the association between marginalised identity and ‘authenticity’ are based on her analysis of the U.S. slam scene, my research revealed that her theories also apply to the U.K. spoken word sphere. Joelle Taylor, who is queer and comes from a working class background,

<sup>245</sup> Somers-Willett bases this theory on the high percentage of black male poets winning the National Poetry Slam, in addition to her observations regarding the perception of black masculinity as ‘authentic’ in American culture. As I will note shortly, her argument has been contested by J. Johnson.

<sup>246</sup> Including Bearder; Clasen; Coppoc; and Hoffman.

<sup>247</sup> Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘carnavalesque’ in literature and culture, developed in the mid-20th century, is rooted in his interpretations of the historic and contemporary carnivals (*Rabelais and His World*). In Bakhtin’s theory, these events are characterised by an inversion of traditional social hierarchies and norms (including power structures) through humour, profanity, and uninhibited interaction. The way in which staging conventions (particularly the erosion of distinctions between performers and spectators) contributes to a ‘carnavalesque’ environment in contemporary U.K. spoken word will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

describes feeling judged by audiences and critics as inherently ‘authentic’ based on her identity. When asked whether audiences in spoken word spaces tend to assume that everything shared within that space is ‘true,’ she replied:

Yes. Absolutely. I think there is – but again, as the scene is shifting, audiences are shifting. And with them they’re bringing their own understanding of truth ... if I was reduced to one word that middle-class people say to me all the time, and I’ve only just unpacked what it means [laughs]. It’s so patronising. But I get offstage, and they go like, ‘Oh my God, you’re so authentic.’ And at first, I’d be like ‘Ah, thank you! Thank you!’ But now I realise what they’re saying is ‘You’re so working class! You’re so rough!’ You know? (Interview)

Taylor feels that the audience’s perception of her working-class identity encourages them to consider her more ‘authentic’ and to judge her poetry through that lens. This effect is not unique to spoken word: the association between marginalised identity characteristics and inherent ‘authenticity’ within the U.K. literary sector more broadly has been heavily documented throughout the past twenty years (Kean; Saha and van Lente). Research into the experience of BAME writers has found that ‘for many BAME novelists the word “authentic” is interchangeable with “exotic” and is equally resented because it seems to emphasise difference rather than universality’ (Kean, *Writing the Future* 15). Chong’s research similarly indicates that reviewers’ perceptions of authors’ ethno-racial identity are influential in how they analyse and describe these texts, in part to determine and ‘construct the authenticity of a novel’ (73).

The fetishisation of marginality as inherently ‘authentic’—as ‘rough’ or ‘exotic’—is exacerbated when the demographics of the audience and performers are significantly different. This is the crux of Somers-Willett’s argument in the U.S. slam context: she claims that ‘the audience for slam poetry on a national level has been and continues to be predominantly white, liberal, and middle class,’ contrasting with the more diverse pool of performers, and contends that these disparities fuel the perception of poets’ inherent ‘authenticity’ (78). She argues that these ‘audiences may be equating performances of marginalized racial identity with what is authentic on the basis that something so distinctly different from or ‘other’ than white, middle-

class existence is cool, desirable, and more real or genuine' (79). As Somers-Willett observes, there is long history of performances of Otherness being patronised by (in both financial and social senses) white middle-class audiences, including blackface minstrelsy, rock and roll, 'gangsta rap,' etc: this effect is, again, not limited to contemporary spoken word poetry. The uneven power dynamic between marginalised performers and non-marginalised<sup>248</sup> audiences exacerbates how these performers are fetishised as inherently 'authentic.'

As there are not sufficient data on the demographics of spoken word participants (poets and audiences) in the U.K.,<sup>249</sup> it is difficult to authoritatively determine whether this tension which Somers-Willett identifies in the U.S. context is also a factor in the U.K. context. These demographics are also highly variable regionally and across different event formats; for instance, while some spoken word events are held in formal theatres and charge £10-20 per ticket, others will be held in pubs with free admission, with subsequent effects on the socioeconomic demographics of the audiences who attend.<sup>250</sup> While I hesitate to generalise the U.K. scene by arguing that these demographic differences—and thus tensions—exist at all spoken word events, I do argue that the effects Somers-Willett describes exist at the individual level: that these tensions are heightened when the performer and the spectator differ demographically. For instance, in Taylor's experience recounted above, it is the middle-class spectators who have characterised her as 'authentic' based on their perception of her working-class identity. Arguably, a working-class spectator would be less likely to exotify Taylor by essentialising her identity in this way (although, again, audiences are not homogenous and will not react uniformly based on their identity characteristics).

Following Somers-Willett, non-marginalised spectators may patronise the

<sup>248</sup> For instance, white, cisgender, middle-class, able-bodied men: those who experience privilege based on their visibly and audibly marked identities.

<sup>249</sup> One relevant data point was collected by Gregory in her 2006-7 data collection across 13 slams in southern England: she found that only 14% of audience members at these events were Black or minority ethnic (368-9), suggesting that audiences in the U.K. spoken word scene are majority white. However, this statistic is limited in its applicability to this study (see Methodology), and further research is required to confirm this hypothesis.

<sup>250</sup> This also occurs with different demographic groups: for instance, a 'student spoken word night' will likely elicit younger people; a 'queer spoken word night' may draw more queer spectators, etc. (although of course this effect is not guaranteed and is heavily dependent on the way in which the event is marketed, and to whom).



poetry of marginalised artists not only due to aesthetic interest, but also (subconsciously) to assuage guilt over privilege and to ‘authenticate’ themselves by association<sup>251</sup> (79-80). By patronising the work of marginalised artists, they are able to claim some of their social capital as ‘inherently’ ‘authentic’ figures. As theorists of ‘Outsider Art’<sup>252</sup> have contended, the social difference in class between artists and buyers has a significant effect on the buyers’ motivations for patronising the artists:

The biography of the artist rubs off on the collector: you are the artist you display. Perhaps for this reason in a group that values a multi-cultural perspective, awash in tolerance, the work of vernacular, marginalized artists is so valued. (Fine 175)

For instance, within the spoken word context, a white, wealthy man might attend a feminist spoken word event not solely because of his appreciation for the craft but additionally (consciously or not) in order to assuage any guilt over his privilege and mark himself as ‘authentic’ by association. These effects are challenging to measure, and more research into the demographics of U.K. spoken word participants and audiences is required in order to conclusively determine the extent to which Somers-Willett’s theories apply here; however, on the level of the individual spectator-performer relationship, demographic differences likely exacerbate the extent to which the performer is fetishised as ‘authentic.’ The nuances of how power dynamics affect the perception of spoken word poets as ‘authentic’ will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

Importantly, as I will reiterate throughout this section, the fetishisation (and thus, arguably, rewarding) of marginalised identity performance within spoken word poetry is *not*, on the whole, advantageous for marginalised artists. Although the association of marginality with ‘authenticity’ may lead to some slam victories, or gain poets (potentially tokenistic) bookings, a system grounded in systemic

<sup>251</sup> Here I refer to one of Peterson’s strategies of ‘authenticity work,’ ‘authenticity by association,’ in which individuals seek ‘to claim a bit of authenticity by immersing themselves in what they take to be authentic experiences’ (“In Search of Authenticity” 1088). Peterson contends that frequently this strategy is used by individuals with higher social capital to acquire (by association) the ‘authenticity’ apparently inherent to marginalised individuals (1088-9).

<sup>252</sup> In Chapter 6 I further apply ‘Outsider Art’ scholarship to indicate how artists perceived as inherently ‘authentic’ are more fetishised than appreciated for their talents.

prejudice<sup>253</sup> is inherently problematic and ultimately pressures artists to perform work limited by their marginality. As Chapter 6 will further analyse, when marginalised artists' work is perceived as 'authentic,' it is less likely to be perceived as crafted *art*, leading to a reticence to adequately critically evaluate this material. Instead this work may be patronised as 'emotional expression' or criticised as overly personal, even if the material is not actually confessional.<sup>254</sup> In contrast, non-marginalised artists may be allowed more nuance in their self-identification and use of narrative, and thus be more easily perceived to be crafting their poetry based on observation and imagination rather than direct experience.<sup>255</sup> In short, critics are more likely to be able to separate the art from the artist for these (white, middle-class, able-bodied, etc.) artists, and subsequently to give adequate critical attention to the material. This effect, then, ultimately creates a problematic disparity in how the work of different poets receives critical attention purely on the basis of their identities.

Furthermore, while my arguments here are grounded in theory, data, and evidence from other fields, I acknowledge that the ideas proposed here could be applied in a dangerous manner. Ignoring the nuances of these arguments—that the fetishisation of marginalised identity in spoken word is grounded in societal prejudice and ultimately harms these poets—could yield the over-simplified, inaccurate conclusion that because marginality equals 'authenticity' and 'authenticity' equals success in this genre, marginalised poets have it easy. Thus these theories could be misapplied to explain away the success of poets with marginalised identities, rather than recognising that their success is based on

<sup>253</sup> I refer to the assumption of marginalised individuals as inherently 'authentic' as prejudicial because, as previously explained, it is grounded in a notion of these individuals as primitive, simple, and otherwise basic and non-sophisticated.

<sup>254</sup> I identified this effect in Chapter 3 when I discussed Peacock's review of Sara Hirsch's solo show "How Was It For You?" as overly emotional: Peacock assumed the 'emotional authenticity' of the work rather than evaluating its crafted nature. Following the theories I explain in this section, Peacock's evaluation of Hirsch's work was inevitably affected by his perception of her identity (as female) and this perception of her marginality may have increased the extent to which he perceived her performance as 'authentic' (and thus confessional and uncrafted).

<sup>255</sup> This effect was briefly discussed in Chapter 3, where I described how the white male poets I interviewed feel more comfortable breaking the autobiographical and referential pacts (i.e. performing fictional, surreal material) than other more marginalised poets. I revisit and further discuss this effect at the end of this section.

countless factors, not least of which is a tremendous amount of effort and artistic ability. In his contestation of Somers-Willett's theory that black identity is implicitly rewarded in the U.S. slam sphere, J. Johnson explains why this implication can undermine the idea of poets of colour winning on their own artistic merit:

When we [competitive teams that feature poets of colour] listen to members of the larger national community work dogmatically to explain why our teams have won multiple national titles and why we consistently make the final stage, we hear their rhetoric as an orchestrated rescue of whiteness in which the notion of 'black as best' is treated as an illogical construction that must be torn down. Bluz told me, 'No one questioned how the mostly white team of St. Paul/Minneapolis won back-to-back titles; that was just "good poetry."' But when DPL and Charlotte did it, the forums lit up about how slam is not about poetry. Whatever that means.' (*Killing Poetry* 83)

I therefore wish to be clear that while I argue that underlying societal prejudice contributes to the perception of marginalised artists as more 'authentic,' ultimately this perception is deeply harmful to these poets as it leads to their work not receiving adequate critical attention.<sup>256</sup> There is considerable evidence indicating that within the U.K. literary sector, marginalised writers still face significant barriers to career success due to underlying racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and otherwise prejudiced structures (see Guyan; Kean (*Free Verse; Writing the Future*); Saha and van Lente).

### **Spoken Word's Association with Marginality**

Thus far in this section, I have established that marginalised identity is associated with 'authenticity,' so marginalised identity performance is fetishised in the U.K. spoken word scene. This value system has influenced the way in which spoken word poetry has been characterised in the U.K. through media journalism and scholarship: it is heavily associated with marginality, particularly with poets of

<sup>256</sup> Saminaden et al.'s research into implicit assumptions about 'traditional' people rooted in stereotypical notions of 'authenticity' has similarly concluded that 'although images of "noble primitives" are superficially positive, they may have negative consequences for members of traditional societies' (102).

colour and working-class poets. Below I argue that while some of this association is reasonable due to the demographics of the art form and the various artistic traditions which have influenced it, much of this assumption is rooted in essentialised stereotypes of ‘authentic’ identity and ultimately harms poets.

Globally, spoken word poetry has typically been characterised as a forum for the expression of marginalised identity: a genre through which oppressed people can assert their lived experiences (Somers-Willett; Eid). As noted in the Introduction, many of the artistic movements which have influenced spoken word—including the Black Arts Movement, dub poetry, and punk poetry—have been dominated by people of colour and working-class individuals and strongly oriented towards advocating for justice and recognition (Bearder). Due in part to this history, and in part to the relatively diverse demographics of the scene,<sup>257</sup> spoken word as a genre has long been implicitly associated with marginality. This association is exemplified through the rhetoric concerning the founder of the poetry slam in the U.S., Marc Smith, which generally emphasises his working-class credentials. He is described as a ‘retired construction worker’ and ‘struggling working-class writer in Chicago,’ ‘the embodiment of anti-shtick’ who ‘kept true to his vision of poetry’ (Aptowicz 35, 35, 37). Here I cite a single author, but descriptions of Smith emphasising his background as a construction worker are highly common<sup>258</sup> and constitute a central element of slam’s origin lore grounded in evidence of its ‘authentic’ beginnings (Blacksher).

This tendency to associate spoken word poetry with marginality is heavily evidenced within the U.K. context, where for decades the genre has been particularly associated with blackness (Osborne). In 1999, poet Patience Agbabi stated ‘I do think there’s often an assumption, with performance poetry, that the person’s got to be black, or of colour, or certainly not white English,’ and attributed this to racial stereotyping: ‘there’s this perception that we do it better, because we’re more

<sup>257</sup> As detailed previously, there is a lack of statistical data regarding the demographic composition of the U.K. spoken word scene and demographics will vary regionally; here I mean that based on the data I collected in my interviews, the U.K. spoken word scene appears to be more diverse than the rest of the U.K. literary scene.

<sup>258</sup> Some of the many scholars and journalists emphasising Smith’s background as a construction worker include Bearder; Burnett; Rohter (who also mentions that Smith was a college dropout); Williamson; and Yanofsky.

“natural performers”” (qtd. in Binta Breeze et al. 42). Multiple writers of colour cited in the 2004 report *Free Verse: Publishing Opportunities for Black and Asian Poets* confirmed that this was still a prevalent issue five years later (Kean). Bernardine Evaristo claims that ‘I think performance poetry has become synonymous with poetry from Black writers,’ and Rommi Smith argues

I think more could be focused on the expectation that minority ethnic poets are performance poets. This is often used in a dismissive way. I’ve had the head of a poetry MA course refer to me as ‘one of those performance poets’, then proceed to demean the craft as lesser to that of those who are solely published. (qtd. in Kean, *Free Verse* 16, 8)

Fowler recognises this effect in her 2013 research into the Mancunian live literary scene and cautions that ‘persistently figuring black poets as “performance poets” or “spoken word artists” risks relegating them to a kind of graffiti at the margins of British poetry’ (242). Most recently, Bearder’s 2019 research found that ‘poets of colour reject the terms “spoken word artist” or “performance poet” because of their associations as a lesser art form than page poetry’ (73).<sup>259</sup> While my research found the most evidence for associations between spoken word and poets of colour in the U.K., there are also indications that spoken word is associated with other marginalised identity characterisations. Joelle Taylor shares her experience of feeling automatically associated with ‘spoken word’ rather than ‘poetry’ because of her class identity and sexual orientation: ‘People like me are not allowed to be poets. We can be spoken word artists, if you like’ (Interview).

As these statements highlight, compounding the essentialising nature of these assumptions is the widespread condescension towards spoken word as a genre: it is not only that these marginalised poets are assumed to perform in a certain genre solely due to their identities, but further that because of its popular, mainstream appeal, this genre is typically considered to be ‘low art’ by journalists and critics

<sup>259</sup> These associations between spoken word and blackness are not limited to media reports but can be found in published scholarship as well. For instance, Hoyles and Hoyles’ article “Black Performance Poetry” (in the U.K. context) and Chepp’s article “Art as Public Knowledge and Everyday Politics: The Case of African American Spoken Word” (in the U.S. context) do not distinguish between ‘black performance poetry’ and the genre more widely, so could be read as implying that there is no distinction: that ‘performance poetry’ is inherently a ‘black’ art form.

(Parmar). Bauridl's scholarship traces this effect within the American spoken word context:

the media, and at times academia, equate contemporary performance poetry with "blackness" and reduce its complex performativity to "on-stage expressiveness" (if not "clownery"). Thus, they not only tag black artists with a stereotypical, reductive label, but they furthermore neglect the heterogeneity of performance poetry in general and of black performance poetry in particular. They wrongfully assume a linear and coherent line of succession from black artistic precursors to contemporary performance poetry. And they fail to recognise the diversity of the format and the complex relationship between black poets and performance poetry. (719-720)<sup>260</sup>

Because spoken word poetry in the U.K. is associated with marginality, marginalised poets often face the assumption that this is the (implied sub-par) genre they must be operating in, to their detriment.

Theoretically, the valorisation of 'authenticity,' and by extension marginality, in the U.K. spoken word poetry scene could be seen to detrimentally affect any non-marginalised (i.e. white, straight, cisgendered, middle-class, able-bodied, male) spoken word poets if they were considered to be inherently 'inauthentic' interlopers appropriating this culture. However, my research did not find substantial evidence that a lack of marginalised identity characteristics negatively affects chances for success for U.K. spoken word poets, nor have I encountered this in my personal experience in the scene.<sup>261</sup> As I previously noted, the U.K. literary sector remains a challenging environment riddled with barriers to success for marginalised writers. Many of the most commercially successful spoken word poets in the U.K. of the past

<sup>260</sup> d'Abdon's scholarship in the South African poetry scene has also discovered this effect in that context. In his article "'You Say 'Performance Poet', I Hear 'Dance Nigger, Dance'": Problematizing the Notion of Performance Poetry in South Africa" he criticises the use of the term 'performance poetry' on the grounds that it produces 'racial micro-invalidations' ultimately harming poets of colour (Abstract).

<sup>261</sup> Of course, my relative privilege may prevent me from perceiving any existing bias; for instance, it is possible that there is a sense among BAME spoken word poets that white spoken word poets are appropriating their art form, but because I am not part of this discourse I have not heard these claims. More research is required to confirm my hypotheses here.

twenty years have been white men:<sup>262</sup> Murray Lachlan Young, John Cooper Clarke, Mark Grist, and more (arguably) non-marginalised poets—i.e. white cisgender men—have achieved fame within the sphere.<sup>263</sup> Thus the sense of spoken word poetry as an art form for marginalised individuals ironically negatively affects these marginalised poets—as they are perceived as limited to (and by) this art form rather than as autonomous artists with wide-ranging abilities—while apparently having no measurable negative effect on the careers of non-marginalised poets.

### **Burden of Representation on Marginalised Poets**

The association of ‘authenticity’ with marginalised identity not only affects the way in which poets are perceived but also the material that they feel expected and/or incentivised to compose and perform. My evidence indicates that many poets with marginalised identities within the U.K. spoken word sphere feel pressure to perform material concerning their identities in a manner that is ambassadorial for their demographic. During my data collection, I asked poets two related questions to determine their experiences of performing as or being perceived as representatives for their demographics. First, I asked ‘When you’re performing, do you feel as though you’re speaking on behalf of any group or identity?’ Virtually none of the poets interviewed identify with this experience: most reject the prospect of framing their individual experiences and beliefs as representative for the experiences and beliefs of a wide-ranging demographic group or identity.

However, when I then asked ‘Do you ever feel as though your work is being taken to be representative of any group or identity?’ replies were divided down demographic lines. Generally, poets with marginalised identity markers (including poets of colour and female, queer, and working-class poets) report feeling as though audiences and event producers perceived them as representative for their

<sup>262</sup> This is not to argue that marginalised poets do not achieve commercial success; George the Poet, Kae Tempest, Anthony Anaxagorou, and many more poets with variously marginalised identity characteristics have earned well-deserved acclaim. Of course the issue of commercial success is arguably only linked to artistic merit through correlation: by noting that non-marginalised artists have commercial success, I am certainly not arguing that they are superior artists. Rather, I cite this to indicate that non-marginalised do not appear to be disadvantaged in the commercial sphere by their lack of marginality.

<sup>263</sup> Arguably, though, some of these poets’ public personas implicitly perform other forms of marginality, including working-class identity.

demographic group(s). Aliyah Hasinah, who is a Muslim woman of colour, shares that she feels as though she is taken as representative

All the time. You see that especially in like where you get booked ... people used to book me for loads and loads of charity events. And I'd just be like, 'No, I don't want to.' Because I've never written from an exact perspective. I just happened to be like a Muslim woman who is writing, and people would be like, 'Oh OK, well come and do this charity event' ... So there was a lot of like tokenism. (Interview)

Hasinah's experience is not unique: several of the U.K. spoken word poets with marginalised identities I interviewed felt as though they were often booked due (at least in part) to their marginality and the event organisers' perceptions that they could represent 'their' demographic. Dean Atta shares his experience of feeling tokenised, claiming that some institutions

might have used me [laughs] to stand in, you know, and say 'Here's a black poet, here's a queer poet, they can speak on behalf of that community at this event, or, you know, on this project, or doing this thing for us.' ... For whatever reason, I feel like I'm being chosen for the fact that I'm gay, or for the fact that I'm black, or for the fact that I've recently spoken about mental health. (Interview)<sup>264</sup>

Much of this tokenisation appears to occur when there is a demographic difference between the producer and audience of an event and the performer; as previously noted, differences in social capital and identity exacerbate the tendency to fetishise identity. Newcastle-based poet Rowan McCabe shares his experience touring: 'as a northerner you become a representative of that world ... if you're performing outside that region' (Interview). Consequently, these poets felt less able to speak as unique individuals but more as token representatives of their perceived identity groups, which are of course vast, multifaceted, and unable to be summarised through the experience of a single individual. The felt presence of the burden of representation on marginalised poets is also evidenced in the U.S. spoken word sphere, where

<sup>264</sup> Further research (outwith my data collection) indicates that these experiences of U.K. spoken word poets with marginalised identities feeling tokenised are common; see Iqbal (10), Hagan (10).



Weinstein and West find ‘many youth poets who identify with one or more marginalized social identities and feel a responsibility to represent those identities in poetry and performance in ways that counter dominant social representations’ (294).

Notably, in my data set virtually none of the poets without marginalised identity characteristics—i.e. cis-gendered, straight, white, middle-class men without strong regional accents—express feeling the burden of representation for their demographics. Due to their lack of marginality, they can be perceived as individuals instead of as speaking on behalf of their imagined communities.

### **Incentivisation to Perform Essentialising Material**

Furthermore, the disproportionate valuing of performances of marginalised identity within the U.K. spoken word scene has meant that some marginalised poets feel a pressure to perform their identity onstage using stereotypical or otherwise essentialising tropes. As was discussed in the Chapter 3 section regarding ‘authenticity of persona,’ spoken word poets are capable of mediating their performed personas in order to achieve success within these varying contexts. While some aspects of identity performance are less mutable than others—for example, clothing is easier to adapt than race—there are ways in which poets may alter their performed identities to suit a particular context. These may include strategic code switching (altering one’s language and accent), decisions regarding personal appearance (clothing, makeup, etc.), and adapting one’s performance style (e.g. being brash for a show in a bar versus subdued for a show in a church). However, despite poets’ agency in being able to perform their identities, in this section I analyse the pressure many poets feel to perform their identities using models and styles that may more immediately be recognised as ‘authentic’ by audiences.

Again, here I apply Somers-Willett’s theories on the U.S. slam context to the U.K. spoken word context. She argues that cultural stereotypes are benchmarks used by audiences to determine how ‘authentic’ a poet’s performance is, writing that ‘[a]udiences cannot judge slam poems about identity as “authentic” or “inauthentic” without having a model of norms to which they can compare that identity,’ and often the norms to which the audience reverts are stereotypical models of (racial, gendered, classed, abled, etc.) identity (76). For instance, if a black female poet is

performing a poem regarding her identity, Somers-Willett argues that the audience (consciously or not) will compare her performance of black womanhood with models available to them through the media and their lives. Her ‘authenticity’ as a black woman is thus determined in relation to cultural models of black femininity which include racist, sexist stereotypes. Deeply engrained societal biases, many of them prejudiced and unjust, thus inform an audience member’s determination of how ‘authentic’ an individual’s identity is.

This theory is grounded in the understanding that all identity performance is inherently shaped by—and in this context, limited by—the available models for identity performance. As life writing theorists Smith and Watson describe, ‘[t]he cultural meanings assigned [to] particular bodies affect the kinds of stories people can tell’ (51). These models are deeply rooted in ideologies deeming certain identity performances as more ‘authentic’ than others and heightened by capitalist forces valorising certain identities and narratives over others. Nguyen and Anthony’s research has analysed ‘the construction of limitations for what is accepted as legitimately ‘Black’ within a market context and how forces at this level perpetuate particular, accepted representations of Black authenticity’ within higher education (771). They refer to these stereotypical models of identity as ‘controlling images’ and explain that:

The dualities of othering and white ideals are once again prevalent as individuals construct self-identities and respond to what it means to be authentically Black, according to working-class or middle-class expectations. These classed dualities extend through transitions into higher education, as Black students face challenges in what it means to be ‘Black enough.’ Students often uphold controlling images in their constructions of self and others, based on accessibility and acceptance of these images (Ford 2011). Black college men are constrained in their presentation of Black masculinity by the ‘stereotypical and situational constructions of pretty boys, sellouts, gay or bisexual men, and thugs’ (Ford 2011, 51). For instance, one Black college male summarized a common experience of thinking at a subconscious level that, ‘I’ll just default to this thug persona, this hard

persona, and I know that will be accepted because I'm supposed to be like that anyway' (Ford 2011, 46). Students can thus feel they are being held accountable and judged according to these controlling images. (774-5)

Particularly for people of colour, the 'controlling images'—or stereotypical models of 'authentic' identity—incentivised within this system are often ones which depict their racial community as gritty or tough (i.e. the 'thug persona' cited above), rather than those depicting success (which presumably would be less interesting to white audiences subconsciously seeking narratives of difference). As Schur writes regarding the U.S. arts sphere, 'African American cultural workers have increasingly found commercial and critical success precisely to the extent to which they produce images, lyrics, and texts that revel in presenting the sordid "reality" of the African American experience' (166). In this regard, the expectations prescribed by 'authenticity of identity' (in the terms of my taxonomy) significantly limit the ways in which an individual can behave and express their identity and still be perceived as 'authentic' (Favor).

My data reveal that the effect that Somers-Willett describes is also present within the U.K. spoken word sphere: spoken word poets with marginalised identities express feeling pressure to perform material concerning these identities, often in a manner which conformed to societal expectations of what that identity should be.<sup>265</sup> These stereotypical identity tropes can be quite limiting for artists wishing to express their inherently more nuanced personalities and life stories. Joelle Taylor describes the way in which marginalised spoken word poets can be pigeonholed by societal notions of what their identities must be:

Gay people, we're allowed ... to tell the narrative of the coming-out story, of how different we are, of toilet cubicles, and all those kinds of things. I have heard that poem. It's been done. I'm a gay woman in the whole world. And I have a right, as much right as a white,

<sup>265</sup> There is also significant evidence of this effect within the U.K. literary sector more broadly: the 2020 *Rethinking Diversity in Publishing* report found that 'for a writer of colour to be published, their stories need to conform to the worldview of the white, middle-class editors who have particular expectations over what kind of stories are supposedly authentic to these writers' (Saha and van Lente 14). See also Brady; Kean (*Free Verse; Writing the Future*).

heterosexual, older male to be universal. (Interview)

To perform identity in a manner which deviates from essentialist stereotypes risks appearing ‘inauthentic.’ This, again, is the paradox underlying the concept of ‘authenticity’: when a poet expresses their identity in a manner which feels ‘authentic’ to them, rather than adhering to stereotypes, the audience may perceive this performance as ‘inauthentic’ because their standards of what is real and ‘authentic’ are grounded in these stereotypes. As Umbach and Humphrey aptly summarise, ‘[a]s soon as those who are stylised into bearers of authentic being speak for themselves, the conceit disintegrates’ (5). Thus poets navigating the contemporary spoken word scene encounter these expectations based purely on their identity markers and must determine the extent to which their performed identities will adhere to or reject these assumptions.

In a video filmed for the Process Productions YouTube channel’s “Let’s Talk About” conversation series, Tyrone Lewis and Antonia King, both poets of colour, discussed how they engage with race in their work (“Let’s Talk About | Black Poems”). It is a wide-ranging conversation addressing distinctions between representation and tokenism, the pressure to address race within the spoken word sphere, and common depictions of black identity within this genre. In this excerpt, Lewis discusses how performing material concerning his racial identity can be a technique for achieving success within the sphere:

AK: Do you feel like there’s a pressure to address blackness when you get up as a black performer?

TL: I - there definitely - I’ve only recently started addressing my blackness in poems and I’m very aware I have my black poems. ... I have my black poems that will come out in slams, cos black –

AK: [laughs]

TL: Cos that’s what has to happen. Like normally - ah yeah. [laughs]

AK: OK, let’s unpick that, why - why do you feel like your black poems -

TL: That’s going into slams in general. Like slams in general - it’s basically like what card can you play at a slam, what card can you play that you - that’s like - this will get people to feel something, cos

that's what slams - slams are very much let's get you to feel something, let's try to manipulate in some sense and like [mumbles] it's playing the race card.

AK: Do you think, wow.

TL: Like - to some extent.

AK: That's so interesting - do you do better in slams when you're like, "Yay I'm black!"

TL: Um - a little bit. ("Let's Talk About | Black Poems")

While King and Lewis do not specifically define what they mean by 'black poems,' they seem to be referring to poems in which the speaker is performing their blackness in a manner which they believe to be rewarded by spoken word audiences. King and Lewis express their preference instead for 'the individual's own poems,' which they describe as material which is more personally specific (and thus nuanced) rather than performing race in a flattened, stereotypical manner. They imply that feeling this burden of representation may lead marginalised poets to perform their identities in relatively clichéd manners. King shares her experience of feeling reduced to her racial identity and experiencing social pressure to perform material about it within the U.K. spoken word scene:

I really hate the idea that people of colour and black people feel the need to come on to the scene ... and they feel like they have to write that kind of poetry and they do feel reduced to 'OK I'm a black person and I'm about to get up at a poetry night with like lots of other really cool black poets ... I have to be black now!' ... you can feel that pressure. I know I certainly felt it when I was coming onto the scene. (Ibid)

She expresses her frustration that black poets feel pressure to 'be black and be woke, whatever that means' and asserts the importance of expressing one's own identity rather than subsuming to pressure to perform essentialised, stereotypical models of blackness: 'just write a poem about your first love if you want to or - or the time you fell over. Like sometimes just be you' (Ibid).

While Lewis admits to occasionally succumbing to the pressure to perform 'black poems,' he justifies this by stating that these poems are not composed in order

to be ‘slam-winning poems’ but rather are ‘genuine’ works which also happen to do well in the slam context: ‘as much as it’s playing the race card ... these are still poems that I actually have written myself, that I’m proud of ... especially if it’s a slam and it’s judged I will lean towards certain kind of poems because yes, it will do better here. ... But that’s not to say I only do it for that’ (Ibid). Again, while poets may mobilise certain poems in order to achieve success in the spoken word sphere, that does not necessarily mean that these poems have been composed (primarily) for that purpose.<sup>266</sup>

Several other poets with marginalised identity characteristics reference these types of clichéd poems which essentialise identity and contain relatively standard messages of empowerment. Connor Macleod recalls attending a poetry night at which ‘six performers, every single one of them had a – had a poem that was their own gay anthem. Which was wonderful. ... But every single one of them was exactly the same’ (Interview). Similarly, Michelle Madsen typifies ‘female poems’ versus less overt expressions of womanhood:

Yeah I have got poems about women ...but not in the kind of ... ‘This is this poem.’ They’re not like that. They kind of like exist sort of more in an in-between space. So sometimes I feel a bit like, um, should I write stuff that’s a bit more overt? But ... I hate those poems. They get – they don’t last. (Interview)

Among many of the U.K. spoken word poets interviewed, there is a sense that often these clichéd identity-expression poems—Lewis’ and King’s ‘black poems,’ Macleod’s ‘gay anthems,’ for instance—do not represent the highest quality poetry. Rather, the fact that these poems are written to a formula for achieving success within the sphere ‘inauthenticates’ them.<sup>267</sup> This perception of course varies amongst poets, but it illustrates the fraught nature of composing poems regarding one’s own

<sup>266</sup> Some spoken word poets subvert this pressure to perform stereotypical models of identity by performing work which cleverly draws attention to it. Parody can be a powerful tool here; for instance, Lewis performs a piece entitled “Not Another Race Poem” in which he subverts the audience’s (likely) expectations of a poem regarding his ethnicity based on the poem’s title and instead tells the narrative of a running race (“Tyrone Lewis - Not Another Race Poem”).

<sup>267</sup> As the next section will describe, these poems could be interpreted as ‘inauthentic of motivation’ if perceived to be composed solely in order to achieve success by manipulating the valorisation of marginality within the art form.

identity: perform identity-focused poems which do not conform to societal stereotypes and risk being perceived as ‘inauthentic’ by one’s audiences, or perform identity-focused poems which do conform to these stereotypes and risk being perceived as ‘inauthentic’ by one’s peers.<sup>268</sup>

Furthermore, when spoken word poets are conscious of how to perform identity in a manner likely to be perceived as ‘authentic’—for example, when they understand that ‘black poems’ or ‘gay anthems’ are likely to win them success—they may then disproportionately emphasise these identity characteristics not only in their poetry but also in their general onstage personas. While one’s visible and audible identity is less mutable than one’s clothing choices (i.e. I as a white woman could not perform black masculinity in any legitimate way), individuals can adapt their identity performances to fit into what they think their audiences expect of them—usually, these culturally entrenched stereotypical models. For instance, the hypothetical black male poet in Somers-Willett’s model may understand how to perform his black masculinity in a manner that audiences are likely to perceive as ‘real’ in order to win slams.

Artists can respond to this pressure to adhere to ‘controlling images’ (in Nguyen and Anthony’s terms) in a range of ways. Joelle Taylor, while expressing frustration at the way in which she is stereotyped due to her working-class accent, admits that ‘I’ve manipulated that and played with it a bit, so I am the person who swears the most onstage’<sup>269</sup> (Interview). Others deliberately work to avoid playing into these stereotypical identities. Kevin P. Gilday also discusses feeling a pressure to over-perform his working class identity:

poetry is an overwhelmingly middle class pursuit. And I think by even being involved in it, there’s an assumption that you must be middle class. ... So it means that any working class poets that come into the scene feel like they have to be really performatively working class.

<sup>268</sup> Of course, this is not a binary option; there is a great deal of nuance in the extent to which performances of self reinforce or reject essentialised models of identity.

<sup>269</sup> While I use Taylor’s statement here as an example of artists performing in line with audience’s stereotype-based expectations of their identities, it is important to note that much of Taylor’s work is an active rejection of these stereotypes: she writes and performs eloquent, nuanced material concerning the diverse experiences encompassed within womanhood, working-class identity, queerness, and more subjects.

And sometimes what I feel is like a stereotyped way, which annoys me slightly. (Interview)

Conscious of this pressure, Gilday chooses not to capitulate to it: instead he tries to present a more nuanced version of his class identity by ‘embody[ing] a Scottish working class ethic which isn’t performatively working class’ (Interview). In Gilday’s experience, performing a more nuanced, non-stereotypical class identity means rejecting the pressures he encounters in the spoken word sphere. Similarly, the Repeat Beat Poet actively works to counteract limiting stereotypes within his work: ‘I try to un-mediate as much as I can. I try to provide as broad an aspect of myself as possible to show – to show, you know, all the nuance and complexity that a person, specifically in my case a person of colour, a black British person, can have. Because the assumption would be not that’ (Interview). Again, this demonstrates the irony at the heart of performative ‘authenticity’: the Repeat Beat Poet deliberately expresses his identity in a certain fashion to demonstrate how nuanced it is—thus, performing it in a curated fashion—in response to pressures to perform it in a stereotyped fashion, which are rooted in a desire for ‘authenticity.’ He is crafting his onstage identity in order to avoid appearing ‘authentic’ by stereotypical standards, and as a result could be seen as not ‘authentically’ expressing his identity (because he is curating it).

Furthermore, when performances of certain identities are incentivised, spoken word poets may be driven to perform and/or adopt these identities, leading to a cycle of generic identity production and reinforcement. Somers-Willett explains that

If slam judges reward poets who are authentic in their performance of an identity, and if that authenticity is actually constructed through this process of reward, then the poetry slam itself is a representational practice that *authenticates* certain voices and identities. In short, through their system of audience reception and reward, poetry slams generate the very identities that poets and audiences expect to hear. They prove to be sites of negotiation between poet and audience where the performance of identity is judged for its success or failure



(its authenticity or inauthenticity) in the world. (76)<sup>270</sup>

The way in which poets perform identity on spoken word stages, then, can not only be prescribed through stereotypes, but may also be prescriptive in and of itself: it may serve to restage and reinforce these stereotypes.

This reiteration of certain narratives and identities can affect not only the audience's perception of the poet and their identity, but also the way in which the poet perceives their own identity. As Weinstein and West argue, 'concepts such as race, gender, and sexuality have profoundly real effects on people's lives. When poets make certain truth claims, and/or claim specific identities in a poem, they sometimes find themselves fenced in by their own words in ways that later feel confining' (293). In some cases this may be a beneficial speech act: for instance, performing feminist messages which claim an empowered female self may lead a poet to feel more confident in their identity. Pedagogical scholarship has contended that through spoken word educational programmes, youth poets actively construct identities and world-views (Jocson; Rudd) and research into spoken word poetry as a psychotherapeutic practice indicates that participation in this art form may benefit mental health (Alvarez and Mearns; Maddalena). However, theoretically this effect might also have negative repercussions: for instance, the repeated performance of poems regarding oppression and trauma could have a negative effect on a poet's mental health, particularly if these poems do not receive the success that the poet anticipated.<sup>271</sup>

That this effect occurs within an artistic sphere championed for 'giving voice to the voiceless' and being a radical forum for positive self-affirmation is deeply ironic. Certainly spoken word poets can experience real senses of agency and empowerment through this form, as noted previously. However, the fact that the genre gives the illusion of free expression while subtly hemming in the identities and narratives poets are encouraged to perform is rather insidious. Schwarz provides a

<sup>270</sup> Rivera's research into the U.S. amateur youth poetry slam scene also critically examines how identities and authenticities are developed and performed through this forum.

<sup>271</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, my data indicates that spoken word poets who frequently perform autobiographical poetry on difficult subjects develop various coping mechanisms (i.e. emotional presence or distance) to avoid eroding their mental health. Again, further research into the psychotherapeutic effects of participating in contemporary spoken word poetry is required to support this theory.

concise summary of this contradictory system:

The authenticity ethic has promised to disembody individuals from structural constraints and social scripts associated with ascribed identities—but ended up reinforcing the very same constraints. While giving more leeway to the privileged it further constrains non-hegemonic groups: what it gives with the one hand (while urging actors to engage in introspection for moral direction) it takes with the other (while telling subjects what they should find inside based on their nominal ascribed identities). Constraining actors precisely while celebrating their freedom, from the very heart of liberalism, it is a form of symbolic violence typical of our late-modern times. (12)

Artists are often aware that responding to this pressure to essentialise their own identities through their work can not only reinforce stereotypes but also be a form of self-exploitation.

Ragan Fox, a gay American spoken word poet and scholar, has reflected upon these effects within his poetry and research. Within his practice, he ‘put[s] my gay body on a stage, where my mannerisms and styles of speech are willfully paraded and often celebrated. ...I enjoy playing the role of gay boy and frequently become more flamboyant when I perform gay-themed work’ (421-22). However, he questions whether this exaggeration of his identity is a form of self-exploitation given the economy valuing marginalised identity within spoken word. Realising that much of the material he plans to perform at an event where the marketing includes a huge message on the cement outside proclaiming ‘RAGAN FOX IS QUEER’ concerns his sexuality, he wonders

Am I pandering? Am I complicit in my own marginalization? The narrated and narrative events co-constitute one another. I am “Ragan Fox, a gay poet”; I cannot escape the gravitational force of settings that demand me to be alternately and simultaneously “homosexual,” “gay,” “queer,” and “faggot,” regardless of connotation or philosophical consideration. (422)

Fox’s quandary is illustrative of the ‘dangers that always accompany autobiographical performance,’ which as Heddon observes include ‘problematic

essentialising gestures; the construction of limiting identities; the reiteration of normative narratives; the erasure of “difference” and issues of structure inequality, ownership, appropriation, and exploitation’ (157). All artists engaged in performances of self, regardless of their ascribed and/or performed identities, must negotiate the fine lines between agency and exploitation, between empowered self-assertion and capitulation (consciously or not) to problematic stereotype. While my analysis here may seem critical of the U.K. spoken word poets who might be perceived as capitulating<sup>272</sup> to essentialising pressures, the blame does not lie with the poets but within the overall system disproportionately valuing these limiting narratives and identity tropes.

### **Non-Marginal Poets and Appropriation**

Thus far I have argued that due to cultural prejudices associating marginalised identity with ‘authenticity,’ poets with marginalised identity characteristics are inherently perceived as more ‘authentic’ and face pressure to perform their identities through stereotypical models. While the perception of one strain of ‘authenticity’ does not immediately lead to the perception of other strains—as this thesis has indicated thus far, strains of ‘authenticity’ interconnect but do not act as a single bloc—my data indicate that the perception of a poet as ‘authentic of identity’ may lead to a strengthening of the perception of other strains of ‘authenticity.’ By this I specifically mean that poets with marginalised identities may be perceived as inherently more ‘honest’ and ‘sincere’ than non-marginalised poets, whether or not they are performing essentialised modes of identity. Joelle Taylor explains this effect:

white older men are not held responsible in the same way that we are, as the sort of more marginalised communities. So you don’t expect –

<sup>272</sup> Again, I do not imply here that any addressing of one’s identity onstage is a capitulation to the pressures within the spoken word sphere. I am specifically discussing the conscious decision to compose and perform materials which perform identity through stereotypical models in order to achieve success within the genre. However, these pressures are not overt and it is challenging to disentangle a poet’s ‘natural’ creative expression with any capitulation to underlying forces within the genre: again, poets’ complicity within these systems is difficult to discern and they should not necessarily be criticised for the ways in which they express self within this fraught system.

you know, a Tony Harrison poem, even with such a working-class background, but you wouldn't expect him to have gone through that situation necessarily. You don't expect [Simon] Armitage to have gone through various things. Very famous poem he does "The Shout" ... it was a guy he knew from school, but he didn't go through that necessarily. But he won't be like ... 'Oh my God I'm so sorry for your loss.' People never say that to him. Yeah? Cos there's not the expectation that that is a confessional poem. He is allowed to be the viewer of this. We are not allowed to be artists. We're not allowed to be viewers of the world, observers in the same way. (Interview)

As explained in Chapter 2, all spoken word poets operate under the same autobiographical and referential pacts established in the genre. However, non-marginalised poets are able to perform material which will less immediately be assumed as 'true' as the work of their more marginalised peers. J. Johnson observes this difference in the level of complexity granted to poets of different ethnic backgrounds in his research on the U.S. spoken word scene: 'white people are granted a degree of legitimacy and nuance and ... black poets have to work harder for nuance so that we are not reduced to angry black poets' (*Killing Poetry* 22). This has serious implications for the critical discourse in that the work of non-marginalised poets (i.e. cis, straight, white, middle-class men) may be perceived more as crafted material (artifice, art) rather than 'authentic' expression, leading their work to be taken more seriously *as art* than the work of their marginalised peers. This effect has contributed to a tiered system of artistic criticism in which work of poets from marginalised identities is inadequately acknowledged within the critical discourse due to underlying societal prejudice; this effect will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

This difference in the perception of autobiographical truth-telling between marginalised and non-marginalised spoken word poets can also affect the material they feel they are able to perform. My data indicate that non-marginalised spoken word poets are more likely to perform non-autobiographical material than marginalised poets. As I noted in Chapter 2, the majority of those research participants who do not place a high value on veracity in spoken word poetry are

straight white men. This non-conformity with the genre's over-arching autobiographical pact may be caused by several factors. First, non-marginalised poets may not perform as much autobiographical material simply because they recognise that their relatively privileged identities and narratives are not as valued within the spoken word sphere as marginalised identities and narratives. They may also simply not feel the same urge to write material concerning their identities since their identities are less politicised and more represented within mainstream media.

Second, because non-marginalised poets are less burdened by the assumption of truth-telling, they may feel more leeway to perform non-autobiographical material. While the majority of the spoken word poets I interviewed consider performing non-autobiographical material using first-person voice to be taboo (unless the poem is obviously a persona work, as established within Chapters 2 and 3), several of the white male poets I interviewed express that they felt there was nothing wrong with appropriating others' identities and narratives within their material. Jim Monaghan, for instance, argues that mining others' experiences makes for richer, more nuanced material:

I've never had any qualms about stealing other people's histories or emotions for poems, because I think it's - there's much more to an emotion than just how you experience it, you know. Sometimes it's - you find a better way of telling the story, sometimes you just think it's a better story. Someone else's story's better than mine, you know?

(Interview)

I argue that non-marginalised poets are more comfortable with performing non-autobiographical narratives because they feel the autobiographical pact less intensely: they understand that the audience will not as immediately interpret their work as autobiographical, and thus feel permission to perform fictional narratives as they do not perceive this as breaking the autobiographical pact. While there are of course other factors influencing the extent to which any spoken word poet fictionalises narratives—they may, for instance, draw artistic inspiration from other

genres which allow more character-play, such as theatre<sup>273</sup>—these data further evidence the influence an artist’s identity has on the material they feel comfortable creating.

The hypothesis that non-marginalised U.K. spoken word poets feel less restricted by the autobiographical and referential pacts is borne out through observing differences in material across demographics. Although this is difficult to accurately quantify, I have observed that white male poets perform non-autobiographical material—whether persona work, surreal narratives, or other non-confessional material—at a higher rate than individuals from other demographics.<sup>274</sup> Several other poets I interviewed also identified this trend for white male poets in the U.K. spoken word scene to appropriate identities and narratives. Freddie Alexander criticises this tendency: ‘the co-opting of identity because you feel entitled to that identity as a performance is a form of violence. That is encouraged by spoken word, because of the assumption by white, cisgendered, middle-class poets that the way to make money off spoken word is by performing poetry like that’ (Interview). Dan Simpson also decries this trend:

the absolute worst is when it’s not someone’s sort of lived experience, and they’re kind of co-opting repressed group’s kind of point of view, I guess, and difficulties. Not a struggle you’ve come through but you’re talking about the struggle of someone else and making it cultural capital, I guess. And getting extra points because you’ve recognised that someone who isn’t like you might have it harder.  
(Interview)

Simpson further shares that his awareness of this trend has specifically led him to avoid these topics and techniques, as he does not feel that it is appropriate for him to profit from the popularity of narratives of marginality given that he does not

<sup>273</sup> Robin Cairns, a Glasgow-based performance poet and events organiser, for example, is also an actor in local productions and draws inspiration from the cabaret theatre tradition (Interview). His work is characterised by surreal narratives and a comedic tone.

<sup>274</sup> Again, here I am describing general structures and assumptions at work throughout the spoken word sphere. I do not wish to imply that there are no straight white men writing autobiographically, nor that the work of straight white men is never perceived as autobiographical. I simply contend that the underlying pressure to perform one’s identity in certain manners in the spoken word scene manifests itself in part through poets of different demographics feeling different levels of permission to perform certain material.

personally face identity-based oppression (Interview).

Another way in which non-marginalised poets can benefit from the popularity of marginalised identities in the spoken word sphere, despite not having these identities, is through performing allyship (strategically or incidentally). Poetry which expresses liberal political opinions and support for marginalised groups is popular and commonplace within the contemporary U.K. spoken word sphere. Jess Green observes that ‘the kind of poetry that wins slams I think tends to be issues-based ... stuff addressing minority issues’ (Interview). Such statements by poets may be strategic performances of allyship in order to achieve success: in Dan Simpson’s experience, spoken word poets frequently ‘point out inequalities we all already know ... And it definitely happens from people who aren’t—who haven’t experienced that inequality themselves, because they’re not gay, or they’re not disabled, or they’re not ... black’ (Interview). Of course, poets making these statements in their work are likely not (solely) motivated by a desire to achieve success within the sphere: many are genuinely passionate about these issues and wish to proclaim their opinions through their work. However, it is pertinent to consider how, when marginalised identities and narratives are fetishised, liberal political statements may also be motivated by a desire to align oneself with marginalised groups and in so doing, ‘authenticate’ oneself by association (to use Peterson’s language, “In Search of Authenticity” 1087). The next section will further consider how spectators’ perceptions of poets’ motivations for performing certain work can influence their sense of these poets as more or less ‘authentic.’

### **Section Conclusion**

In concluding this section, I return again to the positive note on which I began: the expression of one’s identity through spoken word poetry can be an empowering, radical experience for many poets. The issues discussed here which derive from the association of ‘authenticity’ with marginality are pervasive and rooted deeply within unjust systems underlying contemporary society. However, through becoming aware of these problems and the ways in which they affect the performance, consumption, and evaluation of contemporary spoken word poetry, this scene can begin the work of actively mitigating them.

## **Authenticity of Motivation**

Dr. Martens is all about authenticity, originality, and rebellious self-expression. Spoken word poetry is rooted in these same values, and is the perfect medium to give voice to the brand.

—“New Blood Entry - Spoken Word by Dr. Martens,” n.p.

In autumn 2019, Apples and Snakes published an article entitled “Slam Poetry: How Do You Maintain Truth and Authenticity in the Face of Success and Demand?” containing accounts from established U.K. spoken word poets regarding how they stay ‘true’ to themselves while progressing in their careers (Craven-Griffiths et al.). The very title of this article frames personal ‘authenticity’ in a binary against success: it implies though career progression inherently threatens one’s capacity for ‘authenticity’ in this art form. Although this philosophy can be found in many art forms and contemporary society writ large, I contend that it is particularly pervasive within spoken word poetry due to the genre’s heavy valorisation of the poet’s ‘authenticity.’

The penultimate strain of ‘authenticity’ within my taxonomy is ‘authenticity of motivation’: the perception that the poet’s motivations in composing and performing their work are ‘pure’ (i.e. creativity, activism, passion) and untainted by the pursuit of commercial success and/or wealth. In this section I trace the history of this connotation of ‘authenticity’ as reactionary to the perceived excesses of wealth and analyse its influence within the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene. I then indicate the importance of this strain of ‘authenticity’ within this scene through a case study of the controversy following the use of U.K. spoken word poets for several advertising campaigns, most notably by Jeep and the Nationwide Building Society. I conclude by considering the negative implications this framing of creative ‘authenticity’ and career success as mutually exclusive has for the professional development of U.K. spoken word poets.



## Contextualising ‘Authenticity of Motivation’

‘Authenticity of motivation’ is closest to the Romantic connotation of ‘authenticity’ in that it considers the temptation of wealth and indeed all commercial pursuits to be inherently ‘inauthentic’ (Schwarz). As explained in Chapter 1, this ‘notion that art and commerce are in an immutable opposition is not an eternal principle’ but originated in the Romantic movement, in which a lifestyle of wealth and excess was juxtaposed against the bohemian, more modest (or rather, impoverished) existences of artists (D. Weinstein 58). The value of ‘authenticity of motivation’ is particularly apparent in the societal valorisation of the artist as ‘pure’ and the deeply problematic fetishisation of the starving artist, which can be found across many art forms but (as I will argue shortly) is particularly pervasive in contemporary spoken word poetry. In Trilling’s landmark 1975 text *Sincerity and Authenticity* he claims that ‘[m]oney, in short, is the principle of the inauthentic in human existence’ (124). Cobb argues that in order for an object to be perceived as ‘authentic,’ it must be seen as existing outwith the capitalist system: ‘to create an aura of authenticity in the age of digital reproduction, an object or a text must seem not only irreproducible, original, but also uncorrupted by Western capitalism, even though these very objects rely on the marketplace for dissemination’ (5-6).

Of course, as with all ‘authentic’/‘inauthentic’ binaries, this is unstable and subjective; while ‘[c]ritical assessments abound which take for granted that inchoate values of truth and honesty depend upon an opposition between art and commerce,’ the relationship between the artist and capital is multidimensional and ultimately only one factor in the myriad strains that compose perceived ‘authenticity’ (Behr 2). Furthermore, within contemporary society, it is virtually impossible for artists to *be* ‘authentic of motivation’ in this manner: to create and distribute art outwith capitalism is not particularly feasible,<sup>275</sup> particularly for artists relying on their craft

<sup>275</sup> Phelan argues powerfully in her seminal text *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) that liveness allows art to exist outwith capitalism: such a theory would posit that ephemeral, performance-based art forms may be ‘authentic’ in this manner. However, Auslander refutes this theory in his key text *Liveness* (1999) on the basis that there are no ‘clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediated ones’ (7). While Phelan’s theory is attractive in its idealisation of the performing arts and the power of their ephemerality, ultimately I concur with Auslander that even live art forms are constrained by commercial and societal forces and thus cannot be considered inherently ‘authentic’ in this sense (and in any case, this thesis argues that no item or concept has inherent ‘authenticity’).

for their primary income. As Behr writes within the context of rock music,<sup>276</sup> any ‘position that places rock in opposition to capital is inconsistent in the face of evidence about how it is made’ (15). However, artists may deploy certain strategies to downplay their inevitable complicity within capitalist systems. They may make claims to being inspired purely by a desire to create art, to engage with audiences, to convey political/social messages, or other acceptably ‘authentic’ motivations, rather than by a desire for wealth or success. They might also avoid using clichéd styles established as ‘crowd-pleasers,’ or other apparently easy routes to success, in order to evade any perception that they are simply replicating a successful formula (in this sense, performing ‘authenticity of voice’ can reinforce the perception of ‘authenticity of motivation’).

As with each of the strains introduced in my taxonomy, an artist’s actual motivations for creating their work are relatively inconsequential to *the perception of* their ‘authenticity of motivation’: what matters is how these motivations are performed and framed. As Moore writes (again within the context of rock music), ‘this commercial/authentic polarity is illusory, since all mass-mediated music is subject to commercial imperatives, but what matters to listeners is whether such subjection appears to be accepted, resisted, or negotiated with, by those to whom they are listening’ (218). An artist’s motivations may in reality be utterly ‘pure’—insofar as purity from commercialism is conceivable—but viewed externally, they can still be perceived as greedy, overly ambitious, or otherwise venal, and thus ‘inauthentic of motivation.’

Additionally, the associations between marginalised identity and inherent ‘authenticity’ discussed in the previous section are again relevant in this context. Although any artist can be perceived as ‘inauthentic of identity’ based on their behaviours, work, or other factors, artists with certain marginalised identity characteristics may be perversely inoculated from this judgment. As Waltz and James

<sup>276</sup> As Moore and D. Weinstein have each identified, ‘authenticity of motivation’ is particularly important within rock music, where ‘selling out’ or otherwise accepting commercialism may be perceived as a betrayal of rock’s countercultural ethos. D. Weinstein charts how ‘[t]he art-authenticity—commerce binary ... has persisted into the present in the successive musical and critical discourses of all of the inheritors of sixties rock: art rock, arena rock, the singer-songwriters, heavy metal, punk, and, later, indie, rap, and alternative. The binary has become the guiding myth-structure of rock’ (59-60).

have analysed, disability can also be a powerful marker of ‘authenticity’ often capitalised upon in marketing. D. Weinstein (rather crudely) observes that addiction and mental illness may somewhat immunise artists from being considered ‘inauthentic of motivation,’ noting that rock music critics ‘champion heroin-addicted musicians and rockers who are off their rockers... Addicts and the insane are automatically authentic because their grip on rationality is too weak to allow them to “sell out”’ (67). As discussed in the previous section, while this effect may be superficially beneficial (through conferring the value associated with ‘authenticity’ on these artists), ultimately it is rooted in deeply ableist prejudices and systematically undermines these individuals’ perceived legitimacy as professional artists.

### **‘Authenticity of Motivation’ Within Spoken Word**

Although ‘authenticity of motivation’ is valued across many artistic genres, it appears to be particularly emphasised within the contemporary spoken word sphere across international contexts. In her research into the Canadian spoken word sphere, Eid concludes that the perception of ‘authenticity of motivation’ is important to the audience in their appraisal of the poet: ‘to sense that a poet is performing not for the “right reasons,” such as those that embody the previous findings of social purpose and real purpose, contributes to the audience’s perception of the poet as being inauthentic in his or her performance’ (45). Somers-Willett has similarly argued that ‘free’ expression uncorrupted by commercialism was valorised within the U.S. slam scene of the early 2000s, observing a

recurring conflation of urban black culture, masculinity, *poverty*, and authenticity in the *Def Poetry* and *Slam* projects—a conflation made by performers, filmmakers, film reviewers, and mainstream audiences alike—that fosters the illusion of an authentic black, urban, *underclass* expression *free from the artificial trappings of commercialism*. (99, emphasis added)

An article concerning the spoken word scene in the Philippines entitled “If your intention is corrupted by a thirst for virality, you aren’t likely to last in the spoken word scene” further indicates the value of ‘authenticity of motivation’ in this genre globally (ANCX Staff n.p.).

Somewhat ironically, spoken word poetry has developed as an art form and gained mainstream attention primarily through a competitive, commercial format, in the sense that the popularity of the poetry slam event has attracted audiences to this genre. However, rhetoric has developed within the slam context to discourage ‘inauthenticity of motivation’ amongst competitors: the adage ‘the points are not the point; the point is poetry’ has become part of the customary introduction to slams, particularly in North America.<sup>277</sup> Slam founder Marc Smith’s guide to how to run a slam similarly discourages poets from being motivated in an ‘inauthentic’ manner: ‘competing in a poetry slam is not about getting the highest score, walking away with a pocketful of cash, or trying to fill a trophy case’ (Smith and Kraynak, *Stage a Poetry Slam* 19). This does occur, however: for instance, Connor Macleod admits composing a ‘dreadful, dreadful poem about sexual assault ... in order that I’d win a slam’ which he now regrets due to what he considers the piece’s ‘inauthenticity of motivation’ and no longer performs (Interview).

In her interview, Catherine Wilson discusses how important the perception of ‘inauthenticity of motivation’ can be in the ethics of the contemporary spoken word sphere. First, she claims that ‘authenticity of motivation’ is crucial due to the often quite sensitive, charged issues within contemporary spoken word poetry: ‘because all these poems are about kind of experiences of racism or sexism or homophobia or sexual assault or loss, it would be very wrong to write on them having not experienced them in an effort to win a competition’ (Interview). While she clarifies that she does not fundamentally take issue with the idea of ‘inhabit[ing] someone else’s worldview,’ she contends that assuming a separate persona or telling fictional narratives (i.e. breaking ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘authenticity of narrative’) *primarily in order to achieve success* would be inappropriate:

There’s a different social contract when reading a book and when seeing a poem, especially at a slam. Because at a slam, your goal is essentially to win. Or you have a competition-based goal, and the prize for that might be money, the prize for that might be to do with publishing, the prize for that might just be a bottle of wine, but the

<sup>277</sup> This adage is credited to U.S. poet and slam organiser Allan Wolf (Smith and Kraynak, *Stage a Poetry Slam* 19).

fact there is a competition necessarily has some form of hierarchy, even though there is the ‘Let’s judge art’ or, you know, ‘Judging art is stupid’ or ‘All the poems are great’ or ‘The best poet never wins’— even though those things are trotted out, there is an element of hierarchy and trying to better yourself or be the best. And it means that when you write on something that isn’t authentic, it is seen as a tool, that you have used a tool that people agree with to get ahead.  
(Interview)

Wilson’s perspective is that ‘inauthenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘inauthenticity of narrative’ may be acceptable in some situations within contemporary spoken word poetry, but only if the work does not also breach ‘authenticity of motivation.’

Wilson’s statement also demonstrates that if an artist is ‘inauthentically’ motivated in their creative process by a desire for commercial, competitive, or career success, this not only has the potential to affect the audience’s perception of the work, but also the poet’s reputation within the social community of spoken word poets. Gregory’s research finds that both U.S. and U.K. poets ‘divide slam participants into authentic, original artists and career-minded impostors, interested only in personal gain,’ indicating the importance of ‘authenticity of motivation’ not only in gauging the quality of the poems but also the moral status of the poet within the social spoken word community (263). Eid similarly concludes that ‘authenticity of motivation’ is important within the social community of spoken word poets: ‘if others perceive a poet as being too concerned with winning the competitions, a sense of inauthentic performance or dishonesty may gradually arise with regards to the poet as performer’ (28). Thus, as I have indicated with several other strains of ‘authenticity’ within this thesis, being ‘inauthentic of motivation’ can have ramifications not only for the reception of one’s work by audience and critics, but also for one’s reputation within one’s artistic community.

### **Case Study: Poetry in Advertising**

The importance of ‘authenticity of motivation’ within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry has been highlighted recently by controversies over poets

appearing in advertisements for various organisations and corporations. Within the past five years, several U.K. companies have hired spoken word poets to feature in advertising campaigns, including Jeep (George the Poet,<sup>278</sup> “Renegade” 2015), O2 (George the Poet, “Breathe It All In” 2018), ASOS (Hollie McNish, 2016), and most notably, Nationwide (Sugar J, Iona Lee, Toby Champion and others, 2017-present<sup>279</sup>).<sup>280</sup> This is certainly not the first time poetry has been used a marketing tool; punk poetry icon John Cooper Clarke alone has leant his iconic voice and image to Fred Perry, Sugar Puffs, and McCain oven chips, and poets including ee cummings, Robert Frost, and many more have contributed to advertising campaigns. While there has always been controversy regarding the fraught, co-dependent relationship between commerce and the arts, these more recent collaborations sparked a fierce debate illustrating the high moral value of ‘authenticity of motivation’ within contemporary spoken word poetry. Here I focus on the reaction to two of these advertising campaigns—George the Poet in 2015 for Jeep’s Renegade vehicle, and the ‘Voices Nationwide’ series beginning in 2017—by both the public and the U.K. spoken word community.

In 2015, Jeep debuted an advertisement for their Renegade vehicle featuring a voiceover by George the Poet.<sup>281</sup> The poem champions a rebellious spirit and celebrates personal ‘authenticity,’ claiming ‘individuality doesn’t roll off a production line’ and urging listeners to ‘reclaim your real from the mundane lane’ and ‘overtake the fake’ (“Jeep Renegade Feat. George the Poet”). It uses no set metre but employs some light internal rhyme, and much of it consists of seemingly unlinked buzzwords and phrases, for instance: ‘you / unique / go straight / forward / think clear / mutineer / salvage your soul / progressive / immersive / transformational’<sup>282</sup> (Ibid). The video features a predominantly white, well-clothed cast driving around and engaging in such ‘rebellious’ activities as running through a

<sup>278</sup> ‘George the Poet’ is the pseudonym of George Mpanga.

<sup>279</sup> This campaign is still active as of mid-2020.

<sup>280</sup> This trend is certainly not limited to the U.K.: many North American companies are also using spoken word for commercial purposes, including Underarmour (Saul Williams) and Calvin Klein (Kendrick Lamar).

<sup>281</sup> This video was uploaded to YouTube by the Jeep UK account in February 2015; it remained online through late 2019 but as of mid-2020 it has been removed from that channel.

<sup>282</sup> I lineated this quotation in references to the pauses in speech.

museum, cliff diving, and dancing at a rave.

In early 2017 the Nationwide Building Society launched a campaign entitled “Voices Nationwide” featuring spoken word poets from a wide demographic range performing short pieces to camera. These poems, which the poets wrote themselves following prompts, are generally themed around home, belonging, family, friendship, and community. Apart from a couple of advertisements directly concerning the history of the company, the advertisements generally do not refer to Nationwide by name or directly discuss its specific services. The poets tend to wear casual, everyday clothing, and the advertisements are set in quotidian locations: generally inside cosy-looking homes, but also in cafes, shops, etc. (see fig. 2). The poems themselves are generally fairly simple, some employing rhyme structures, some not, without any backing music.

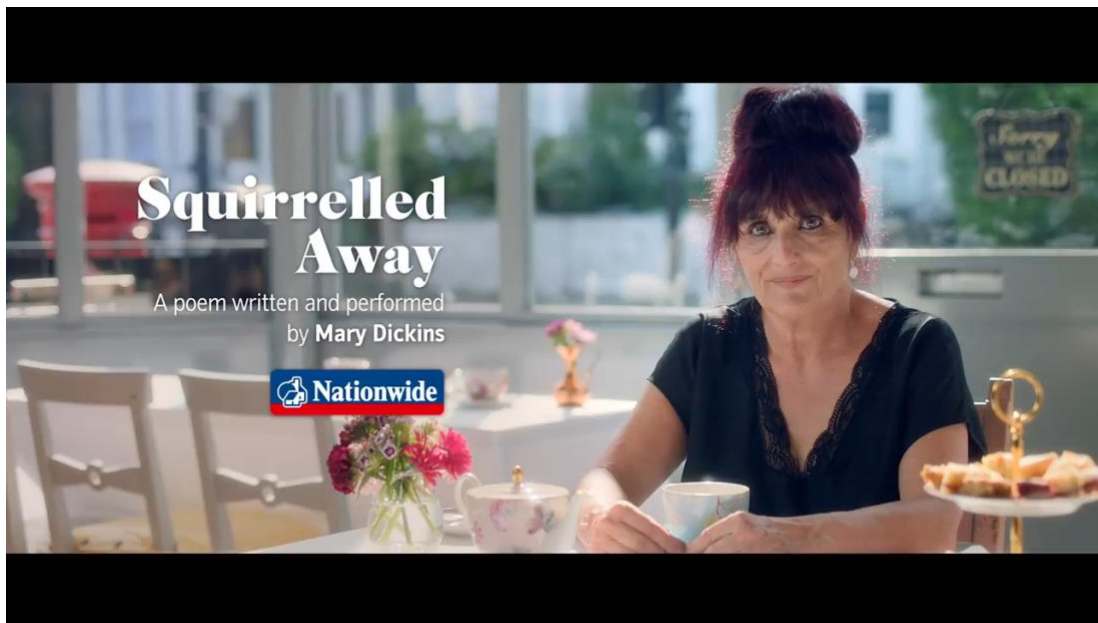


Figure #2: Still from “Voices Nationwide: Mary on squirrelling away a bit each month.”

*YouTube*, uploaded by Nationwide Building Society, 10 July 2017,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnbLS7YwNI4>.

In both the Jeep and Nationwide campaigns, the poems heavily use the rhetoric ‘of authenticity’: for instance, the Jeep advertisement’s encouragement to ‘reclaim your real,’ ‘overtake the fake.’ The agencies producing these advertising campaigns are transparent about the fact that in hiring spoken word poets for this

work, their intent was to capitalise upon the ‘authenticity’ associated with spoken word poetry and thus to imbue their brand with that quality. The Chief Marketing Officer for Nationwide explains that

the voices of *ordinary people* are rarely heard within financial services advertising today. These ads provide an opportunity for Nationwide to go *back to its roots* in a powerful, *authentic* and thought-provoking way while giving people a voice on the things that matter most in their lives. (Bennison qtd. in Farey-Jones n.p., emphasis added)

The description of the poets as ‘ordinary people,’ rather than paid professional artists, demonstrates the stereotype of spoken word as a vehicle for ‘genuine,’ i.e. uncrafted, utterance undertaken by amateurs rather than professional artists. It also undermines the notion of spoken word poetry as a legitimate career, in that these poets are referred to as ‘ordinary people’ instead of individuals excelling in their creative fields.

Furthermore, a figure at the creative agency behind the advertisements articulates the societal belief in ‘authenticity of narrative’ within spoken word, and thus the notion of spoken word poets as trustworthy figures: ‘Each of these poets brings a *raw honesty* to the words they have written, the subjects they’ve chosen and the way in which they are performed. It’s rare and refreshing to see such *authenticity* in a world of advertising *artifice*’ (Thornton qtd. in Farey-Jones n.p., emphasis added). As poet Caroline Bird summarises, what is occurring is the

commodification of authenticity where banks and mortgage lenders or whatever realise that poetry has a currency in terms of people think it tells the truth and believe it. So they’re like, ooh, “We want adverts to convince people, you know, to do things.” Right? “Let’s get poets and use their authenticity to convince people.” (Interview)

That marketing officers working with such large corporations as Jeep and Nationwide are conscious of the implicit association of spoken word poetry with ‘authenticity’ and veracity indicates how entrenched this perception is societally.

In February 2017, two years after the Jeep Renegade advertisement debuted and as the Nationwide advertisements were beginning to air on U.K. television, Luke



Wright posted a video to his YouTube channel performing a poem written in response to the Renegade advertisement.<sup>283</sup> The description introducing the poem explains ‘I fell in love with live poetry because it was subversive and anti-establishment. It’s so depressing seeing that on adverts now’ (“Renegade Poets (in adverts)”). In his poem, Wright cites George the Poet’s general self-marketing as a socially conscious artist speaking truth to power,<sup>284</sup> implying that George’s participation in this corporate campaign is hypocritical: ‘Those babies [the Jeep Renegades] start at 20k / that’s probably what he got paid / to take his anger from the street / and wrap it up all safe and sweet’ (Ibid). Wright also argues that to wield spoken word poetry as a corporate tool undermines the power of this genre and dilutes its revolutionary potential: ‘When you sell me interest rates / you sell out everyone’; ‘Every time a poet sells their countercultural slack / it cuts a bit off all of us and we never get it back’ (Ibid). The top comment on the YouTube page for the Jeep advertisement<sup>285</sup> echoes Wright’s sentiment, criticising George the Poet for what the commenter perceives as inconsistency in his messaging due to ‘inauthenticity of motivation’:

kinda dissapointed [sic] you did this george. You’re always saying how your message is the most important thing to you, I’m just not sure how selling Jeeps correlates with your message. Weakens your whole persona as a man fighting the system, when you seem to have sold out to sell a car. Still a massive fan though (of George, not jeeps)  
(MonkeysEPB)

Wright’s critical poem coincided with a wash of sharply negative reactions to the Nationwide campaigns from viewers and in the media. Googling ‘Nationwide poetry advert’ in early 2019 yielded just on the first page articles including “Why I Hate the

<sup>283</sup> This video of Wright performing the poem to camera in his car was removed from YouTube in early March 2019, but a post on his website from 6 Feb. 2017 containing the text of the poem remains online (“Renegade Poets (in Adverts)”).

<sup>284</sup> Mpanga’s website claims that his poetry ‘has won him critical acclaim both as a recording artist and a social commentator’ and the Amazon description of his collection *Search Party* describes him as ‘A young black poet blending spoken word and rap; an inner city upbringing with a Cambridge education; a social consciousness with a satirical wit and infectious rhythm’ (“Who is George the Poet?”; “Introducing George The Poet: Search Party: A Collection of Poems”).

<sup>285</sup> As previously noted, this video has now been removed from this channel; this was the top comment when it was still online as of September 2019.

Nationwide Poetry Adverts,” “Is There More to Spoken Word Than All Those Terrible Adverts,” “Sleaford Mods review those terrible Nationwide Poetry ads,” and “Awful Nationwide Poetry Adverts: Fixed” (*Learn with Fearn*, A. Harrison, Denney, *AdTurds*, respectively). The campaign also sparked a firestorm of remarkably nasty comments online including death threats for the musical act Flo and Joan featured in some of these advertisements (Marshall n.p.).

Why did these campaigns ignite such vitriolic reactions? Aside from the easy answer that poetry is not always the most popular art form—particularly when thrust at unwitting consumers through their television sets—the issue seems to lie in the perceived hypocrisy of the companies capitalising on the ‘authenticity’ associated with spoken word, and by extension the poets being complicit in this commercial action. Poet Claudia Daventry’s comment on a blog post concerning this debate sums up this perspective: ‘I still have real trouble with anyone using a poem — a piece of writing that should come from the heart, which is expressly written to talk straight to the emotions of someone else — to sell anything, however ethical you think the product is’ (cdaventry n.p.). Another blog post invokes a politically active, somewhat romanticised ideal of spoken word poetry, implying the form is sullied (‘inauthenticated’) by commercialisation: ‘the free-flowing and spontaneous nature of spoken word poetry is long associated with protest and emancipation. ... It’s not supposed to be associated with Nationwide, McDonalds or The Village Hotel franchises’ (“Learn with Fearn”). In our interview, while Jenny Lindsay is careful to qualify that she has done corporate work herself and does not judge the poets who take part in these advertising campaigns, she too reiterates this notion that commercial partnerships dilute any ‘authenticating’ power the art form may hold:

The risk of spoken word being used as a tool other than it as an art form is that spoken word is starting in a lot of places to sound a bit like motivational fridge magnets and sh— Hallmark stuff... Spoken word is to me one of the most potentially most powerful art forms. Because it’s just one voice and one mic most of the time. Holy sh—, that’s amazing ... And if it gets reduced to this tired Nationwide pish, then it’s gonna – oh no, what’s happening, what’s happening to this beautiful art form? (Interview)

This discourses framed commercialism as a threat to the inherent ‘authenticity’ spoken word poetry is perceived to hold and thus implies that ‘authenticity of motivation’ is central to the genre’s purpose.

Furthermore, the debate sparked by these advertisements tended to assume a moral heart to spoken word poetry which is compromised by the corruptive influence of advertising seeking to wield it at counter-purposes. As Keith Jarrett summarises in a blog post concerning these advertisements, ‘[s]poken word poetry, in particular, has a certain kudos, a claim to counter-culturality and to integrity which often runs against the principles of advertising. There are certain moral ideas at stake. It’s not the poetry that’s being sold ... but the \*idea\* of poets as a wholesome subculture that is being exploited’ (“Poetry Sells (Out?)” n.p.). While poetry as a genre more generally is associated with ‘authenticity,’ as previously noted, spoken word especially seems to be expected to adhere to these high moral standards. As poet Fay Roberts ponders in a blog post responding to Wright’s piece,

I don’t remember people taking to social media to make hyperbolic statements about how “page” poets ‘selling out’ to greeting card companies ruins poetry and wrecks poets. Why is spoken word to be held to higher account? It’s more scary than any other performance form I’ve ever engaged in – these are my words, spoken by me. It’s an incredibly exposing experience. Is that why people need it to have more integrity? But what does that actually mean? (n.p.)

As Roberts observes, the concept of ‘integrity’ is highly mutable and hard to quantify (just like the related notion of ‘authenticity’), but the level of vitriol and passion within the debates over these advertisements indicates its centrality to contemporary spoken word poetry.

The demographics of the poets featured in these campaigns are remarkably diverse, meaning that these campaigns can capitalise not only on the ‘authenticity’ associated with spoken word as a genre but also the inherent ‘authenticity’ associated with marginalised identity. George the Poet is a black man and the poets featured in the Nationwide advertisements appear to be diverse across multiple indices, including gender, race, age, class, and region (as far as can be perceived through visible and audible markers). Significantly, many poets featured in the Nationwide

advertisements perform their work in strong regional accents typically associated with working class identities. A *VICE* article claims these poets were speaking in ‘*deliberately* regional accent[s]’ and cynically appraised how the advertisement featuring Matt Abbott performs ‘authenticity’:

It’s just so, *authentic*, isn’t it? Can you not feel the realness oozing out of it like leek and potato soup? Can’t you picture his matted dog larking about on rain-dappled cobbles? Can’t you just hear his mum’s voice squawking upstairs that his fish fingers and beans are ready?

(A. Harrison n.p., emphasis added).

Whether these poets are using their ‘natural’ accents or emphasising them for effect is a moot point; what is significant is that these advertisements capitalise upon the ‘authenticity’ associated with regionally specific, classed accents and other markers of marginalised identity in order to associate their brand with ‘authenticity.’<sup>286</sup> When these poets are described as ‘ordinary people’ by the marketing executives hiring them as talent, arguably this is not only a reference to the purported commonality of their life experiences but also an indicator of their ‘marginality.’

The debate sparked by these advertisements revealed that not all spoken word poets in the U.K. hold ‘authenticity of motivation’ as equally important in their genre, or simply do not believe that writing to commercial commission compromises the integrity and ‘authenticity’ of the poet. Of course, the poets hired by these agencies defended their participation in various ways. Matt Abbott justifies his work by noting that he was not asked to ‘write about Nationwide itself, or any products,’ but rather ‘it’s just me reading my poem, followed by their logo. So essentially it advertises me just as much as it advertises them’ (“‘It’s a Marriage of My Words and Their Message’ - Matt Abbott on the Nationwide TV Ads” n.p.). Jo Bell, also featured in a Nationwide advertisement, defends her participation by claiming that her contribution was ‘authentic of motivation’ because she was able to sense a genuine support for the company from its employees:

<sup>286</sup> Here I focus on the effect of these casting decisions rather than the intentions behind them; I do not imply that the casting directors chose poets reflecting diverse demographics explicitly in order to capitalise on the ‘authenticity’ associated with marginality. Myriad factors influence casting decisions in advertisements, and a push towards more diverse on-screen representations is not inherently suspect.

Poetry isn't copywriting; if you can't believe in the thing you're writing about, it will sound fake. In poetry (as in sex) you can fake it, but the other party will know. But this was different. When the Nationwide asked me to join their new advertising campaign, I expected the usual patter – 'We are passionate about financial products' etc. Instead, I found myself talking to people who really believe in the company. Having spent this week at the Nationwide's conference with colleagues from The Poetry Takeaway, I can confirm that the people who work there seem to love it. (n.p.)

Thus the question of 'authenticity of motivation' can be quite nuanced: even when writing for advertisements, poets may feel that their material is 'authentic of motivation' due to the ethos of the company they are promoting or other factors in the creation of the work.

Although the perception of a poet's 'inauthenticity of motivation' may cause that poet to lose some social status within the spoken word community, most of the poets scorning the advertisements were careful to target the companies profiting from the 'authenticity' associated with spoken word rather than directly criticising the poets working with those companies. Even amongst those declaring the composition of spoken word poetry for advertising purposes 'inauthentic of motivation,' very few directly condemn the poets for their decision to take the jobs, acknowledging the difficulty of turning down a generous paycheque in an underfunded sector. Even Wright, while criticising the 'Renegade' advertisement, reserves some judgment: 'I'm not blaming these young poets - I know the money is hugely tempting, but I think they should think long and hard about and doing it' ("Renegade Poets (in adverts)" n.p.). As Anthony Anaxagorou contends, 'It's just about the money. I know poets who are supremely principled, and when we spoke about it they were like "If they gave me 30 grand, I'd do it." 15 second poem, 30 grand. Whew! And you can get back to cussing the establishment tomorrow' (Interview). This measured response indicates that spoken word poets are careful to balance their peers' need for income with their desire for their genre to remain 'authentic'—whatever that means for them.

## Implications for Professionalisation

These debates concerning the relationship between poets, their craft, and commerce raise another pressing question: is the reification of ‘authenticity of motivation’ within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry a barrier to this genre gaining mainstream attention, and with it a wider audience base? Some poets celebrate the high level of exposure spoken word has achieved through these advertisements: producer Liz Counsell said of the Nationwide series,

I think it’s great. Because I can say to my mum, me and my mum if we’re watching TV and I go back home to visit her, and someone will come on, and I’ll be like “That’s my friend and that’s what I do.” And she’ll be like, “Oh! I get it. I get what poetry is now.” (Interview)

However, others argue that since this material is written to commission and possibly edited by marketing agents, it is not always the best poetry to represent the genre and may repel more potential fans than it attracts. As cited above, many poets contend that this mainstream, commodified work is actively harming the genre by diluting what they perceive as its radical, countercultural potential.

Furthermore, considering that spoken word poetry has in the U.K. historically been a grassroots, non-institutional, underfunded art form, this upholding of ‘authenticity of motivation’ within the genre could be a factor stagnating the growth of the industry through implicitly discouraging artists from taking high-paying commissions. If the pursuit of professional success is framed as inauthenticating within a genre valorising ‘authenticity,’ this fundamentally dissuades poets from (at least overtly) working towards this success. Certainly the situation is more nuanced than this, and structural barriers to funding are more likely suspects, but this raises the age-old question: does retaining one’s ‘authenticity’ necessitate eschewing all profit-seeking pursuits—including performances, workshops, and commissions—and thus thwarting one’s own professional advancement? Does existence within mainstream society inherently ‘inauthenticate’ an artist, and/or their art? If nothing else, this case study indicates that the connotation of ‘authenticity’ first posited by Rousseau is still powerful within the contemporary artistic sphere, and that ‘authenticity’ more generally remains a powerful moral, aesthetic, and social quality within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry.

## Section Conclusion

This section established the importance of spoken word poetry being perceived as ‘authentic of motivation,’ demonstrating the extent to which commercial work tends to be considered an ‘inauthenticating’ factor in the U.K. spoken word scene. Like ‘authenticity of voice’ and ‘authenticity of identity,’ this strain is heavily culturally constructed; its precise nature, techniques for performing it, and the way in which it is perceived and judged are highly variable based on the material and setting. These three socially mediated strains exemplify the instability of the notion of ‘authenticity’ and the importance of analysing it within the context of its performance and perception.

## Case Study: Keith Jarrett’s “Hip Hop Salvation”

The previous three chapters have introduced a taxonomy of ‘authenticities’ within contemporary spoken word poetry consisting of nine distinct yet intersecting strains.<sup>287</sup> While there is still one more strain to introduce (‘authenticity of engagement,’ discussed in the next chapter), here I present a case study of a spoken word poem demonstrating each of the strains discussed thus far to show how they can interrelate within the context of a single piece. Keith Jarrett’s poem “Hip Hop Salvation” provides an excellent example not only because it exhibits the performance of almost all of these strains, but also because there are multiple video recordings of the poem publicly available, including live and studio recordings filmed across three years (in 2014, 2016, and 2017).<sup>288</sup> A version of the poem

<sup>287</sup> In summary, these strains are: ‘authenticity of origin,’ ‘authenticity of autobiographical self,’ ‘authenticity of narrative,’ ‘authenticity of persona,’ ‘authenticity of temporal state,’ ‘emotional authenticity,’ ‘authenticity of voice,’ ‘authenticity of identity,’ and ‘authenticity of motivation.’

<sup>288</sup> The live videos I draw upon for this analysis are from the Capturing Fire 2014 Queer Spoken Word Summit and Slam (19 June 2014; “Keith Jarrett – “Hip-hop Salvation””) and Penguin Pride (5 July 2017; “Keith Jarrett performs his poem They Call Me D”). The studio recording of the poem was made by Muddy Feet Poetry and published online 11 October 2016 (“Keith Jarrett - Hip Hop Salvation”). All of these videos can be viewed via the link in Appendix B. Unfortunately I have not personally witnessed Jarrett performing this poem live.

adapted for print publication is also published in Jarrett's 2017 collection *Selah*.<sup>289</sup> This allows for comparison across performance and publication contexts and through the poem's evolution. I also draw upon other epitextual material contextualising the poem, including a 2016 blog post Jarrett wrote concerning "Hip Hop Salvation" and my 2017 interview with Jarrett. Again, here I do not judge the 'authenticity' of the poem—or Jarrett—according to these strains; instead I examine the ways in which he performs (consciously or not) these various strains.

To briefly describe the work before beginning deeper analysis: "Hip Hop Salvation" is a roughly three-minute long performance poem in the first-person voice. In it, the speaker describes playing with different creative identities—all including wordplay and performance—as he was growing up. The piece is dynamic, with highly varying tempos, rhythms, volumes, and even cadences, plus gesticulation: Jarrett describes it as his 'most energetic poem' (Interview).

Much of the material framing "Hip Hop Salvation" establishes it as 'authentic of origin' and 'authentic of autobiographical self.' A blog post on Jarrett's website linking to the 2016 Muddy Feet video frames Jarrett as the authorial 'I' and proclaims the work autobiographical and factual: 'here's a new video, of which I'm pretty proud. It was a lot of fun writing this, I'm sure you can imagine. And it's mostly true [insert embarrassed emoji here]' ("NEW VIDEO: Hip Hop Salvation," Jarrett's language in the brackets). In his 2014 live performance of "Hip Hop Salvation," Jarrett constructs an autobiographical pact for the poem through his contextualising remarks.<sup>290</sup> He frames the poem's narrative as autobiographical:

<sup>289</sup> The text of this print version is considerably different from the text in the performed versions. In his interview, Jarrett articulates how he felt the need to adapt the poem's text in order to publish it: 'I really wanted a pared down version in the book. But then a lot of things just look trite [when transcribed in print]. ... I end it three stanzas early. I also have to cut out lots of lines, cos you can't have the same repetition' (Interview). Because the text of the poem differs substantially between the printed version and the performance versions, Jarrett identifies it as essentially a separate entity now (if not explicitly labelling it as a different poem): 'But I almost can't bear to see it, cos I'm like – that's not – that's something else' (Ibid). Because of these major differences between the versions, in this case study I directly cite which version I am quoting from throughout.

<sup>290</sup> As Chapters 2 and 3 established, audiences are encouraged to expect 'authenticity of narrative' and 'authenticity of persona' by the conventions of the spoken word genre, and as such it is not necessary for individual poets to construct their own autobiographical and referential pacts in order to frame material as autobiographical and true. However, they may choose to do so (as Jarrett does here), with the likely effect of strengthening those implicit pacts.



When I was in high school, I really – I was really into my hip hop.  
And I really wanted to be a rude boy, I wanted to be ghetto [audience  
laughs]. And then I'd go home, and I'd go to church, and I decided  
that I wanted to be a gospel rapper. And this is what happens with the  
conflict. (“Keith Jarrett – “Hip-hop Salvation””)

The poem concerns Jarrett’s experimentation with different identities, all focused on verbal performance, when he was younger. These various narrated ‘I’s are introduced through different names, beginning with the first line of the poem: ‘They call me D. / I tell them D is for *don*, is for *done know!*’<sup>291</sup> The poem articulates multiple narrated ‘I’s—multiple personas—including a misogyny-tinted<sup>292</sup> ‘wannabe rude boy,’ a ‘pulpit preacher’ capable of code-switching between cultural discourses, and a ‘model pupil’<sup>293</sup> writing raps in French. Introducing his second church-based persona, Jarrett shares that he would ‘break it down / with some ragga chat to bring in my West Indian congregation.’<sup>294</sup> He then adopts a West Indian accent and a distinct metre for the next section. By adopting this accent (apparently comfortably), Jarrett performs his inclusion—and thus ‘authenticity of identity’—within this cultural community.

The poem not only articulates these separate selves but narrates from their perspective for brief spells. Jarrett assumes these distinct personas to perform short raps before returning to the core narrating ‘I.’ He signals the switch to a distinct persona by addressing the audience in vernacular, telling them before the first rap sequence to ‘check it.’<sup>295</sup> In the 2016 studio recording of the poem, Jarrett physically differentiates these personas from one another by stepping to one side to enter and

<sup>291</sup> This line is consistent across the printed and performed versions of the text; the emphases are present in the printed text.

<sup>292</sup> The live performances contain an anecdote of the speaker’s misogyny within this persona which is cut from the published version of the poem. The 2014 live version contains slightly different text again from the 2016 and 2017 versions (2014 text first in brackets): ‘the topic of the day, [Grade 9 / Year 10], Rachel, who everyone knows is a [ho / sket] / I’ll come to regret my indiscriminate machismo / [when I return to her home that just doesn’t quite fit me / which I use as a shield and doesn’t quite fit me].’

<sup>293</sup> These three epithets are not present within the printed text of the poem.

<sup>294</sup> In the published text, ‘Caribbean’ is substituted for ‘West Indian.’

<sup>295</sup> ‘Check it’ is not present within the published text. It is consistent across all three recorded versions, indicating that while it may be a performance of ‘authenticity of temporal state,’ it is likely a planned rather than extemporaneous element of the piece.

exit these personas. In his 2017 interview, Jarrett shares that while he is ‘ambivalent about deliberate choreography’ within his performance practice, he did plan this physicality in advance of recording this video with Muddy Feet (Interview). He wondered ‘how am I going to convey “This is me back then”?’ and decided to distinguish between his selves at different ages through occupying a separate space: ‘I thought, OK, great, I really need to show, boom, I’m stepping, this is me at 15, now I’m back and talking’ (Ibid). In both live versions Jarrett does not step aside to physically denote assuming a separate identity; however, this may simply be due to the presence of the microphone stand rooting him to one point onstage.

Somewhat paradoxically then, Jarrett performs ‘authenticity of persona’ within the poem because of his explicit use of alternate personas. By stepping aside or otherwise altering his speech and cadences for these distinct personas, Jarrett implies that the ‘self’ to which he returns after each is his ‘natural’ state. Additionally, although “Hip Hop Salvation” does not contain performances of extreme emotion (i.e. grief, rage), Jarrett certainly appears to be emotionally engaged in his performances: he smiles frequently and seems to be enjoying himself. Thus because the emotional affect of his performance correlates with the emotional tone of the narrative he shares, audiences may be encouraged to perceive his presence as ‘emotionally authentic’ (regardless of Jarrett’s actual internal emotional state during these performances).

The live recordings of “Hip Hop Salvation” contain multiple examples of (performative or incidental) ‘authenticity of temporal state.’ First, Jarrett performs the piece from memory across all recordings, seeming comfortable in this performance and not making any visibly or audibly apparent errors.<sup>296</sup> While his physicality alters somewhat between his introductory chat and the poem’s first line (in both live recordings he pauses slightly and he increases his volume for the first line), his actual voice does not significantly change: he does not adopt any recognisable ‘poet voice’ to mark the poem as separate speech. In this sense the performance could be conceived of both as ‘authentic of temporal state’ (because he

<sup>296</sup> As described in Chapter 2, memorisation is a relatively common practice within contemporary spoken word performance; here I am not arguing that Jarrett memorises his poetry with the specific intent to perform ‘authenticity of temporal state,’ but rather that the spectators may more easily perceive this ‘authenticity’ when the material is memorised.

rolls smoothly from the introduction into the poem, making the poem feel more extemporaneous) and ‘authentic of voice’ (because he does not adopt any recognisably cliché ‘poet voice’ and thus could be conceived of as using his ‘natural’ voice).

Additionally, in Jarrett’s 2017 live performance, he inserts the aside ‘True story!’ after his enactment of a gospel rap elicits the audience’s laughter. This aside is not present in the 2016 Muddy Feet recorded video,<sup>297</sup> nor his 2014 live performance despite the gospel rap section eliciting loud laughter then as well. This indicates that the aside is likely not a scripted element of the poem, although it may have been added as a semi-scripted element over the course of the poem’s evolution. The addition of this aside not only performs ‘authenticity of temporal state’ in its apparent spontaneity, but also directly reinforces the autobiographical and referential pacts by asserting the poem’s ‘authenticity of narrative’: that it is a ‘true story.’

As noted, the initial sections of the poem play between these multiple narrated ‘I’s, demonstrating Jarrett’s ability to code-switch between multiple cultural and linguistic discourses and eliciting laughter and audible affirmation from the audience in both live recordings. However, as the poem progresses, the narrating ‘I’ begins to frame the existence of these multiple personas less as virtuosic and more as problematic: ‘There is a thinning line between my Sunday features and my weekday frolics / developing a conflict in my mind as intense as that East Coast/West Coast beef.’<sup>298</sup> The use of multiple identities is framed as a mark of immaturity: ‘They still call me D / cos I still haven’t learned to step up / into a fully grown name and own it.’ The poem then frames writing as a means for unifying these separate identities:

One day they’ll also call me a poet  
using pared down rhythms to connect  
the seemingly disparate seams of my selves

<sup>297</sup> As noted in Chapter 3, it is more challenging and potentially futile to perform ‘authenticity of temporal state’ within a recorded context (i.e. straight-to-camera or otherwise not live): viewers will understand that the performer knew the video was recorded, and thus is not being truly spontaneous.

<sup>298</sup> Here (and for the following three quotations) I cite the recordings of the poem: this text is consistent across all three video recordings. In the published version, this line is shortened and adapted so that it simply reads ‘there’s a thinning line between Sunday and schooldays’ (*Selah*).

In each video recording, when Jarrett performs this stanza, he makes a motion with his hands as if combining multiple items into one, physically enacting this unifying of the self (see fig. 3). This meta reference to Jarrett’s poetic practice reinforces his ‘authenticity of origin’ by emphasising his active role crafting this work.



Figure #3: Jarrett’s hand gestures as he performs the line ‘using pared down rhythms to connect / the seemingly disparate seams of my selves.’ Still from the 2016 Muddy Feet recording (“Keith Jarrett - Hip Hop Salvation.”).

The narrating ‘I’ is now a voice of the past: the audience, viewing Jarrett performing this onstage, is aware that he has reached this stage of being called a poet (given that he would have been introduced and billed as such). The final lines of this poem are performed from this past narrating ‘I’: ‘One day I will simply be called Keith / and I will take comfort in just being me.’<sup>299</sup> In both of the live versions, Jarrett reinforces the unity between the performed selves by physically gesturing to his own body and mouthing the final ‘me’ rather than audibly speaking it. The use of his given name, which is also the name under which Jarrett regularly performs, for this final line again reinforces Jarrett’s ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and the

<sup>299</sup> Again, here I cite the recordings, which have consistent text. The printed text cuts the final three stanzas of the live version of the poem and ends with the stanza ‘and they still call me D as I don’t know how / to step into a full-grown name / and own it’ (*Selah*).

poem's 'authenticity of narrative.' It also implies that he has reached this unified identity he describes, given that he was 'called Keith' when he was introduced to the stage in order to perform the poem. The use of the given name at this point is particularly powerful given all of the assumed names for personas listed earlier in the poem ('done know,' 'demon destroyer,' etc.).

"Hip Hop Salvation" is a somewhat unique and extraordinary example of the performance of 'authenticity of identity' in that it literally demonstrates the adoption of several stereotypical identities associated with blackness—the 'gangsta rapper' with 'low-hanging jeans' and misogynist beliefs; the preacher with a gift for powerful oratory; the too-smart-for school student—before rejecting each. Jarrett enacts the process of assuming various 'controlling images' (in Nguyen and Anthony's language) in an attempt to find a comfortable model of selfhood. Ultimately, he asserts his own unique (apparently 'authentic') identity distinct from these modes, and as such seems to reject the pressures to conform to racial stereotypes. While "Hip Hop Salvation" is not a polemic, nor what one might consider a traditional 'political' poem, the rejection of racial stereotypes in favour of an 'authentic' discovery of self is gently radical. An additional way in which 'authenticity of identity' impacts this poem is that, viewers might perceive Jarrett as more inherently 'authentic' due to his marginalised identity characteristics as a black, gay man based on structural biases which they have (consciously or not) internalised. As with all of these perceptions, these perceptions are of course heavily subjective.

Reaching the final strain of 'authenticity' discuss thus far: in order to consider how 'authenticity of motivation' might be performed and perceived through "Hip Hop Salvation," it is necessary to know the context of the work. In our 2017 interview, Jarrett reveals that he wrote the piece 'for an event called the "Rap Party"' (Interview). If this was a paid commission, and spectators were conscious that Jarrett had written the piece to a prompt and been reimbursed for this labour, theoretically they might perceive the work as 'inauthentic of motivation' due to its existence within the commercial system. However, given that the poem does not advertise any product or otherwise explicitly engage in capitalism, such a judgment seems unlikely. The mere fact of a commission does not guarantee that a poem will be

perceived as ‘inauthentic of motivation’; rather, it is the circumstances in which the work was commissioned (or otherwise prompted) which affect this judgment. Ultimately, as with all of these strains of ‘authenticity,’ their perception is dependent on the subjective judgments of the viewer.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

Thus far, this thesis has demonstrated the prevalence of ‘authenticity’ as a meaningful aesthetic and moral quality within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry. I have identified nine strains of ‘authenticity’ and described the ways in which they are often performed by spoken word poets and potentially valued by audiences. However, the perception of a poem’s (and poet’s) ‘authenticity’ is not determined solely by the poet’s actions onstage, but heavily framed by the conventions of live spoken word events and the rhetoric concerning the genre. The next chapter considers how these contextualising features encourage the perception of spoken word poets as ‘authentic,’ non-representative figures.

## Chapter 5: Event Conventions and ‘Authenticity of Engagement’

We might want to think about how particular sites of narration perform cultural work, how they organise the personal storytelling on which they rely. And we might think about what kinds of narratives seem ‘credible’ and ‘real’ at particular sites of narration.

—Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* 69

The material venues of spoken word poetry... are most importantly the bars, cafes, and theaters in which such poetry finds its audiences. These sites and conventions are inseparable from the poetry’s meaning.

—Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* 143

Since spoken word poetry is a live performance medium, meaning is co-constructed by the poet, the host, and the audience in a shared physical and temporal space. The performance and perception of the poem’s ‘authenticity’ shifts across different performance contexts given variations in time, venue, event conventions, the demographic and energetic makeup of the audience, and myriad other factors. To hear the same poem in a grand proscenium theatre versus in a grubby pub basement will likely yield differing perceptions of how ‘authentic’ that poem is (across the varying strands described in the previous chapters). Returning to Lejeune’s concept of the autobiographical and referential pacts: as explained in Chapters 2 and 3, this theory stipulates that the pacts are not conditional upon elements *within* the works, but on *how the work is contextually framed*.<sup>300</sup> Thus, framing devices from the

<sup>300</sup> For instance, it is not the text of a memoir which prompts the expectation that it is autobiographical, but rather the fact that the author’s name on the cover and inside the text are the same, as well as the blurb on the back, the marketing materials, and the biography of the author all framing the material as autobiographical.

marketing of the event to the décor of the venue are critical to establishing the audience's expectations for 'authenticity.'

This chapter considers the ways in which the typical conventions of U.K. spoken word events—including the venues in which they occur, the rhetoric used to promote events, the hosting customs, the arrangement of seating and performing areas within spaces, the presence or absence of amplification and bright lighting, etc.—tend to reinforce the performance of 'authenticity.' While previously I have examined the actions of the poets performing, in this chapter I focus on production decisions made by spoken word event organisers (although of course these categories often blur).<sup>301</sup> I argue that many of the typical practices within U.K. spoken word poetry contribute to an atmosphere of informal, 'genuine' engagement and social intimacy, in contrast to spectacle, drama, and showmanship (which can be construed as 'inauthentic'). I contend throughout this chapter that spoken word events typically minimise many of the filters (such as costumes, performance lighting, and wings) which spectators might perceive as barriers to 'authentic' interpersonal engagement with the poet.

Spoken word event conventions (alongside the actions of the poets themselves) also function to minimise the extent to which the audience perceives the people and actions onstage as part of a 'fictional space.' Rather, these conventions encourage the perception of spoken word poets as non-representative figures: not actors playing characters, but people being fully, naturally themselves. This contextualisation occurs through many practices, including the erosion of spatial and social distance between poets and spectators; the lack of professional hierarchy and informality of language; the invitation of vocal audience participation; and the use of spaces, seating arrangements, and staging practices not common in traditional theatrical or literary settings. It also occurs outside of the event itself, beginning with the publicity materials for the event. Factors as seemingly inconsequential as the name of the venue and the neighbourhood in which it is located affect the audience's perception of spoken word poets and their work as 'authentic.'

<sup>301</sup> For instance, the convention of poets wearing casual clothing onstage is not covered in this chapter, as it is ultimately the decision of the poet and not the organiser (and was covered in Chapter 3 on the section regarding 'authenticity of persona').



This chapter also introduces the final strain of ‘authenticity’ in my taxonomy: ‘authenticity of engagement.’ Although all of the strains previously analysed are co-created in the sense that they are dependent both on the poet (to be performed) and the audience (to be perceived), this strain is particularly collaborative. ‘Authenticity of engagement’ refers to the perception that the poet is directly engaging with the audience: that they are actively performing *to* and *with* spectators and adapting material for this specific context.

As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, there has been a serious lack of scholarship concerning how the conventions of live poetry events shape the reception of the poetry performed at them. Novak’s 2011 text *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* is a notable recent exception, and throughout this chapter I draw upon the live events analysis methodology that she proposes. I also rely on theoretical frameworks developed in other fields, chiefly performance studies and sociology. I am guided by audience studies and audience-response theory, as pioneered by Bennett in her 1997 text *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. This theoretical framework is an adaptation of reader-response theory for the live performance context which recognises that in these contexts ‘the audience becomes a self-conscious co-creator of performance’ and analyses the ways in which audiences interpret and affect the performance (Bennett 21).

Additionally, in this chapter I continue to be guided by Goffman’s methodology of ‘frame analysis’ and Bauman’s extension of Goffman’s work to oral arts (see *Frame Analysis*; ‘Verbal Art as Performance’). Applying Goffman’s concept of ‘keying,’ Bauman has contended that artistic genres and cultures use specific strategies to indicate when a performance is occurring and guide how that performance is to be interpreted:

each speech community will make use of a structured set of distinctive communicative means from among its resources in culturally conventionalized and culture-specific ways to key the performance frame, such that all communication that takes place within that frame is to be understood as performance within that community. (“Verbal Art in Performance” 295)

Throughout this chapter I identify the means through which performance is ‘keyed’ in the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene through typical elements of live events, including venue choice, seating arrangements, hosting approach, and more. As I describe these framing factors, I contend that—taken together, and in combination with the behaviour of poets and the poetry itself—these practices encourage the perception of this poetry as ‘authentic’ (across various strains).

I also draw upon theorists who have examined the effect of spatial relationships on human behaviour, particularly within the context of live performance. I use E. T. Hall’s theory of proxemics to analyse how the spatial distance between performer and audience can significantly affect the perception of intimacy and ‘authenticity.’ In order to describe the various spaces within spoken word venues, I use McAuley’s taxonomy of spatial function for live performance. Finally, I draw the language of ‘spectator-performer communication’ and ‘spectator-spectator communication’ from Elam’s semiotics of theatre and drama in order to describe the relationships between participants during spoken word events (97).<sup>302</sup>

This chapter begins by introducing the key theories and critical languages utilised (Hall’s ‘proxemics’ and McAuley’s ‘taxonomy of spatial function’). I then consider how various elements of spoken word events work in tandem to encourage the perception of the poet as non-representative and ‘authentic.’ First I analyse how spoken word events have been designed as inclusive, diverse spaces encouraging audience engagement, with some organisers directly contrasting these more ‘authentic’ events against what they depict as the inherent ‘inauthenticity’ (formality, lack of active engagement) of more traditional poetry reading structures. Next I survey marketing materials for recent U.K. spoken word events and analyse how the rhetoric used generally advertises these events as accessible, dynamic, socially intimate spaces in which active participant engagement is encouraged. I then consider how the physical settings of spoken word events frame the poet as ‘authentic’ and non-representative through the use of non-exclusive, relatively small venues; sparse stage sets; and the porousness of the boundary between the audience space and the presentational space. Next I analyse how typical hosting practices

<sup>302</sup> Here I follow Novak in applying Elam’s terminology to the U.K. spoken word context (*Live Poetry* 196-7).

further encourage this perception of ‘authenticity’ through how poets are introduced and the frequent practice of poets additionally acting as hosts and producers during a single event. Finally, I argue that all of these components not only help to frame the poet as non-representative but also facilitate the perception of ‘authenticity of engagement’ between attendees. This chapter concludes with a case study of a 2015 spoken word event, Loud Poets: Straight Outta Dennistoun, which illustrates many of the effects described.

To briefly clarify terminology: throughout this chapter I use the collective term ‘participants’ as a blanket descriptor for poets, event producers, and spectators. Here I build upon Novak’s language: she describes the audience as “‘participants’ in rather than “recipients” of, live poetry’ (*Live Poetry* 194). In this chapter, however, I use the term ‘participant’ more broadly to indicate all involved with the event, not just the audience. This is in recognition of the fact that no individual is a passive spectator of the event, but rather that the ‘audience and poet’—with the audience here including not only paying attendees but also producers, venue staff, and any other individuals in the performance space—‘collaborate in the performance of the poem’ (Middleton, “The Contemporary Poetry Reading” 291). The use of this blanket term also acknowledges that any individual may transition through multiple roles (i.e. host, performer, spectator, etc.) over the course of a single event.

Finally: factors contextualising live spoken word performance range from the intentional to the incidental to the accidental. My approach to event analysis here parallels my approach to poem analysis in that I consider every event to be multi-faceted and contextualised through the actions and preconceptions of myriad individuals. I follow scholarship in oral poetics in recognising the relevance of the contextualising legacy of artistic events; as Bauman and Briggs contend, ‘[a] given performance is tied to a number of speech events that precede and succeed it (past performances, readings of texts, negotiations, rehearsals, gossip, reports, critiques, challenges, subsequent performances, and the like)’ (60-61). Not all of these factors are under the event organisers’ or poets’ control: even elements entirely oppositional to the producer’s wishes will inevitably colour the audience’s reception of a poem, for instance the deadening effect of a mostly empty audience (Bennett 131). From the perspective of the participant (and, here, the researcher), it can be challenging to

determine which factors of the live event are deliberate and which are pre-determined or limited by funding, labour, and venue availability.<sup>303</sup> This is particularly true when analysing a grassroots, chronically under-funded art form such as spoken word poetry: staging decisions may not be purely artistic but are often influenced by financial realities. Frequently spoken word organisers are not permitted by their budgets to book whichever venue they think would best suit their events, meaning that generally ‘[s]poken word institutions are impermanent, ad hoc, borrowed on the cheap’ (Wheeler 143).<sup>304</sup> There is often, then, a discrepancy between the aesthetic ideal the producer(s)<sup>305</sup> holds for the siting and staging of their event and the reality. Thus in this chapter I am careful not to assume curatorial intent behind each element of the performance space and conventions, while simultaneously recognising that each of these elements does frame participants’ perceptions of the work.

### **Explaining Terms: Proxemics and Spatial Function**

Throughout this chapter I utilise two theoretical languages—E. Hall’s ‘proxemics’ and McAuley’s ‘taxonomy of spatial function’—which I will briefly explain here. First, I use Hall’s theory of proxemics in order to analyse the ways in which the physical setting may affect participants’ perceptions of the poet as ‘authentic,’ as well as the potential for engagement between participants.<sup>306</sup>

Proxemics describes ‘the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of

<sup>303</sup> For instance, because the majority of spoken word events in the U.K. occur in venues that are not accessible to wheelchair users, one might infer that spoken word organisers are ableist. However, the reality is more likely that these organisers lack the funds required to book accessible spaces, as much as they rue this lack of accessibility. The end result, of course, is still that wheelchair users are often excluded from events occurring in these venues, regardless of organisers’ intents.

<sup>304</sup> This also applies to elements of the performance including sound quality, lighting design, the comfort and availability of seating, etc.

<sup>305</sup> Even if an event is apparently organised and produced by a single person, multiple individuals tend to influence the way in which it is shaped, including the venue manager and bar staff. Additionally, events are inherently shaped by the differing visions and intended outcomes of the individuals and groups that organise them; as Novak observes, ‘the various live poetry participants - poet-performer, audience, MC, and producer - may pursue different aims with regard to the same event’ (*Live Poetry* 207).

<sup>306</sup> I follow Novak in applying Hall’s theory of proxemics to the contemporary spoken word event context.

space'; effectively, it is the study of how spatial arrangements affect behaviour (Hall 95). Specifically, I draw upon two of Hall's taxonomies as proposed in his 1966 text *The Hidden Dimension*. The first is his categorisation of spaces into 'fixed-feature,' 'semifixed feature,' and 'informal' (95). Throughout this chapter I argue that spoken word spaces generally feature more semifixed features: while the venues themselves are fixed (literally in space), often participants have the ability to adjust the seating and set elements. In some spaces this may empower participants to take more control over the arrangement of the space and to engage more socially with the event.

The second of Hall's taxonomies that I draw upon is his categorisation of proxemic relations between people, characterising distances as 'intimate,' 'personal,' 'social,' or 'public' (110-120). These categories are based on the actual physical distance between people (i.e. 'intimate' distance means that participants are touching or close enough to touch, while 'public distance' is over 25 feet) (110, 117). As Novak has observed, in the majority of spoken word events in the U.K., the audience is 'sitting within the "social distance" range, partaking in a friendly, familiar atmosphere that can be one of the strengths of small spaces' (*Live Poetry* 210). In this chapter I argue that this close proximity facilitates the perception of the poet as 'authentic' and enables 'authenticity of engagement' to occur between participants. I also describe the potential consequences for this relaxed atmosphere of informality, camaraderie, and engagement when spoken word events occur in larger, more traditionally theatrical venues.<sup>307</sup>

Finally, in order to describe the various literal spaces within the venue (i.e. to differentiate between where the audience sits and the performer stands), I use McAuley's 'taxonomy of spatial function' in live performance,<sup>308</sup> outlined below

<sup>307</sup> While Hall's theories and the scholarship building upon them provide helpful language for describing the effects of space on behaviour and suggest some potential effects, I want to note here that these theories do not hold in every case. Closer spatial proximity does not guarantee that participants will experience the performer as more 'authentic' or will bond socially: as Whalley and Miller caution, 'intimacy is not guaranteed by proximity, any more than it is denied by distance' (21). Throughout this chapter, while I assert that there is a strong correlation between proxemic distance and perceived 'authenticity,' I am aware that exceptions exist.

<sup>308</sup> While I generally build upon Novak's scholarship in this chapter, here we use different terminology to define space within live poetry performance. She adopts Balme's categories: 'theatrical space,' 'scenic space,' 'place or space of performance,' and 'dramatic space'

(25):

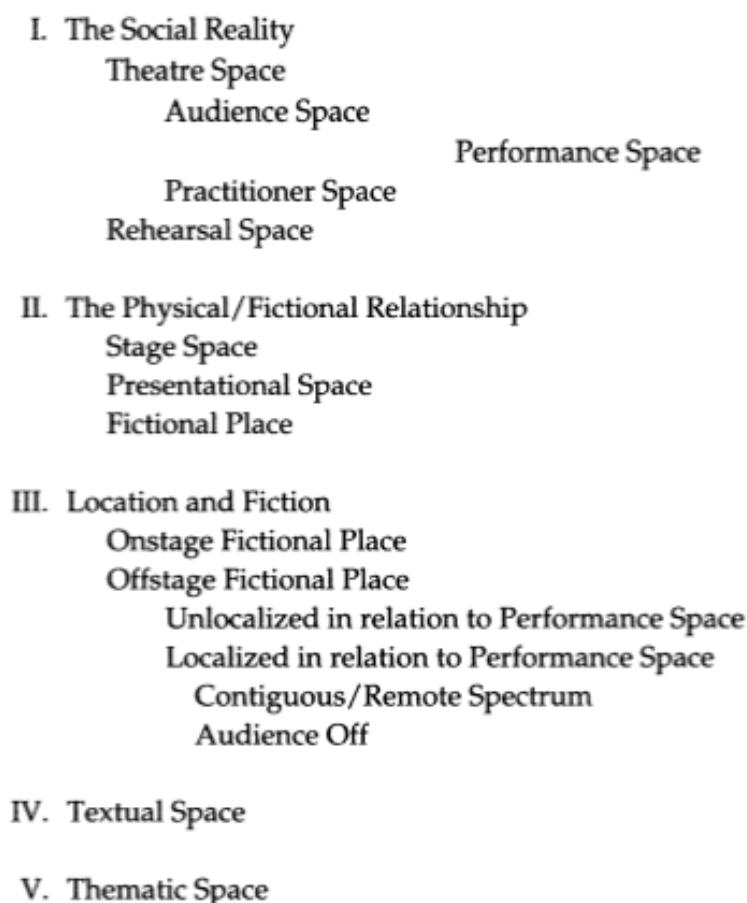


Figure #4. McAuley's 'taxonomy of spatial function in the theatre.' In *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, pp. 25.

In this chapter I specifically use terms in the first and second categories<sup>309</sup> of McAuley's taxonomy. Below I briefly explain these terms and how I apply them to U.K. spoken word event spatial organisation.

(Balme 48-62). I use McAuley's system instead because it is the original spatial categorisation system from which Balme's appears to be adapted and which he praises (Balme 61) and because McAuley's system is more detailed and thus allows for greater clarity in analysing these spaces.

<sup>309</sup> The third category of McAuley's taxonomy, 'Location and Fiction,' lists sub-categories of 'fictional place' which as I will shortly explain are not relevant to this discussion due to the illusion of spoken word as a non-representative art form. The fourth and fifth categories could be applied to the spoken word context but are superfluous to the purpose of this chapter.

Beginning with the ‘social reality’ category: what McAuley terms the ‘practitioner space’ within modern theatre buildings generally consists of the backstage area (including stage door, dressing rooms and green rooms, hallways, and wings) and the stage itself (26). However, spoken word venues generally do not have (or do not use) dedicated backstage areas for poets; rather, poets tend to sit in the audience with the other spectators. This means that at spoken word events, the ‘practitioner space’ is merged with the ‘audience space’ (where the audience sits), which I will argue helps to reinforce the perception of the poet as a non-representative figure. Helpfully, the ‘performance space’ in McAuley’s taxonomy is an umbrella term grouping together the ‘practitioner space’ and the ‘audience space.’ McAuley describes this as the space where ‘performers and spectators... meet and work together to create the performance experience,’ and in spoken word spaces that collaborative engagement is particularly important (26). That the ‘performance space’ in McAuley’s taxonomy includes not only the stage on which the poet stands but also the location in which the audience sits helpfully reminds us that the existence and participation (however active or passive) of the audience is a constitutive part of live performance.

Moving on to the categories of the ‘physical/fictional relationship’ and ‘location and fiction’: McAuley provides helpful terminology for negotiating ‘the constant dual presence of the physical reality of the performance space and the fictional world or worlds created’ (27). Within representational performances (i.e. plays, ballets, operas, etc.), but also arguably within all performance, the stage ‘is always both stage and somewhere else’ (28). McAuley characterises literal versus representational space using three terms: the ‘stage space’ (literally, the physical stage space), the ‘presentational space’ (the stage space occupied and transformed by the presence of the actors), and the ‘fictional place’ (‘the place or places presented, represented or evoked onstage and off’) (29-30). For instance, in a production of “Hamlet” at the Globe Theatre, the ‘stage space’ is the physical stage and set at the Globe, which is transformed by the actors into the ‘presentational space’ in order to project the ‘fictional place’ of Elsinore.

However, this balance is different in spoken word spaces given that poets are generally not playing distinct characters: as was examined within Chapters 2 and 3,

spoken word poets generally project themselves *as themselves*, or heightened versions of themselves, rather than as distinct personae. Consequently, at these events the performance space generally is not intended to represent a specific fictional world.<sup>310</sup> Certainly the environment is not fully quotidian—participants understand that they are engaging in an artistic event and thus that this is a distinct, special space in which the speech onstage is poetic performance. This is why, for example, when in Sam Small’s aforementioned comedic poem “You Kept My Heart in a Jar in the Fridge” the speaker reveals that his lover ‘cut out all my organs,’ no one phones an ambulance (*Pure Toilet*). Despite the heavy existence of the autobiographical and referential pacts, there remains at least a basic recognition that this is an artistic performance, rather than an entirely spontaneous outburst. However, as I will argue throughout this chapter, generally the conventions of spoken word events function to erode the perception of the performance space as a distinct fictional world. Using McAuley’s taxonomy of spatial function and Hall’s taxonomy of proxemic distances, I will now consider how the conventions of spoken word events also work to reinforce the perception of ‘authenticities’ in this genre.

## **The Spoken Word Event**

In this section I consider how the typical conventions of U.K. spoken word events—marketing strategies, physical settings, event formats, elicited audience engagement, etc.—encourage the perception of the poet as ‘authentic.’ I argue that the way in which these events are produced generally fosters a socially and culturally accessible environment with a low level of proxemic distance. Often spoken word events are located within venues that were not designed for this purpose and are not associated with academia (i.e. pubs rather than lecture halls): locations which are relatively culturally accessible<sup>311</sup> to a wide swathe of the public. The semifixed

<sup>310</sup> Slight exceptions could be made for when a poet constructs a fictional world within a poem. However, even in these cases the audience may be invited to imagine the world but not to perceive the bodies, sets, and actions in front of them as part of that world: they are still perceiving the poet onstage narrating this story.

<sup>311</sup> By ‘culturally accessible’ here I mean that these venues are generally public spaces which would not feel exclusive to those of a certain education level, class, or social status. I do not mean ‘physically accessible’; unfortunately, many spoken word events occur in settings which are not wheelchair accessible and lack hearing loops and other amenities.



nature of these settings tend to allow for a higher level of spectator-spectator communication (i.e. participants may move chairs around to in order to accommodate their wishes) and thus may encourage social bonding and community formation. As there is a lack of dedicated event producers within the U.K. spoken word scene, often the roles blur between poets, producers, hosts, and spectators. This, alongside the convention of seating performers in the audience space, encourages the perception of spoken word poets as ‘authentic,’ non-representative figures.

Importantly: while there are similarities between the accessible, ‘democratic’ natures of curated spoken word events and poetry open mic nights, these two event formats should not be conflated. An open mic is a (usually free) event at which any individual may sign up to read voluntarily poetry<sup>312</sup> (of any style) for a set amount of time. Generally open mics are helpful forums for amateur writers to hone their craft and for writers at any level to test new material. What I describe in this chapter as ‘spoken word events’ are curated events at which spoken word poets are booked in advance for their performances. Certainly a spoken word event may feature an open mic section, or a spoken word poet may feature at an open mic night. However, it is important not to conflate curated events with open mics, as to do so collapses unpaid performance with professional activity and may lead to the inaccurate perception that all spoken word poets are amateurs. As discussed in the section regarding ‘authenticity of motivation,’ the concept of the spoken word poet as the ‘pure’ ‘starving artist’ is somewhat glorified, and I argue here that spoken word events generally do not emphasise the professional status of poets but instead their relatable, accessible nature. However, curated events do exist (paid and unpaid) and thus, although the binary between professional and amateur is unstable within this art form, it is still vital to distinguish between these types of events.

Finally: before commencing analysis of the conventions of ‘typical’ spoken word events in the U.K., it is worth acknowledging that these conventions vary across events given available resources, the aesthetic preferences of the organisers,

<sup>312</sup> Of course, the open mic format is not limited to poetry; open mic events are common within a variety of art forms including music and stand-up comedy.

the intended and regular audiences, and other factors.<sup>313</sup> Despite this variation and the constantly evolving nature of the genre, it remains possible to trace some common threads across these events in terms of the typical ways in which the poet-performer is presented as a non-representative, ‘authentic’ figure.

### **Counter-Institutional Conventions**

When Marc Smith founded the poetry slam in the 1980s, he designed it to be as distinct as possible from what he perceived as the traditional poetry reading, characterised by poets reading from the page and a relatively formal social structure (Aptowicz). Zitomer describes the conventions of such ‘academic’ readings:

This reading is structured according to a series of hierarchically motivated isolations. The event is held in a venue constructed to minimize intrusions from the social sphere, and it is clear from the setting—the darkened hall and lit stage, the fixed seats, the podium before which the poet stands and perhaps even the beverage allowed only to the poet—that the audience is there to witness.... Just as the venue and equipment are designed to transparently perform the detachment between the activity on the stage and the context beyond it, so the audience members apparently know how to perform appropriately as passive recipients of the cultural display—to sit still and remain silent during and between poems, to speak quietly before and after the event, even to cast cold glances at the one unwrapping a piece of candy. (52)<sup>314</sup>

Smith describes these readings in a less objective tone: ‘[b]y the early 1980s, traditional poetry events had diminished to sporadic, self-absorbed, nonadventures cramped uncomfortably in bookstore aisles’ (Smith and Kraynak, *Stage a Poetry*

<sup>313</sup> Additionally, while there are of course events entirely devoted to spoken word poetry, there are also many events which operate in a more cabaret style in featuring multiple performing art forms (i.e. Scotland’s Flint & Pitch, London’s Outspoken).

<sup>314</sup> As with spoken word events, there will of course be some variations to the conventions of these readings; however, Middleton notes their remarkable stability and resistance to change or examination over the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. He observes a lack of any ‘reflexive discuss[ion] [of] the ritual itself’ due to the aforementioned perception of the formal reading as a vehicle for the transference of the poem to a passive audience, the conventions of which do not inherently affect the poem (“The Contemporary Poetry Reading” 262).

*Slam* 9). Smith's rhetoric emphasises what he perceives as the traditional poetry reading's expectation of audience passivity, prioritisation of the poet's voice over the audience's comfort or entertainment, and the lack of wider public engagement in these events.

Of course, each poetry reading will vary considerably based on the curatorial style and energy of the producer and participants; any binary between 'boring,' passive 'page' poetry readings and dynamic, engaging spoken word events is as unstable as the binary between 'page' and 'stage' poetry. However, Smith's design for the poetry slam is deliberately oriented to erode the hierarchical formality of traditional readings and provide a more entertaining, engaging experience for the audience. Rather than seating an audience in neat rows and requesting their respectful passivity, slams encourage participants to cheer and even boo<sup>315</sup> (not only between poems but during them) and endow participants with the critical power to determine the winner (Aptowicz). Of course, slams are not the only format of spoken word events; however, the relative accessibility and audience engagement they espouse has carried over into contemporary spoken word culture more generally. Rather than physically separating the poet from the audience with a lectern, frequently spoken word events only allow a microphone as their staging and encourage poets to perform from memory so that there is no book acting as a barrier between performer and audience. Additionally, spoken word organisers have generally sited their events in socially accessible venues such as pubs and community centres, rather than using more culturally exclusive spaces such as university settings.<sup>316</sup>

The way in which spoken word events are framed as a more 'real' experience in comparison with traditional poetry readings exemplifies what Auslander terms the 'exclusionary concept of authenticity': these events are characterised as 'authentic' in contrast to the apparently 'inauthentic' poetry reading (*Liveness* 81). In

<sup>315</sup> Describing the U.S. slam context, Bauridl writes that '[t]he audience, who judges the poets' success by distributing points, is encouraged to utter loud approval or disapproval during the performance and to join in chorus lines' (717). However, booing or hissing virtually never occurs in the contemporary U.K. spoken word context unless a performer's work or behaviour is flagrantly offensive.

<sup>316</sup> Again, any binary between 'page' poetry readings and contemporary spoken word events is unstable here; poetry readings also occur within public social settings such as pubs.

promotional materials (as I will discuss further in the next section), often spoken word poets and event organisers explicitly reference the negative connotations they anticipate many potential audience members to hold regarding ‘page’ poetry in order to establish directly contrasting expectations regarding their own event. For example, the Facebook event page for Evidently #50 (the 50<sup>th</sup> show of the Salford event series) encourages potential audience members to ‘Forget what you learned at school, this is poetry as entertainment’ (Evidently #50). By distinguishing these ‘real’ events from this stereotype of the ‘elite,’ ‘irrelevant’ academic poetry reading, spoken word as a genre seeks to establish itself as the more accessible and engaging art form.

### **Marketing**

The framing of participants’ expectations for a spoken word event begins long before the physical gathering within the venue. The way in which an event is marketed ‘often determine[s] a very specific set of expectations in the audience and thus determine[s] how that audience will receive’ that event and the work performed at it (Bennett 122). In Goffman’s terms, marketing materials are a factor in ‘keying’ the event and thus framing the way in which it is to be interpreted by audiences (*Frame Analysis*). This section considers how epitextual marketing materials for spoken word events in the U.K. (including the digital and print platforms on which they appear) assist in constructing participants’ expectations of a welcoming, intimate event with high levels of opportunity for active engagement. While these materials do not explicitly guarantee that the poet will be ‘authentic’ onstage,<sup>317</sup> they generally frame events as informal, socially interactive forums with low proxemic distance between participants.

Promotion for U.K. spoken word events is generally conducted through free or low-cost means. A primary tool is word of mouth: participants spread news of events to their communities, and promoters and poets often publicise their upcoming events at other poetry gatherings, including open mics. This technique has been long a staple of awareness-raising for live poetry: Jim Monaghan recalls marketing in the

<sup>317</sup> For instance, I have not encountered marketing materials claiming ‘The performers will all be expressing their true selves through autobiographical material’; generally, expectations for ‘authenticity’ are encouraged less overtly, through subtler rhetoric.

pre-internet era for poetry events in Scotland occurring ‘mainly [through] word of mouth’ (Interview). In today’s digital environment, social media has become a major platform for promotion: event organisers often post event pages on Facebook and promote them through platforms including Twitter and Instagram. Some producers issue press releases to local media and/or list their events on digital and print databases. Organisers may also advertise by printing and distributing posters and flyers; however, as these activities involve cost, they are less common among non-funded event series.

Marketing spoken word events primarily through word of mouth and online social media platforms simultaneously emphasises their inclusivity and exclusivity. Public Facebook event pages are open to all (even those lacking Facebook accounts), with information regarding attendance freely available. However, the relative lack of (paid) advertising in mainstream cultural publications means that potential attendees would not find these events without knowing where to look, endowing participation in these grassroots events with a sense of insider privilege. This is also the case with word-of-mouth communications, as it requires knowing someone already familiar with the scene to share information about events. Thus the sense of intimacy which many spoken word events seek to foster may begin with the participants’ perceptions that they are attending an exclusive event.

In order to analyse how promotional materials for U.K. spoken word events contextualise these events with regards to ‘authenticity,’ in the spring of 2018 I conducted a short-term study of the descriptions of Facebook event pages for U.K. spoken word events. Generally, these event page descriptions include practical information such as the location and accessibility of the venue, the times at which doors open and the event begins, the price, and information regarding the event’s featured performers. I accessed the event pages of all of the regular spoken word event series in the U.K. of which I am aware,<sup>318</sup> and I searched key terms including ‘spoken word,’ ‘slam poetry’ and ‘performance poetry’ in the Facebook events

<sup>318</sup> Although my knowledge of these event series was already considerable given my insider status in the scene and the data I had gathered through my interviews the previous year, I also relied here on any databases and other records I could find of regularly occurring spoken word event series, including information on the *Sabotage Reviews*, Apples and Snakes, and Scottish Book Trust websites.

search bar to find any events this initial search might have missed. I saved all event pages which fit the criteria (regularly occurring spoken word event series in the U.K. between January and June 2018<sup>319</sup>) then conducted thematic analysis on the descriptions of this pages. This was a deductive study informed by the data I had collected through my interviews: I hypothesised that while the rhetoric in these event pages would not explicitly establish these events as forums for ‘true,’ confessional expression, it would frame them as welcoming, social spaces in which participant engagement is encouraged. As detailed below (using quotations from event pages which were representative of the general trends<sup>320</sup>), my findings were consistent with this hypothesis. As this was a short-term study with a small sample size, further research into the rhetoric of spoken word event promotional materials is required to corroborate my findings here.

My research indicates that these event pages commonly employ exclusionary authenticity (using Auslander’s term) by juxtaposing spoken word events against stereotypes of traditional poetry readings as formal, non-engaging, and staid. Often spoken word events (series and individual events) are playfully and invitingly titled:<sup>321</sup> many series use wordplay in their marketing (for example Sonnet Youth and Hit the Ode) and/or contain references to popular culture (i.e. Come Rhyme With Me).<sup>322</sup> Events are generally hyped up as dynamic and exciting: Sonnet Youth proclaims itself as ‘a spoken word house party. A literary rave. A poetic piss up - bringing together poets, authors, rappers, comedians and musicians for a night of no holds barred performances’ (Sonnet Youth).

<sup>319</sup> Throughout this research process (as throughout this entire thesis) I was conscious of my status as an insider to this field: as an events producer I frequently write the copy for I Am Loud Productions event pages, so I am familiar with this rhetoric from this perspective. To reduce the risk of insider bias, I omitted any event pages that I had worked on from this particular study.

<sup>320</sup> The event page descriptions cited below refer to the following events, each linked in the Works Cited: “Bad Language - back for 2018” (31 Jan 2018, Manchester); “Boomerang Club #41: Ruth Sutoyé and Kareem Parkins-Brown” (5 June 2018, London); “Evidently #50 featuring Tyrone Lewis and Stephen Hill” (9 April 2018, Salford); “Heaux Noire: Jan 2018” (12 Jan 2018, London); “Sonnet Youth #18 (GLA)” (18 April 2018, Glasgow); “TGDDS MAY” (11 May 2018, Edinburgh). I also cite the organisation page for the event series Come Rhyme With Me, based in London.

<sup>321</sup> The title of an event serves as a strong epitextual framing device (Bennett 138).

<sup>322</sup> Event series in Scotland, Birmingham, and London respectively.

Sometimes promotional material is written in first-person voice from the perspective of the host(s), often portraying them as accessible and friendly, such as this excerpt from the event page of the first Bad Language of 2018: ‘What have we been up to? Joe has been hanging around in fancy hotels and making friends with cats in train stations. Fats has been rediscovering eggs and playing card games in a crown court waiting room’ (Bad Language). The projected personal welcome is particularly marked in the case of Come Rhyme with Me, where the cover image for the page reads ‘Dean and Deanna present Come Rhyme With Me’ and the profile image shows hosts Dean Atta and Deanna Rodgers embracing and smiling at the camera (Come Rhyme With Me). Signoffs such as ‘Love, / The Boomerang Crew’ encourage a perception of the event as informal, inviting, and personally curated (Boomerang Club).

It is important to note that although these marketing materials construct the expectation of a welcoming, intimate performance space at which exciting performances will occur, they generally do not guarantee that the material performed will be ‘authentic’ in any of its denotations. For instance, as established in Chapter 2, while autobiographical and referential pacts are generally constructed within spoken word events through the combination of many contextual factors, ‘true’ autobiographical expression is generally not directly guaranteed. These events are not marketed as ‘true storytelling’ events, but rather as events at which live poetry will be performed. However, the rhetoric of inclusivity, engagement, and personal warmth primes participants for a different relationship with poetry than they might anticipate from a traditional poetry reading.

Furthermore, those spoken word event series which prioritise social activism do often establish their events as forums for participants to express important narratives and be witnessed. While the rhetoric of ‘speak your truth’ is less ubiquitous in the U.K. than in the U.S., often epitextual promotional material emphasises the inclusivity of these events and the invitation to support participants. Edinburgh’s God Damn Debut Slam invites ‘Come join us for the super-inclusive, most bonkers, least predictable poetry slam in the central belt!’ and England’s Heaux Noire (a platform for female poets of colour) encourages potential participants to ‘Bring your love, support and positive vibes! / All welcome!’ (The God Damn Debut

Slam; Heaux Noire). Thus while ‘authenticity’ is rarely guaranteed through spoken word marketing, materials tend to frame these events as ones in which all are welcome, socially intimate relationships are cultivated, and important personal and/or political ‘truths’ may be aired, rather than formal events in which the poet and audience may occupy distinct social strata.

### **Physical Setting**

The physical spaces in which spoken word events take place further encourage the audience’s perception of the performer as an ‘authentic,’ non-representative figure. These spaces act as critical framing devices for the work performed within them: as Bennett argues, ‘each particular variety of playing space provides the audience with specific expectations and interpretive possibilities’ (127). As such, spectators’ ‘physical and perceptual relationships’ with these spaces ‘are central to the audience’s experience and will always mediate readings of the fictional stage world’ (Ibid 128). I follow Bennett, Heddon, and Novak in recognising that no performance sites are neutral: ‘[p]laces, like the bodies located in them, are embedded within and produced by historical, cultural and political vectors’ (Heddon 112). In securing venues for spoken word events, organisers must consider which sites are accessible for those of different classes, races, genders, abilities, and so on—as well as what pre-existing associations participants may hold with these spaces.

In this section I observe that—in part due to financial necessity and in part due to a desire to make events popularly accessible and foster an informal, social atmosphere—spoken word events in the U.K. generally take place in informal social spaces rather than theatrical (proscenium) venues or academic sites. The rooms in which performances take place tend to be relatively small, allowing for closer proximity between participants and thus facilitating engagement. The stage spaces tend to be relatively sparse (there are typically no sets per se, frequently simply a microphone on a stand), and the audience spaces tend to be semifixed (chairs can be moved). The practice of seating poets in the audience blurs the distinction between



the performance space and audience space and further deconstructs any notion of the poet as a representative figure.<sup>323</sup>

### *Non-Exclusive Spaces*

At the time of writing, there exist no venues in the U.K. specifically designed for the performance of spoken word poetry.<sup>324</sup> Due to the lack of resources for most spoken word events and because of the decisions of event organisers to make events more culturally accessible to a broader demographic, these events generally occur in non-exclusive spaces. By non-exclusive I not only mean spaces which are not specifically designed for spoken word poetry, but also multi-purpose spaces which are typically used for a broad range of activities. While statistics on the venues used for contemporary U.K. spoken word events are not available,<sup>325</sup> I observe that the majority of events occur in pubs, clubs, cafés, bookshops, libraries, and similar venues. In this section I argue that the use of these non-exclusive spaces not only makes these events more accessible to a broader demographic, but also encourages the perception of the spoken word poet as non-representative due to the lack of traditional theatrical framing devices.

Spoken word is certainly not the first poetic genre to occur in pubs and other non-exclusive spaces: there is a long history of poetry performances eschewing formal settings, particularly within counter-cultural and political poetic movements. Fowler notes that ‘Britain’s counterculture has been here before. Poets associated with the British poetry revival, such as Michael Horovitz or Adrian Henri, preferred the same sorts of venues, and shared many of the same values, as those now

<sup>323</sup> Again, these conventions are not exclusive to contemporary spoken word events: many of the elements I describe here are also common within contemporary poetry readings more generally.

<sup>324</sup> There are venues designed or at least primarily utilised for live poetry readings—for instance, the National Poetry Library in London has a space for readings. However, these tend to be publicly funded institutions. This raises the query: would a purpose-built spoken word venue somewhat defeat its own purpose? There is an argument to be made that any move towards institutionalisation (i.e. holding events at a central, dedicated, standard space) could diminish the accessibility and relaxed vibe of these events. Arguably, the local pub or community centre would remain the ideal spoken word venue, given its cultural and socioeconomic accessibility.

<sup>325</sup> Any accurate, comprehensive documentation of spoken word events has been made challenging by their ephemeral and relatively grassroots nature (Marsh et al.).

associated with contemporary slam poetry' (241).<sup>326</sup> Since the beginning of the slam movement in the 1980s, spoken word events have carried this tradition forward by occupying a wide range of spaces outwith the traditional proscenium theatre. As Marc Smith has proudly claimed,

Poetry slams can be found nearly anywhere—in schools, between the office cubicles, at festivals, in bars, at wedding celebrations, at museums, in cultural centres, even in Laundromats. Performance poets have trained themselves to succeed wherever and in whatever context they're called on to emote—bowling alleys, churches, temples, pool halls, street fairs, commuter trains, discoteques, you name it. The slam's mission has been to throw off the shackles of how and where poetry should be presented. (Smith and Kraynak, *Stage a Poetry Slam* xvi)

The use of non-traditional performance venues for spoken word events occurs in part due to financial restraints, but also serves an important social and political function. Producing events in venues which are not coded as exclusive or elite like traditional theatres can be signals these events as more welcoming to a greater diversity of people. For instance, A. Brown's research has found that 'in the United States, white Americans use purpose-built arts facilities at several times the rate the Hispanics and African Americans use them' (52). While equivalent statistics are not available for how participation in live poetry events breaks down by demographic in the U.K., this research further suggests that using non-purpose-built spaces helps to increase the accessibility of spoken word events to a broader demographic range.

In addition, these non-traditional venues generally lack the architectural components that signify representational (i.e. acted) performance: for instance, a high raised stage framed by an archway, a curtain, wings for performer entry and exit, scenery, etc. Architecture and setting provide an important framing device for live performance: when the curtain rises on the raised stage in a grand theatre, the audience sitting below is conditioned to perceive the body onstage as an actor playing a role. Conversely, the lack of these features in a non-exclusive venue means

<sup>326</sup> Bowen describes one of the Liverpool venues in which the young Merseybeat poets began performing as 'a hired room which doubled both as a washroom and folk club' (50).

that the audience lacks important framing elements that would normally contextualise the performance as representative. This does not guarantee that the performance will be perceived as non-representative; theatrical productions can of course take place outwith traditional theatres (establishing the representational nature of the performing bodies through other means). However, the physical elements of traditional theatres assist in establishing the audience's expectations of this representative action onstage, and thus spoken word audiences in non-theatrical spaces are less conditioned by the venue to expect representational performance than they would be in a theatre setting.

### *Venue Size*

The size of the venue significantly affects spectators' abilities to see, hear, and engage with the poet, and subsequently the extent to which they perceive the poet as 'authentic.' On a basic level, several of the 'authenticity' performance techniques described in the previous chapters are dependent on the audience being able to see the performer's body. For instance, spectators in smaller venues may more easily perceive the poet-performer as 'emotionally authentic' given that they can clearly see their facial expressions, while spectators in larger venues might not be able to 'verify' the poet's tone of voice against their facial features. But more to the point, physical proximity may *by virtue of itself* increase the spectator's perception of the poet's 'authenticity.' Here I expand upon Novak's argument that 'the extent to which the poet appears as an "extra-mundane" being will in part be determined by the size and structure of the performance space' (*Live Poetry* 210).

Within smaller spaces (i.e. where the performer and spectator are separated only by social, personal, or even intimate distance<sup>327</sup> in Hall's taxonomy), spectators are able to perceive the poet's body in detail through multiple senses. The poet's presence is corporeal, material, and physically close. This physical proximity can lend itself to a greater experienced intimacy: not only a sense of being literally and metaphorically 'close' to the performer, but also a greater sense of the performer as

<sup>327</sup> In Hall's taxonomy, 'intimate distance' is 0 inches (i.e. touching) to 18 inches, 'personal distance' is 1.5-4 feet, and 'social distance' is 4-12 feet (E. Hall 110-116).

‘real.’ Kennedy’s analysis of the effects of venue size on audience perception explains this effect:

when a performance occurs in a small theatre ... the proximity of [the actor]’s body is the dominant physical impression made upon [spectators]. While distant views of a proscenium performance normally affect only the eyes and ears, keeping the danger of [the actor]’s body at bay, the corporal contiguity of small space performance can affect the range of senses. The results are not necessarily pleasant—especially when touch and smell are involved—but they provoke the audience to recognize that the actor is not merely a walking shadow. As an undeniable presence, as a desire, *the actor in a studio becomes both more human and more threatening*. (138, emphasis added)

The corporeal nature of the poet reinforces the perception of them as a real, ‘authentic’ person. Kennedy continues to observe that ‘the intimate and adjacent presence of the actor conveys so clearly the paradox of the theatrical double: the actor’s otherness is both aesthetic object and human incidence, both signifier and corpus’ (138). This paradox of the real person occupying the same physical space as the persona of the poet, of narrating ‘I’ and narrated ‘I’ appearing as one, is the tension at the heart of spoken word’s claims to ‘authenticity.’ But while in the theatrical context this paradox may be uncanny and distracting—for instance, smelling the actor’s sweat from the stage lights may provide an unwelcome reminder that they are exerting effort to act a character in a constructed setting—in spoken word close proximity further serves to reinforce the perception of the poet as ‘genuinely’ themselves. Furthermore, proximity also influences spectators’ behaviours, particularly when the entire performance space is lit and they are conscious that they are visible, and may increase the sense of ‘authenticity of engagement’ (as will be discussed shortly).

In contrast, in larger venues where spectator and performer are at a public distance,<sup>328</sup> this greater distance may discourage spectators from perceiving the poet

<sup>328</sup> In Hall’s taxonomy, the ‘close phase’ of ‘public distance’ is 12-25 feet, while the ‘far phase’ is any distance over 25 feet (E. Hall 116-7).

as ‘real’ and ‘relatable.’ Most simply, larger venues make it more challenging for spectators to perceive the poet in detail with multiple senses (particularly if the poet is not amplified). If the performer is amplified (i.e. using a microphone), this constitutes a mediatisation of their presence, which may be perceived as an ‘inauthenticating’ barrier (Auslander, *Liveness* 57). Again following Kennedy’s scholarship, increased physical distance tends to make the performer less ‘real’ in the eyes of the spectator: he asserts that in large auditoria, the ‘bodies of actors on stage are therefore made to look smaller than the body of the viewer, more like puppets or imagined creatures in an autonomous and visually consistent world, and the farther away from the stage a spectator sits the more dream-like the actors will appear’ (134). Following this logic, the use of larger venues may discourage spectators from perceiving spoken word poets as ‘authentic.’ A review of a Kae Tempest performance at Bestival in 2015 bears out this theory. In this large festival setting, the reviewer worries that

The popularisation of spoken word can become its undoing, as its very reason for being created is lost as it spreads to new media. Kate Tempest’s messages become problematic too. She attempts to directly and personally address the audience (“so if you want to talk just come find me”), and to show herself to be ‘ordinary’ (“sitting it out on my stoop with my shoes off ... I’m you mate”). But when she’s under the spotlights in front of an audience of thousands these statements no longer seem genuine. (Jennings n.p.)

First, this review demonstrates the importance of ‘authenticity of motivation’ within this art form: it worries that the very reason spoken word poetry exists is threatened by its popularity and implies that Tempest’s work cannot still be ‘authentic’ given their commercial, mainstream success. Second, it indicates that spoken word poets’ claims to ‘authenticity’—relatability, accessibility, approachability—may ring false within larger venues. As Novak argues, ‘[l]ive poetry events in large spaces can therefore seem more formal and “cold” in character’ (*Live Poetry* 210).

Additionally, the greater proxemic distances in larger venues make direct engagement between spectators and poets more challenging. Visibility is more difficult both ways: not only will spectators find it harder to see the poet in detail, but

the poet may not be able to see their audience at all if the audience space is not lit. This makes engagement techniques including eye contact more challenging and thus reduces the potential for spectator-performer interaction and for the audience to feel a sense of ‘authenticity of engagement’ (as will be discussed shortly). Lockyer’s research into stand-up comedy arena performances demonstrates this effect: she finds that shows in those huge venues yield a ‘lack of, or limited opportunity for, communication and intimacy between performer and the audience’ (597). Thus the typical usage of relatively small venues within the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene helps to foster not only the increased perception of the poet as non-representative and ‘authentic,’ but also a more intimate, social atmosphere between all participants.

### *The Stage Space*

Given that spoken word events feature multiple poets performing a variety of pieces (rather than a cast performing a single narrative), they tend not to feature theatrical sets suggesting that the staging area is an alternate fictional space.<sup>329</sup> Usually spoken word stages feature only a microphone on a stand against a bare wall backdrop. Where the venue has the technical capability, sometimes these events may also project images or text onto a screen or wall behind the performer (the logo of the event series or the poet’s name, for instance). Foley characterises the typical poetry slam practitioner space in the U.S. as ‘[a] modest-sized stage with one or a couple of microphones stands bare under hazy illumination,’ and notes that this sparse staging is ‘remarkable more for what seems it be missing than for anything on it’ (*How to Read an Oral Poem* 3).<sup>330</sup> The lack of a set reinforces that the spoken word stage does not represent a fictive space: the location is not attempting to transport the spectator to another world, but is obviously just a stage. There is no

<sup>329</sup> A potential exception is with spoken word theatre, in which (usually solo) poets perform lengthier pieces often incorporating theatrical components such as staging, costuming, and props. Because of the subject matter, length, and use of more complicated staging in these performances than the bare staging of the majority of spoken word events, they do not tend to encourage the perception of ‘authenticities’ to the same extent as the typical spoken word showcases discussed in this chapter.

<sup>330</sup> Although Foley describes U.S. slam stages here, in my experience this also characterises U.K. spoken word stages.

podium or other physical barrier symbolically separating the poet from the audience. Lighting is also generally simple and sometimes house lights remain on (i.e. the audience is lit and thus visible from the stage) in order to facilitate performer-spectator and spectator-spectator engagement (Hoffman 202).

This sparse staging is not unprecedented: alternative theatre companies, perhaps most famously Grotowski's Poor Theatre, have similarly utilised minimalist staging to erode the audience's perception of performers as performers and consequently making the performance feel less like 'art' and more like 'authentic' sharing. Kathryn O'Driscoll observes how the addition of theatrical staging elements to a spoken word event can decrease or eliminate the audience's perception of the poet's 'authenticity':

people often feel fooled if [a narrative shared onstage] turns out not to be true. And I think that's more to do with the fact that we're performing it. I have found that that's less so in poetry theatre shows. As soon as you add lighting or sound, people are taken out of it because they associate it with theatre. (Interview)

Thus the sparseness of spoken word event settings further reinforces the perception of the poet and their work as 'real' and non-representative.

### ***The Audience Space***

As mentioned previously, the boundary between the practitioner space and the audience space in U.K. spoken word poetry events is porous. The general convention is to seat poets in the audience, rather than physically distinguishing them from the rest of the participants by having them wait backstage and enter and exit from the wings. Although in part this convention may occur due to limitations in the venue (i.e. the lack of a backstage area or wings), it has become an integral component of spoken word events<sup>331</sup> and an influential factor in framing the poet-performer as 'authentic.' Because the poet walks directly from the audience space to

<sup>331</sup> Almost all of the spoken word events I have participated in in the U.K. have seated performers in the audience. A recent exception is when in 2018 Loud Poets began hosting events at the Scottish Storytelling Centre (a theatre in Edinburgh) and asked poets to remain backstage during the show, entering and exiting via the wings. As an organiser of these events, I recall many poets being confused by this unusual format and requesting to sit in the audience once their performances were complete so as to witness the other performances.

the presentational space, there is no spatial distance, no sudden reveal, of the poet as a distinct character.

This convention frames the event and poet in three important ways. First, it indicates the importance of respect and community within the spoken word scene in that the poets all watch each other's sets. Second, it increases the sense of the spoken word space as 'democratic' through the symbolic enactment of a spectator rising to the status of performer. This implies that any individual seated within the audience might perform, and thus that the presentational space is accessible to all. Hoffman has observed how this lack of spatial and symbolic distance between performing and non-performing participants enhances the 'carnavalesque' nature of poetry slams. He references Bakhtin's description of a performance sphere that 'does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators' as directly applicable to the slam context (Bakhtin 7, qtd. in Hoffman 204). Thus this convention erodes not only the spatial but also the symbolic divide between the performances and spectators at spoken word events, further facilitating social intimacy and engagement. Third, the convention of performers entering from the wings of a theatre (or another part of the practitioner space hidden from the audience) is associated with representational theatre. When Ian McKellan plays King Lear, we do not initially see him as Ian McKellan: he enters the stage from the wings *as Lear* and only appears as McKellan during the curtain call. In contrast, the poet-performer standing up from their seat in the audience is apparent to other participants as 'one of them' before assuming their role onstage. Because this switching of roles (from spectator to performer) occurs visibly, the notion that the spoken word poet is assuming a separate character (playing a representational role) is weakened.<sup>332</sup>

### ***Hosting Practices***

Hosts of spoken word events play a critical role in framing poets as 'authentic,' non-representative figures through their production decisions and

<sup>332</sup> Of course, that a figure enters from the wings does not guarantee that they are a representational figure (for instance, at a TED talk, the person onstage is not acting but instead speaking as themselves). My argument here is simply that the lack of this traditional visual cue, along with the other 'authenticating' devices in the contemporary U.K. spoken word event, helps to deconstruct notions of the poet-performer as a representative figure.



onstage manner. First, the way in which the poet is introduced to the stage provides a highly influential paratextual frame influencing the audience's expectations for the set. While it is challenging to generalise across introductory remarks made at spoken word events due to their variability and ephemerality, based on my observations it is rare for hosts to read poets' formal biographies to introduce them to the stage. Rather, hosts generally speak off the cuff, possibly mentioning some of the poet's credentials but rarely citing a lengthy list of accolades. This lack of formality de-emphasises the poet as a professional figure with heightened cultural capital, instead allowing them to be perceived as 'authentic' (particularly 'authentic of motivation'). If the host uses terms such as 'confessional,' 'honest,' or 'passionate' when introducing the poet, they prime the audience to perceive the material as 'authentic of autobiographical self,' 'authentic of narrative,' and 'authentic of emotion,' respectively. Additionally, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, spoken word poets generally use their proper names rather than obvious pseudonyms. That they are introduced to the stage by their real names reinforces the perception of 'authenticity of origin,' 'authenticity of autobiographical self,' and 'authenticity of persona.'

In another instance of how financial pressures influence how events are staged and thus affect audience perceptions, the fact that poets often perform multiple roles throughout an event can encourage the audience to perceive them as non-representative figures. Because much of the U.K. spoken word scene (particularly outwith London) continues to consist of independently organised event series and collectives (Bearder 129-43), poets are often required to produce and promote their own platforms.<sup>333</sup> As poet and organiser Bibi June shares, 'there is no place for your work anywhere; you have to make your own space' (Interview). The responsibility for artists themselves to platform-build is common to grassroots artistic spheres, and as this comment from early U.S. slam organiser Bob Holman illustrates, has existed from the beginning of this art form: 'this is what it means to

<sup>333</sup> The majority of the figures I interviewed for this study occupy multiple roles within the U.K. spoken word scene: many are both poets and administrators in various capacities (see the index of research participants in Appendix C for details). While this effect is due in part to my desire to interview knowledgeable figures within the scene—leading me to invite participants with multiple perspectives and a range of experience—it also indicates the commonality within this scene of poets not only pursuing their craft but also actively cultivating platforms for others.

be a poet at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: you work, you set up chairs, you're an administrator, you talk with the owner about how the crowd is growing every week or will start soon' (qtd. in Glazner 15).

I argue that this tendency for spoken word poets to enact multiple roles over the course of the event further establishes them to the audience as quotidian, non-representative figures. As Bennett has recognised, this practice of performers 'fulfil[ing] non-performing roles such as collecting tickets, ushering, or even serving behind the bar' is indicative of 'the informal proxemic mode' in Hall's theory of proxemic relations (135). Sometimes in alternative theatre productions, these administrative actions are performed by costumed actors in character, which establishes those figures as representative from the beginning of the event. However, given that in spoken word contexts poets are typically not performing characters (per se) but their own identities, the practice of performing multiple artistic and curatorial roles during an event decreases the idea of the poet as a distant, representative figure and frames them as non-representative and approachable. Furthermore, it may reinforce the audience's sense of this organiser-poet as 'authentic of motivation': if the poet is also organising platforms for other artists to perform (likely without personal profit), theoretically they must be motivated by a love of the art form rather than purely commercial desires.

### **Authenticity of Engagement**

Although all of the strains of 'authenticity' discussed throughout this thesis are cooperatively performed and perceived—'authenticity' is not a stable, objective quality but a subjective determination—'authenticity of engagement' is particularly so. That is because it describes the perceived relationship between the spoken word poet and the other participants (i.e. spectators, host, etc.) in the moment of performance. This tenth and final strain in my taxonomy of 'authenticities' within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry describes a felt sense among participants that there is a genuine engagement between poet and audience; that the poet is actively performing *to* and *with* spectators and adapting material for this specific context. This effect is somewhat challenging to explain—as Whalley and Miller describe, there is an 'inherent oddness of the moment of intimacy between two

strangers’—but constitutes a core part of the allure of spoken word as a genre (94). This section describes how all of the above-mentioned components of spoken word events (as well as the ‘authenticity’ performance techniques described in the previous chapters) work in tandem to construct an atmosphere of active, ‘authentic’ engagement between event participants.

First, spoken word events are structured in order to encourage and facilitate active<sup>334</sup> engagement between participants: spectators are encouraged to be more overtly active (including physically loud) than spectators at traditional poetry readings. Although, again, poetry slam rules do not dictate the conventions of all spoken word events, the way in which slams allocate critical power to the audience through encouraging them to vocally engage with the poetry has heavily influenced the norms of audience engagement at spoken word events. Participants are encouraged through various factors of the event to engage as active co-creators of the event, rather than as passive spectators. Frequently these invitations to engage are overt: hosts will often directly solicit audience interaction through banter at the beginning of the show. In another example of ‘exclusionary authenticity,’ remarks often humorously contrast the event against traditional poetry readings—i.e. ‘This isn’t your grandma’s poetry reading!’—in order to reassure participants that the relatively passive audience etiquette of formal readings is not elicited here.

Sometimes hosts will directly instruct audiences on the requested spectator etiquette of spoken word events. A common introduction, particularly at slams, might be a variation on this script:<sup>335</sup>

OK, you’ve just heard a pretty good poem. It had some nice rhymes, made you see the world a little differently. What do you do?<sup>336</sup>

[Audience claps] Come on guys, writing a poem is hard! You have to

<sup>334</sup> In using the term ‘active’ here, I recognise the scholarship of Fischer-Lichte; Whalley and Miller; Ranci re; Reason; and others arguing that concepts of a binary between the ‘active’ and ‘passive’ spectator is outdated and inaccurate. Instead, engagement occurs on a spectrum, with all audience members engaged at least at the degree of interpreting and thus co-creating meaning.

<sup>335</sup> This is a rough approximation of the speech I often deliver when hosting slams, and I have witnessed many other event hosts delivering similar addresses.

<sup>336</sup> As previously noted, in the U.K. spoken word events generally do not encourage audiences to boo performances that they do not enjoy; in my experience of this speech, it always begins with the baseline of a good poem.

reward it better than that! [Audience claps louder.] OK, that's your baseline. Now let's say you hear an incredible poem that absolutely knocks your socks off and reminds you to call your mother. How do you react? [Audience claps louder]. Good, now you're getting the hang of it! OK, you've just heard a poem that took your world view and shook it up like an Etch-a-Sketch. You're crying and laughing and your life is forever changed. What do you do? [Audience claps and whoops very loudly]. Good – I think you're ready!

Through such introductions, hosts not only give the audience permission to respond loudly to the performances, but prime them for that active engagement. The audience is made aware that their interaction with the poetry is not only critically valid (i.e. for judging slams) but also a core element of the event itself. Through encouraging audience participation, spoken word hosts facilitate both spectator-performer communication and spectator-spectator communication (in Elam's terms).

The fact that spoken word events are generally sited within non-exclusive spaces facilitates 'authenticity of engagement.' When these events occur within traditionally social places such as pubs and community centres—as in the U.K. they typically do—spectators' actions within this space are guided by their understanding of the relaxed, social behaviour generally expected in these sites. In his guide to running poetry slams, Marc Smith emphasises the importance of staging slams in venues which encourage participants to feel comfortable: 'A slam venue needs to be a place where people like to hang out whether something's happening onstage or not. A sit-down place with comfortable chairs, stools, and/or couches... A place that feels down home' (Smith and Kraynak, *Stage A Poetry Slam* 108). Siting a performance in such a comfortable environment encourages more active participant engagement than siting it in a proscenium theatre coded with the expectation for formal, relatively passive spectatorship.

The spatial arrangements of spoken word venues tend to facilitate this active audience engagement. As previously noted, because the venues used for spoken word events tend to be multi-purpose spaces, they are often semifixed (i.e. sets, stages, and seating can be rearranged). Typical fixed-feature theatrical spaces, with proscenium staging and non-moveable seating, reinforce class hierarchies (i.e. boxes

are exclusive, tickets increase in price based on proximity to the stage) and discourage audience interaction. As Elam argues, the result of this audience positioning is to ‘emphasize personal rather than social perception and response’ (64).<sup>337</sup> In contrast, audience positioning at spoken word events often can be arranged to encourage engaged spectator-spectator communication through cabaret seating. When the seating arrangements are flexible, participants may rearrange them to suit their wishes, even potentially sitting around tables in sub-groups (Novak, *Live Poetry* 212). Thus the choice of non-proscenium venues not only encourages the perception of the poet-performer as non-representative and conditions the audience for more social, active participation, but also allows event organisers and participants greater freedom in rearranging sets to enable the most participatory seating with the lowest physical and social distance between participants.

If the audience is lit during the performance, this also facilitates spectator-spectator communication (because audience members can see each other’s reactions and engage with them) as well as performer-spectator communication (because the performer can see and thus better engage with the audience). Writing in the U.S. context, Frost argues that ‘[s]poken word performances have a Brechtian alienation effect built in: the lights remain on, and the performer speaks directly to the audience, acknowledging, even emphasising, that we are there’ (18). Drawing a parallel between the poetry slam and professional wrestling to illustrate how the audience has a similar role, Hoffman notes the importance of lighting: ‘the audience at [wrestling] events is lighted as deeply as possible, indicating that they, too, are conceived of as performers in the ritual’ (202). Here the fact that McAuley’s concept of the ‘performance’ space encompasses both the stage space *and* the audience space is particularly apt: when this entire space is lit, as is common at U.K. spoken word events, the active role of the audience in collaboratively creating the performance is emphasised. While, again, it is challenging to parse whether spoken word events tend to keep the audience space lit intentionally to encourage active audience engagement or whether these spaces simply are not designed with distinct lighting options for the

<sup>337</sup> This tradition of using fixed structures for performances has eroded somewhat in the past century, generally speaking; Elam observes that ‘[m]uch modern theatre has tended – from Strindberg’s ‘intimate theatre’ onwards – to transform architectural fixity as far as possible into dynamic proxemics informality’ (63).

stage space and audience space, the effect is consistent regardless of intent.

The importance of the venue in fostering a social, participatory atmosphere for spoken word events can be highlighted when these events move from relatively informal, accessible venues (i.e. pubs, libraries, community centres) to formal theatrical venues. Wheeler discusses how, when at the U.S. National Poetry Slam in 2005 the competition shifted from smaller venues for the preliminary rounds to a larger theatre for the finals, ‘the grungy rituals of slam met the polish of commercial theater. The result was sometimes successful, sometimes uncomfortable, and less tensely entertaining than the minor bouts’ (Wheeler 146). Even outwith theatrical sites, sometimes venues that feel too formal or commercial may not facilitate an appropriately informal and ‘authentic’ environment for spoken word. Marc Smith shares how ‘[a] few slammasters have tried ‘brand name’ venues—franchise bookstores and coffeehouses, and restaurants with facades and logos duplicated from town to town, but not many have survived. Homegrown. Unique. Ma and Pa. Stimulating and *authentic* does better’ (Smith and Kraynak, *Stage a Poetry Slam* 109, emphasis added). Not only the physical venue, then, but also the audience’s perception of the cultural status of that venue and the behaviour acceptable within it can drastically alter participants’ comfort within that site.

Of course, poets themselves play an active role in curating the perception of ‘authenticity of engagement.’ As noted earlier in this thesis, poets generally adapt their material to the performance context, including curating their sets to the demographics and energy of the audience and even altering the language of some poems. As discussed in Chapter 3, poets can perform presence: they rarely adopt obvious personas, instead appearing as ‘themselves’ in order to ‘genuinely’ connect with the audience. Often spoken word poets perform from memory, which facilitates the illusion of ‘authenticity of temporal state’ and also means that there is no physical barrier (i.e. a book) between participants: poets are free to gesture and make direct eye contact with spectators.<sup>338</sup> And, as explained previously, spoken word poets tend to perform ‘emotional authenticity,’ projecting the sense that they are genuinely emotionally affected by the material they are performing in real time.

<sup>338</sup> Even if the audience is not lit, poets may still create the illusion of eye contact by looking directly into the audience.

Poets can also engage directly with the audience between poems through their paratextual comments linking the poems in their sets together: they may comment on the context of the event or thank the audience directly.

A sense of ‘authenticity of engagement’ can be experienced despite the fact that spoken word events are staged performances. Whalley and Miller describe the relationship between performer and audience as ‘para-social’<sup>339</sup> in that it is ‘an uneven interpersonal relationship, in which one party will have significantly more information about the other’<sup>340</sup> (92). The interaction between poet and audience does not adhere to the social conventions of a regular conversation in that the audience cannot reciprocate the communication in the same way: while they are invited to loudly react and applaud, they are not welcome to respond aloud to rhetorical questions within the poem, for instance. However, that this relationship is para-social and uneven is inconsequential to the experience of ‘authenticity of engagement.’ Just as a fan may have an intense passion for a celebrity despite never having socially interacted with them, so a spectator may feel an affinity or connection with the poet onstage. This is demonstrated through the number of participants who ask poets for hugs following spoken word events (and the many who hug without asking).<sup>341</sup> As with each of the strains of ‘authenticity’ described in this thesis, simply because ‘authenticity of engagement’ is a constructed, negotiated perception does not mean that it is not experienced as real.

### **Case Study: Loud Poets, Straight Outta Dennistoun**

The following case study of a live spoken word event illustrates one example of how the siting, staging, and paratextual conventions of events frame the poet as ‘authentic.’ Here I analyse the Loud Poets event ‘Straight Outta Dennistoun’ which took place on Thursday, 5 November, 2015 in Glasgow. This was one of a series of

<sup>339</sup> Whalley and Miller here borrow Horton and Wohl’s term from their 1956 paper “Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance.” It was initially applied to describe the effect of mass communication technology on perceived intimacy, and has also been applied to describe the relationship between celebrities and fans (Whalley and Miller 92).

<sup>340</sup> Presumably, at the spoken word events, the audience will have more information about the poet than the poet has about each member of the audience.

<sup>341</sup> Here I cite my personal experience as a poet and producer as well as anecdotal evidence from several of the poets I interviewed.

monthly spoken word showcases occurring in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and its structure and conventions were typical of the series. My analysis is based on my observations of this event (recorded through notes taken during the event and a detailed description written immediately afterwards), as well as my knowledge of the regular conventions of Loud Poets events due to my experience producing them. Despite the risk of insider bias, I have chosen to examine an event which I helped to organise (and at which I performed) because as a producer I understand which elements of the production were intentional, and, conversely, which elements were necessitated by financial restriction but nonetheless influenced participants' perception of the poetry. I also experienced this event from the multiple perspectives of organiser, host, performer, and spectator and can thus speak to those various positions.

The marketing for this event was conducted entirely through social media: it consisted of a Facebook event page hosted by the Loud Poets<sup>342</sup> Facebook page. The link to this event page was shared through the Loud Poets social media platforms (including Twitter and Instagram) and shared to Facebook groups for spoken word poets and fans in Scotland, including 'Poetry & Spoken Word in Scotland' and 'Loud Poets Community.' The event's title puns on the 1988 N.W.A. album 'Straight Outta Compton,' referencing the east Glasgow area of Dennistoun. The humorous referencing of mainstream popular culture in the event title frames the event as slightly tongue-in-cheek and culturally accessible.

This event took place in the downstairs<sup>343</sup> venue area of Broadcast, a restaurant and venue on Sauchiehall Street. This street in central Glasgow is easily accessible by public transportation and renowned for its nightlife. Broadcast's downstairs area has a capacity of approximately 85 and is used primarily for concerts and club nights. It features a small bar at the back of the space near the door, and there is a low stage stretching two thirds of the way across the room with a bare wall behind most of it. There is also a small area behind the stage which may be cut off by a curtain to distinguish the performance space from the 'backstage' practitioner

<sup>342</sup> The organisation has since rebranded to 'I Am Loud Productions' with 'Loud Poets' being one of its strands; however, at the time of this event the rebrand had not yet occurred.

<sup>343</sup> Unfortunately, due to the lack of a lift within this venue the event was not wheelchair accessible.



space; however, this space was only used for storage during Loud Poets events, not for exits or entrances, so the curtain was often left open. The spatial elements are semifixed: while neither the stage nor the bar can be easily dismantled, the chairs, benches, and tables can be rearranged and removed.

The space has no natural light so event organisers must choose how to light the space using the available rigged PAR cans and the strip LED lights behind the stage. At this event, lights were focused on the stage with some light falling onto the audience. Throughout the event, the Loud Poets Glasgow logo, the #IamLoud hashtag of the organisation, and images of performers that they had submitted prior to the event were projected onto the wall behind the stage, where a white sheet was hung. Due to financial restrictions, the quality of the borrowed projector was relatively poor, and of course a sheet is not equivalent to a projector screen. The DIY quality of this display was to a certain extent determined by financial limitations, but also served to emphasise the social informality of the event.



Figure #5: AR Crow performing at Loud Poets: Straight Outta Dennistoun, 5 Nov. 2015. Photo credit: Bibi June.

Other than this sheet, a microphone on a stand, and the instruments of the musicians who accompanied the poets, the stage was bare of any set. The performing poets were only physically separated from the audience by the microphone stand and the slightly raised stage. The first row of chairs was within social distance<sup>344</sup> of the performer, and eye contact with all participants in the room was possible due to the visibility of the audience. The low and physically unobscured physical distance between poet and audience enabled spectators to clearly see, hear, and otherwise sense the poet onstage, and invited increased spectator-performer communication.

<sup>344</sup> In proxemics, the 'close phase' of social distance is 4-7 feet, and the 'far phase' is 7-12 feet. At this event the front row was set up roughly 6-8 feet from the microphone stand.

Arriving at the event, audience members were greeted by a member of the Loud Poets organising team, which included the host and several poets also performing at the event (including myself). After paying a relatively affordable £4, spectators had their hands stamped with a custom #IAMLoud stamp. This is the primary promotional hashtag utilised by the organisation. The first-person message is intended to encourage the audience to feel included in the event (i.e. they, too, are 'loud') and prime them for active participation. The audience is referred to as the #LoudCrowd on social media and during the show: often the host will appeal, 'You are the Loud Crowd, make some noise!' In citing the online hashtag, this stamp also establishes a connection between the pre-performance epitextual material and the live event.

The event began with a brief open mic in which three poets who had signed up in advance through the Facebook event page or on the door performed one three-minute poem each. The host (Kevin Mclean) informed the audience that the poet who was cheered the loudest would be booked for the next month's show: effectively, this open mic constitutes a miniature slam. The audience are thus given critical power for the open mic, and as such conditioned to understand that their behaviour during the event is not meant to be passive but enthusiastically audible. Using this open competition to procure acts also advertises the meritocratic nature of the event: it indicates that the stage is accessible to all and bookings are contingent on creative ability rather than professional status or familiarity with the organisers.<sup>345</sup> Additionally, at this event the open mic poets and booked performers were seated within the audience, as is the custom with U.K. spoken word events: they did not await their turn to perform in a separate backstage space. As previously discussed, this lack of physical separation between performers and spectators encourages a sense of the poets as approachable, non-representative figures.

There were seven spoken word poets booked for Loud Poets: Straight Outta Dennistoun (in addition to the three open mic poets) and a three-person band

<sup>345</sup> Not all of the acts at this event series were booked through the open mics; only one slot was available at each event, with the rest of the acts determined by the event producers. Certainly a poet's professional status and the producers' familiarity with their work is still a factor in whether or not they are booked. However, the open mic slot nonetheless indicates the meritocratic values of the event and the accessibility of the stage.

accompanying their performances. Rather than the convention of booked poets performing 10-20 minute sets which is common at traditional poetry readings and many spoken word events, at Loud Poets events in this series the poets only presented a single poem at a time (as with poetry slams) and were discouraged from providing contextualising paratext through introducing their work. Kevin Mclean explains that this rule prevents poets from ‘rambl[ing] on for twenty minutes about what your three-minute poem is about’ (Interview). This lack of contextualisation means that the poet does not have the opportunity to visibly/audibly shift roles onstage from the poem’s introduction to the poem (for instance, briefly stepping away from the mic then back towards it, saying ‘Here goes,’ etc.). Thus there is usually<sup>346</sup> no physical cue for a transformation into a representational persona: the audience perceives the same physical figure seated in the audience walk directly to the microphone and begin performing.

At this event, as was typical with Loud Poets monthly events in this series, rather than a single host introducing each poet to the stage, the role of hosting was shared between the booked poets themselves. They were given a set list at the beginning of the show indicating when to introduce one another. This rolling host structure serves multiple functions. First, it can engender a sense of familiarity and community amongst the booked poets, as often once they learn who they are introducing they will seek them out to learn an amusing fact about them to share onstage. Poets are also required by this practice to remain engaged throughout the entire event so they know when to go onstage to introduce other poets, which emphasises their dual role not only as performers but as spectators, further eroding the distinction between performers and other participants. Second, it decreases any sense of hierarchy by sharing administrative responsibility across the performers rather than having authority centred in a single host. As Mclean explains, ‘No host. Less of this, one person, all the focus on them running the night, so you got somewhere to stand on stage and look important. Nah! Everyone introduces each other’ (Interview).

<sup>346</sup> This is, of course, dependent on the performer’s preferences. Some may walk onstage, adjust the microphone to their height, then step back and visibly prepare to perform.

Third, because poets' formal biographies and lists of accomplishments were not read out as they likely would be at the commencement of a set at a traditional reading, the audience was given less context regarding the poets' cultural capital within the literary sphere. At a Loud Poets event, a renowned poet might be introduced by a newcomer through an amusing fact rather than by reference to their professional accolades, meaning that (excluding any pre-existing knowledge of the performer) the audience's expectations for their performance were less influenced by the poet's professional reputation. This practice further functions to 'normalise' the poets onstage as 'authentic' figures. Fourth, and most relevantly here, this practice further destabilises the notion of the poet as a representative figure because they are witnessed performing multiple artistic and administrative roles throughout the event.

At the conclusion of Loud Poets: Straight Outta Dennistoun, host Mclean thanked all of the performers, the venue, and the audience. He promoted other spoken word events in Scotland, encouraging the audience to attend them as well. On their way out, participants passed a small merchandise table at which they could purchase the performing poets' books and CDs. Poets, organisers, and spectators mingled and all left through the same exit.

While no explicit guarantees were made prior to or during Loud Poets: Straight Outta Dennistoun that the poets and their performances would be 'authentic,' many factors—from the low-distance seating arrangements to the rolling host practice to the inclusion of an open mic, and more—established an environment at which the performance and perception of 'authenticities' was facilitated. The audience participated heartily throughout the event through applause, vocal affirmations, and conversations with poets prior to and following the show; while 'authenticity of engagement' is, of course, subjective and thus difficult to measure, the format and production of the event encouraged this active participation and energetic exchange.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

As this chapter has indicated, spoken word event conventions tend to foster an engaging, intimate space at which narratives can be witnessed and poets are contextualised as non-representative, 'authentic' figures. However, despite its

centrality to the genre, the consistent framing of spoken word poets as ‘authentic’ can have a detrimental effect on the way in which this poetry is critically received. Ben Chaim has argued that within live performance settings, factors which distance performers from spectators through clearly distinguishing between the fictive space and the spectator space can be crucial to the audience’s perception of these performances as art (*Distance in the Theatre*). Effectively, when the distancing factors common to theatrical performance (i.e. costumes, theatrical lighting) are removed from these performances, the audience is less likely to perceive the work as an artistic performance: these contextualising factors serve as vital aesthetic framing devices (Ibid). Thus in minimising the stylistic elements that would normally accompany theatrical performance or literary poetry readings, spoken word events risk lessening the audience’s perception of the performance as an artistic event. Instead, audience members may be led to perceive the event as more of a personal sharing session or political platform: perhaps serving vital social functions but lacking much aesthetic value. The next chapter considers how the consistent implications that spoken word performers are ‘authentic’ has detrimentally inhibited the development of a healthy critical discourse for this genre, with consequences for poets’ professionalisation opportunities and, in some cases, their mental wellbeing.

## Chapter 6: ‘Authenticity’ and the Critical Discourse

[Critics] when they talk about that they’ll say things like, ‘Oh people get up and they’ll just be honest! They just say what comes out their head!’ You know, in the same way people used to say about poems, ‘People just write whatever they think,’ as if that’s the easiest thing in the world. But actually it’s the hardest thing.

—Caroline Bird (Interview)

I’m tired of having spoken word being perceived as something secondary, as something peripheral, as something gimmicky.

—Anthony Anaxagorou (Interview)

As this thesis has asserted, ‘authenticity’ in its myriad forms is deeply embedded as a marker of aesthetic (and moral) quality within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry. For a poem to be perceived as ‘inauthentic’—through plagiarism, fictionalisation, commercial temptation, or simply the audience not believing the poet’s performance—can yield serious consequences for the success<sup>347</sup> of that work and the career of that poet. Thus far I have generally refrained from sharing value judgments on this effect within the art form, instead considering how it functions.<sup>348</sup> However, in this final chapter I evaluate the effect that this focus on ‘authenticity’ has had on the discourse surrounding U.K. spoken word poetry through analysing poetry slam success trends, reviews in the media, and the ways in which certain poems and poets are valued over others.

Socially and politically, the valorisation of ‘authenticity’ within the U.K. spoken word scene serves an important purpose. These events often function as forums for individuals with challenging lived experiences—for instance, poets with

<sup>347</sup> Here I mean ‘success’ in broad terms; for instance, winning a poetry slam, applause and praise for the poem, publication offers, and the general career progression of the poet.

<sup>348</sup> With the exception of Chapter 4, in which I expressed concern over the fetishisation of marginalised identity that occurs through the valorisation of ‘authenticity of identity,’ as well as the discouragement of professionalisation that can result from the celebration of ‘authenticity of motivation.’

marginalised identities or those who have experienced traumas—to share their work with supportive, receptive audiences. As previously noted, while not all spoken word poetry in the U.K. is autobiographical or ‘true’—and these terms are unstable at best—the majority of the poets I interviewed draw upon personal experiences in composing their work. The tacit autobiographical and referential pacts within these spaces facilitate this personal expression: poets can believe that any autobiographical narratives they perform will be taken seriously and attributed to them, and spectators can believe that their trust in poets to speak ‘honestly’ is not being abused. These pacts are particularly important when the material shared concerns trauma: for instance, the audience giving the poet their sympathy for a piece regarding the poet’s sexual assault trusts that the poet is not fabricating this narrative in order to win a slam. In this way, the expectation and valuing of ‘authenticity’ in U.K. spoken word poetry is grounded in the vital social and political transaction that occurs when this genre is used as a confessional medium for personally revealing and challenging material.

However important the role that ‘authenticity’ perception plays in the sociopolitical function of contemporary spoken word, it becomes problematic when upheld as a marker of aesthetic quality. As I have argued throughout this thesis, ‘authenticity’ is not an intrinsic, essential element of a poem (or any crafted material). Rather, it is a constructed, performed, and perceived quality grounded in cultural conventions and stereotypes. As such, no poem (nor poet) *is* authentic: rather, spoken word poets (consciously or not) project ‘authenticity’ through their performances. When critics, scholars, and spectators consider ‘authenticity’ to be an inherent trait of the poetry, rather than a constructed performance, the poetry tends to be assessed as raw, rough, honest, and otherwise poorly crafted. Viewed in this way, because the poet onstage is simply ‘being authentic’—apparently without filter, persona, or craft—they are no longer *performing art* but simply *being themselves*. As this chapter will explore, this inaccurate assumption that ‘authenticity’ is innate to this genre, and further that it is antithetical to aesthetic craft, heavily informs much of the critical discourse in the U.K. media surrounding spoken word poetry today.

This chapter evaluates the critical discourse and values system within contemporary U.K. spoken word on the three broad levels at which it occurs:



between poets within the sphere, audiences' perceptions and values, and criticism in the media. It begins by considering the poetry slam as a microcosm of the critical discourse within the U.K. spoken word scene. I analyse the trends in content and delivery which tend to be successful within the slam context: predominantly highly emotional and (purportedly) autobiographical material, with narratives of personal adversity particularly valued. I then consider how the success of this material within the slam context has led to poets feeling incentivised to perform traumatic narratives. I describe the negative effects this can have on poets, most notably the pressure to divulge difficult personal stories in a competitive setting. Next I pan out to consider the critical discourse concerning spoken word in the U.K. arts media, which is generally under-developed and lacks the historical and aesthetic context to adequately evaluate the genre. I draw upon scholarship regarding 'Outsider Art,' particularly the work of sociologist G. A. Fine, to describe how the perception of certain genres and artists as inherently 'authentic' can lead to deeply patronising, problematic systems of consumption and criticism.

Throughout this chapter I argue that rather than sceptically analysing the crafted nature of the poetry and the ways in which spoken word poets construct and project 'authenticity,' too often critics blindly assume that this poetry *is* 'authentic' (across the strains identified in my taxonomy): that this quality is innate rather than performative. Because 'authenticity' also denotes roughness and lack of craft, this perception has led to the assessment of spoken word poetry in general as of lower aesthetic quality than other poetry. I describe some repercussions this rote association of 'authenticity' with spoken word in the critical discourse has had for spoken word poets, including scrutiny of poets' lives rather than their craft. As a case study, I indicate how Watts' 2018 article "The Cult of the Noble Amateur" exemplifies many of these problematic trends within the critical discourse. Finally, I consider what a better critical discourse for U.K. spoken word poetry would entail and make suggestions for its improvement.

A final note: although this chapter focuses on how the critical discourse has inadequately judged contemporary spoken word poetry, I spend little time defending this genre as a legitimate art form. While I obviously disagree with Harold Bloom (in his condemnation of slams as the 'death of art') and other critics who consider

spoken word poetry to lack artistic value, I do not find it relevant here to explain why this art form has aesthetic merit (qtd. in Barber 379). Rather, I analyse the assumptions underlying the critical implications that spoken word *is not art*: specifically, how the subconscious application of ‘authenticity’ as an innate trait and aesthetic quality marker within the form has led to a perception of spoken word as lacking artistic skill and rigour.

## Poetry Slams as Critical Fora

How can we assess what styles of poetry tend to be most successful within the contemporary U.K. spoken word scene? There are multiple potential metrics for success in this scene: securing high-profile gigs, being well-reviewed, accruing many views of recorded poems on YouTube, being published and earning high book sales, etc. However, these metrics are challenging to quantify and arguably provide as much insight into the poet’s work ethic (ability to self-promote) and context (regional availability of high-profile events and reviewers; accessibility of filming and editing equipment) as they do the successfulness of the poet’s work. In order to evaluate which elements of the poetry are most rewarded in this scene, in this section I examine successful trends in contemporary U.K. poetry slams. Here I use the slam as a quasi-microcosm of the spoken word scene more broadly, indicating how trends and techniques for success within slams reflect broader trends in the genre.

As described in the Introduction to this thesis, slams are live poetry competitions<sup>349</sup> designed to be relatively accessible and to prioritise the preferences of the audience over the edicts of traditional literary institutions (e.g. academia). By empowering the audience to score poets and crown a victor, slams make overt the critical processes (aesthetic preferences, evaluations of quality, etc.) inherent in all spoken word events. While technically any material may be performed within a

<sup>349</sup> Although the judging criteria vary depending on the individual slam, generally in the U.K. judges are instructed to score the poetry on three categories: the quality of the writing, the quality of the performance, and the audience’s reaction. Sometimes judges are asked to score each element independently (i.e. a maximum of 10 points for each, with a total possible score of 30 per poem), while sometimes they are simply asked to keep these criteria in mind when giving a score out of 10. Some slam organisers alter these criteria: for instance, Sophia Walker instructs judges to give 10 points each for writing and performance but only 5 for audience reaction in the annual BBC Slam at the Edinburgh Fringe (Interview).

slam, over time certain qualities and subject matters have arisen as more successful within that context (Gregory; Aptowicz). The format, limitations, and popular styles of the slam affect what is composed and performed in the spoken word scene more broadly. Although, as I discussed in the Introduction and will further demonstrate in this section, the styles of poetry successful in slam may be more exaggerated than those successful more broadly in the U.K. spoken word scene, slams still serve as useful sites through which to measure which elements of spoken word are rewarded within this scene.

During my data collection, I asked interview participants what their criteria were for a good or successful spoken word poem. Their replies indicate preferences for well-written, well-performed, stylistically innovative poetry which engages the audience (I will more fully describe poets' aesthetic priorities in the final section of this chapter). When I then asked them which poems tend to win slams, many laughed. They then described a different, more specific style of poetry: work which is personal and political, concerns marginalisation or trauma, and is performed in a highly emotional and dramatic manner.<sup>350</sup> Many spoken word poets cite the success of material which incites strong emotions in the audience, whether humour, sadness, or righteous anger. Michelle Madsen describes the 'slam-winning poem' strategy as 'you triangulate ... earnestness, sincerity, and pain with a tiny drop of humour and some ... strong gestures' (Interview). Interviewees were remarkably unified and consistent in their descriptions of this trope, indicating that this is a model for slam success across the U.K.<sup>351</sup>

If we consider trends of success within slams to be roughly representative of audiences' aesthetic preferences more generally within U.K. spoken word poetry, this further indicates that audiences appreciate work which they perceive to be

<sup>350</sup> I do not interpret the distinction between this 'slam-winning poem' style and poets' personal preferences to indicate a significant distinction between 'slam style' poetry and spoken word poetry writ large. Rather, I believe that poets' aesthetic preferences differ slightly from those of their general audiences; for instance, because of their deep familiarity with their craft, poets may value stylistic innovation more than audiences who are less likely to recognise a tried-and-tested technique.

<sup>351</sup> Here I am describing general trends in the material which tends to be successful at poetry slams. However, these are not hard and fast rules: what wins a slam also depends upon the context of the event and the specific makeup of the audience.

‘authentic’ across the strains described in this thesis.<sup>352</sup> Specifically, there appears to be a clear preference for (purportedly) autobiographical material, particularly powerful narratives of personal adversity. Lucy English describes how these trends have evolved: while previously ‘bigger and louder and shoutier’ poetry would win slams, now more personal material regarding adversity is successful:

There’s a lot of people writing about mental health issues. Very personal stories. Very sort of that sort of political, politicising about gender issues. There’s a lot of rape poems. There’s a lot of people writing about depression, mental illness, gender. Sort of, um, there’s been gay, bisexual, all those type of narratives. Um. Really challenging peoples’ perceptions of how they view other people.

(Interview)

This is significant in that it reifies a certain emotional affect and subject material, rather than a specific poetic style. As analysed throughout this thesis, this suggests that audiences appreciate their perception of insight and intimacy: their sense of unfiltered access to these poets and their ‘genuine’ self-expression.<sup>353</sup>

However innocently it is meant, the fascination with spoken word poets’ internal lives and any subsequent belief that one may access them through their performances can be deeply problematic. In this framework, the poem functions not as an artistic item in and of itself but rather the conduit through which the audience can access the poet’s ‘true’ self. As such, the perception of spoken word events shifts from an artistic showcase more to a personal confessional. I return now to the pair of quotations I cited in Chapter 1: Bernstein’s claim that ‘the poetry reading enacts the

<sup>352</sup> In this analysis I do not wish to depict audiences as homogenous: as I acknowledged in the Introduction to this thesis, spectators vary widely in demographics and taste. The randomly selected judges cannot truly represent the perspectives of the entire audience, thus accounting for the unpredictability of many slam events in which (as is commonly quoted) ‘the best poet never wins.’

<sup>353</sup> As a poet I have personally experienced the disproportionate valuing of my confessional material over work which appears less personally revealing. Following shows, audience members comment far more often on enjoying and feeling moved by the confessional pieces. Of course, these may simply be better works (and there is a longer discussion to be had regarding whether material sparked from personal experience can yield more aesthetic quality for some poets), but based on my experience and the experiences of other spoken word poets, material perceived to be confessional holds a higher value within the aesthetic economy of spoken word poetry than material perceived to be abstract or otherwise non-autobiographical.

poem not the poet; it materialises the texts not the author' and Hoffman's rebuttal that 'what is performed at a poetry reading is necessarily both the poet *and* the poem' (9, 7). It seems that within the contemporary U.K. spoken word context, Hoffman's assessment is more apt: the presentation of self within the genre and the illusion of intimate access it fosters are central to spoken word's appeal. Connor Macleod summarises this perception: 'That's the reason I prefer performance poetry over every other type of poetry. Because when you're watching it, *it's not a poem, it's a person*' (Interview, emphasis added).<sup>354</sup>

I do not wish to overstate the case here: I believe that spectators are generally able to distinguish between a crafted piece of spoken word poetry and the entire life of the poet performing it. However, as this thesis has explained, virtually every element of contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry, from the common themes and performance tropes to the structure of events and venues used, works to frame the perception of the poet as an 'authentic' figure. Audiences are conditioned through all of these elements to perceive a lack of filter, persona, fiction, or other artifice; they are encouraged to perceive the poet as transparently accessible through the poetry. Thus the genre itself encourages not only this conflation of the speaker of the poem and the person performing onstage, but more generally a sense that the 'authentic' self of the artist is imbued within the art.

This perception of the spoken word poet's 'authentic' presence onstage can spark tensions as the actual<sup>355</sup> and the projected grate against each other. As discussed in Chapter 2, through the establishment of the autobiographical and referential pacts, audiences are led to attribute poets' claims onstage to their actual lives, thus curtailing poets' abilities to fictionalise material or assume personas without issuing a disclaimer. Keith Jarrett explains how audiences' assumptions of 'authenticity of autobiographical self' and 'authenticity of narrative' can be limiting for poets:

when you immediately take the person's personhood into account, it's

<sup>354</sup> Leyla Josephine also expresses this idea, stating 'I think it's interesting being a writer because *people think that you're your poems*' (Interview, emphasis added).

<sup>355</sup> Here I indicate the literal reality of the poets' life. Obviously the intersections between factual biography and performed identity are much more nuanced, as discussed throughout this thesis; however, here I simply refer to any deviations between the projected and the experienced which are complicated by the assumption of 'authenticity' in this genre.

very different from ... appreciating something as art. The art and the person. And if as an artist you want to explore different things in different territories, you're stuck because you almost have to absolutely signal, 'Nah, I'm not talking about me, don't worry!' And as an audience member you're worried for the person or you're concerned or whatever. Or you think, 'Oh my God, they're an absolute arsehole.' And as an artist, you're consciously just thinking, 'Oh maybe I can't do this or say this, because people will make a judgment on me as a person.' You can't separate the two. Or if you do, then you end up having this ultra-long preamble. So yeah, it's – it's difficult. (Interview)

As discussed throughout this thesis, the expectations placed on spoken word poets to 'be authentic' can not only constrain the work they perform and the roles they feel comfortable assuming onstage, but also affect their relationship with the audience and their fellow poets offstage (i.e. if the poetry community learns that a purportedly autobiographical work was fictional and casts a moral judgment on the poet). Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 4, these constraints can be even more limiting for marginalised poets, who must also navigate the expectations that they perform their identities in alignment with stereotypical models.

The illusion of full access to the spoken word poet through their poetry and the focus on their life that it entails can cause personal and professional issues for these poets. In 1999<sup>356</sup> British dub poet Jean Binta Breeze shared her frustration that

people don't often critique the work. Everybody wants interviews with you about your personal life! And, you know, I get a lot of press, and they all ask the same questions, usually. And it's about my personal life, and how I write, and my children. But nobody ever takes the work and says, 'I'm going to critique the work', or come to a performance, and critique the performance, like how you critique a play. (Binta Breeze et al. 31)

<sup>356</sup> Although this preoccupation with the life of the poet rather than the craft of the poetry may be exacerbated by the contemporary trend towards confessional material, it has long been a feature within U.K. performance-based poetics.

Following events, spectators may assume that the illusion onstage of intimate personal engagement between the poet and audience will be consistent offstage: that even in a different social context outwith the performance space spectators still have access to the poet in the same way. This may manifest in situations as mild as a spectator asking for a hug from a poet who emotionally moved them, or as inappropriate as a spectator sexually harassing a poet who performed sensual material onstage, perceiving this as an invitation to engage. While this attention is (to a certain extent) proof that the poet has succeeded in creating ‘authenticity of engagement,’ it can also result in unwelcome invasions of poets’ privacy and personal space.

Additionally—and most relevantly for the purposes of this chapter—this sense that a spoken word poet is sharing honest autobiographical material with no filter can also lead to a reticence to criticise this material. My research indicates that spectators, critics, and fellow poets often feel as though criticising the craft of the poetry is equivalent to criticising the lived experience of the poet themselves. The conflation of art and artist makes criticism seem rude, and thus can deter a healthy atmosphere of feedback on one’s work. Several of the poets I interviewed recognise this tendency within the scene: the Repeat Beat Poet observes that to criticise a poet’s (purportedly) confessional work can feel ‘like berating them, it feels like going straight to them’ and Jenny Lindsay similarly notes that ‘there is a reticence to ... be horrible if somebody’s shared a lot of stuff about themselves’ (Interviews). In addition to simply enjoying the poetry for its own merits, spectators and critics may feel less able to criticise (through direct feedback, slams, or muted applause) work which appears deeply personal to the poet. As I will further discuss in the next section, in this sense the perception of spoken word poetry as ‘authentic’—particularly ‘authentic of autobiographical self’—disincentivises thorough, rigorous criticism of poetic craft.

## **The Valorisation of Traumatic Narratives**

As this thesis has discussed, because the spoken word genre is generally framed (through marketing, event conventions, the actions of poets, and the poetry itself) as a forum for confessional, ‘authentic’ expression, participants are

encouraged to expect and value the perception of ‘authenticity.’ One particularly valued trend is poetry describing personal adversity: emotional performances of purportedly autobiographical narratives of trauma and/or oppression. This effect is particularly observable within the slam context but also occurs more generally within the U.K. spoken word sphere. It has been substantively documented within the U.S. slam sphere: Wheeler vividly describes how ‘[s]lam poems typically invite us to identify with victims—neglected children, abused women, people who suffer discrimination of colour, accent, baldness—and such poems score highly because, paradoxically, it can be pleasurable to identify with a victim (as opposed to being a victim)’ (159).

Many of the U.K. spoken word poets I interviewed claim that purportedly autobiographical narratives of trauma tend to be highly successful within this scene. Observing the Edinburgh spoken word scene, Harry Josephine Giles implies that this is a direct system of reward: ‘authenticity wins, trauma is a route to authenticity, trauma gets points’ (Interview). They refer to ‘some weird incentivisations to perform your pain’ within spoken word culture and consider this effect not limited to this genre but more pervasive in contemporary society:

I think that specific confessional mode and that specific baring of scars which is both metaphorical and literal common to spoken word has become a part of wider social and political discourse. And all of that stuff plays out on a broader level. That to claim your suffering, to claim your scars publicly has become a route to authenticity, a route to the right to speak. (Interview)

The incentivisation to perform traumatic narratives has become an entrenched element of spoken word culture and seems to be an overt feature, to the point where multiple poets raised it during their interviews and spoke quite frankly about it. Hannah Chutzpah claims ‘the more stuff [traumas, oppressions] in your Venn Diagram then the more points’ and Leyla Josephine concurs that ‘the bigger struggle, the bigger kind of – the better points’ (Interviews).

My interview data indicate that U.K. spoken word poets are highly aware of this value system and may consciously select their material for slams and other performances based partially upon it: they may choose to perform material



concerning trauma due to how successful it tends to be.<sup>357</sup> Hannah Chutzpah, among others, spoke to this strategising:

Sometimes I think there is a tendency for people to – that the more personal, lived experience, disadvantages people can speak of – sometimes that translates into scores in a way that like I’ve occasionally at a slam been like ‘I could break out my queer or mental health stuff here to play that game, but I don’t really want to, here’s a poem about my cat.’ (Interview)

Just as in the Chapter 4 section regarding ‘authenticity of identity’ I discussed how marginalised spoken word poets experience a pressure to perform stereotypical models of identity, here again poets are conscious of a pressure to perform identities and narratives of trauma which are valued within this scene due to the fetishisation of ‘authenticity.’ This trend has also been thoroughly documented within the U.S. context. Analysing youth spoken word in the U.S., Weinstein and West conclude that ‘vulnerability and exposure are celebrated’ (289). In her comparison of the U.S. and U.K. slam scenes, Gregory observes that ‘many of the poems performed on U.S. slam stages tell of a personal battle against injustice and oppression’ (217). The valorisation of trauma at U.S. slams seems so commonplace that even an article in the small news outlet *Colorado Springs Independent* opened by claiming that ‘judges and audiences reward the expression of personal trauma, effectively deeming it the most impactful and praiseworthy subject matter’ (Swartzell n.p.). Although arguably the fetishisation of traumatic narratives is currently less prevalent within the U.K. spoken word scene than the U.S. slam scene, it was still recognised by many of the poets I interviewed as a serious issue, with several expressing concern that this effect is worsening.

There are multiple reasons why narratives of personal adversity are successful within the spoken word poetry context. First, these poems often entail highly emotional performances, which as discussed in the Chapter 2 section regarding ‘emotional authenticity’ are likely to engage the audience and encourage

<sup>357</sup> I am not arguing that all poems concerning trauma performed at slams were written expressly for that context; here I am discussing the strategic selection of material for a given context.

them to perceive this material as ‘authentic.’ Listing common elements of the poetry that tends to win slams, Michelle Madsen describes the ‘raw emotion which is so raw that it cannot – nobody can actually do anything apart from giving you a 10<sup>358</sup> because they’re just laid out’ (Interview). Second, as detailed in the Chapter 4 section regarding ‘authenticity of identity,’ individuals perceived as marginalised—including those with disabilities or struggling with mental health challenges or addiction—are associated with ‘inherent’ authenticity. Waltz and James have documented how within the popular music scene, ‘drug addicts, alcoholics and self-harmers are all represented as somehow more authentic than others’ (368). Thus to express purportedly autobiographical narratives of personal adversity, particularly those pertaining to trauma, disability, illness, and addiction, may (somewhat perversely) serve to inherently ‘authenticate’ the poet to spectators.

Third, merely to claim personal trauma within a poem may be seen as a guarantor of the poem’s autobiographical nature because of the assumption that the poet would not ‘lie’ about something so serious. This effect was analysed in Chapter 2 during the case study of Connor Macleod’s poem “Flowers.” Due to the establishment of the autobiographical and referential pacts framing the expectation of ‘authenticity of autobiographical self’ and ‘authenticity of narrative,’ for a spoken word poet to perform a fictional first-person traumatic narrative may be perceived as an inappropriate or even immoral act of emotional appropriation. Keith Jarrett recalls attending

quite a few spoken word nights where people bring out, you know, experiences of, you know, sexual violence and loads of other – and – you immediately think someone is telling their absolute truth and their absolute experience. And so *you’re no longer seeing it as art, but their experience.* (Interview, emphasis added)

Thus poets who share these difficult narratives may be more automatically assumed to be ‘authentic of autobiographical self’ and ‘authentic of narrative’ because of the severity of these narratives.

Fourth, as previously argued, spoken word poems perceived to be ‘authentic of autobiographical state’ and concerning traumatic matters may be considered

<sup>358</sup> Judges generally give scores out of 10, although formats vary.

beyond critical reproach due to the perception of the artist as imbued in the art. Note Jarrett's rhetoric in the above quotation describing traumatic poetry: 'you're no longer seeing it as art, but their experience' (Interview). In the U.K. spoken word scene, this effect appears to be particularly prevalent for poems concerning personal adversity, especially trauma. In my interview with Apples and Snakes Director Lisa Mead, she recalled watching a youth slam in the U.S. in which many young poets were performing very dark, apparently confessional pieces. She felt uncomfortable analysing the quality of these poems because 'I can't judge your poem against your poem because that's your personal story. And that's almost like saying that your rape is better than that rape. It's all a bit messed up' (Interview).

This critical reticence to aesthetically evaluate art perceived as emanating from trauma is highly precedented in poetry and other art forms. Gill's research into the confessional poets of the 1960s discovered in the criticism regarding Anne Sexton's work 'an underlying critical anxiety about the subject's possible failure to control her overwhelming emotions, to stem the flood, or cap the volcano, thereby placing the auditor at risk' (429). In the mid-1990s, the U.S. dance field experienced a similar controversy when critic Arlene Croce refused to review choreographer Bill T. Jones' piece "Still/Here" (inspired by the experiences of terminally ill people) on the basis that it was 'victim art.' Croce's ire was grounded in her perception that Jones (as a black, gay man living through the AIDs crisis) was weaponising trauma: she characterised as 'undiscussable' 'those dancers I'm forced to feel sorry for because of the way they present themselves: as dissed blacks, abused women or disfranchised homosexuals—as performers, in short, who make out of victimhood victim art' (55). Croce's non-review sparked an intense discussion regarding the distinctions between art and artist, autobiography and 'authenticity' in dance, and the critic as (un)invited voyeur (Nereson): parallel discussions to those currently occurring regarding spoken word poetry. Feeling unable—or unwilling—to separate the art from the artist, perceiving that the material lacks crafted filter between the artist's experience and creation, these reviewers refuse to apply critical rigour to the work.

For similar reasons, poems expressing political beliefs aligned with social justice tend to be highly successful within the slam context and more broadly in the

U.K. spoken word scene. Spectators who agree with the political beliefs expressed onstage may be more inclined to support these poems simply on the merit of their content. Pete the Temp describes how this trend can incentivise simplistic poetry more focused on political messaging than artistic innovation—‘at its worst it can be like “Hey, go vegan!” or “Just love everybody!” or “Down with racism!”’ (Interview). Because the U.K. spoken word sphere is heavily left-leaning, material which does not conform to left-wing ideologies tends either not to be shared (or, if shared, tends not to be successful).<sup>359</sup> As Dan Simpson observes, in the slam context the inclination to agree with certain opinions may be a more important critical factor than the aesthetic quality of the poem: ‘I’ve definitely been to slams where it feels like not the best performance or writing has won, but people kind of go, “Yeah, that’s right, I agree with that, what your point of view is.” Which can be quite a frustration’ (Interview). This indicates both the heavy focus within the spoken word sphere on the content of the work as well as the tradition of political advocacy in the genre.

Compounding this, because of the way in which spoken word poetry has often served as a platform for poets who have experienced oppression to advocate for themselves, some spectators and critics may feel unable to criticise poets’ craft for fear of curtailing their hard-won right to speak publicly. This tension arises at the intersection of spoken word poetry’s traditional societal function as a social platform for the ‘voiceless’ and its evolving future as a professionalised art form requiring its own critical discourse. As discussed throughout this thesis, poets and producers have different visions and definitions for the art form, with some centring ‘authenticity’ as necessary for the genre’s social function and others frustrated by the limitations this value system imposes.<sup>360</sup> The conflation between art and artist encouraged by the framing of spoken word as ‘authentic’ means that spectators may be led to perceive

<sup>359</sup> Although there was not scope to fully analyse the results in this thesis, two of the queries in my interviews were ‘Are all ideas and opinions welcome at spoken word events?’ and ‘Are spoken word events safe spaces?’ Overwhelmingly poets’ replies indicated that not all ideas and opinions are welcome: hate speech is typically censored and right-wing opinions are also not particularly welcome and rarely expressed. There is a vigorous debate ongoing within the scene regarding whether spoken word spaces can, or should, be ‘safe spaces’ and what that term implies.

<sup>360</sup> For instance, recall the divisions discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 between poets who consider it acceptable to fictionalise narratives for aesthetic purposes and those who consider that a morally suspect breach of the autobiographical and referential pacts. As noted then, these differences in viewpoint tend to divide down demographic lines.

the poetry onstage more as urgent political statement than crafted art, and thus that aesthetic concerns are beyond the point. Leyla Josephine alluded to this effect: ‘imagine trying to be like, “Your experience as a black woman or a disabled person, like—” You just can’t give that a 3,<sup>361</sup> you know?’ (Interview). Poets who use the forum primarily as a political platform, rather than perceiving it primarily as an art form, may resist this aesthetic criticism as well. Aliyah Hasinah identifies this tension within the contemporary U.K. scene:

People do need to be more critical of it. But people aren’t necessarily open to that criticism at the moment because of how much it is aligned with freedom of expression and freedom of speech. ... Criticis[ing] someone’s freedom of speech and what they’ve said— ‘Well yes, you haven’t crafted it, you could do a lot better’—feels very patronising and hurtful to spoken word poets at the moment. (Interview)

For those spoken word poets who compose material drawing heavily on personal experience and consider their artistry a form of advocacy, rigorous aesthetic criticism of their work is not necessarily welcome. However, because not all U.K. spoken word poets conceptualise their work in the same fashion, for many any blanket assumptions of their work as ‘authentic’ and a subsequent reluctance to aesthetically evaluate it is frustrating.

Many of the poets I interviewed spoke to the nuances these varying perspectives on the centrality of ‘authenticity’ engender within the critical discourse for U.K. spoken word poetry. A common theme in my data was frustration that material which heavily performs ‘authenticities,’ especially narratives of trauma and oppression, tends to not receive thorough critical attention. Jenny Lindsay compares spoken word with other autobiographical art forms: ‘[i]f somebody’s getting up to share their trauma and you’re sitting here as a reviewer like, “Oh, it’s very clichéd,” you don’t want to like—my God. But again, that’s an issue, because it is an art form ... we judge memoirs and novels like that, so why not spoken word?’ (Interview). The lack of adequate critique for poems containing traumatic narratives is not necessarily useful for poets seeking to improve their craft. Kevin Mclean shares his

<sup>361</sup> i.e. a 3 out of 10 at a poetry slam.

experience seeking constructive criticism when composing his poem “Evelyn” about the loss of his mother:

In a scene where so much of it is about your personal - like how do you say to someone, ‘That poem about your dead mum isn't very good’? Like I have a poem about my dead mum. And when I wrote it ... I read it to everyone I could, every one of my friends who was a poet. I was like, ‘Please tell if this is not good ... I don't want to do a bad poem about her. So you will not protect my feelings by telling me it's good when it's not then I find out down the line it isn't.’

(Interview)

Thus the way in which traumatic narratives in spoken word poetry are perceived as automatic ‘authenticators,’ reinforcing the autobiographical and referential pacts, can lead to a reluctance to honestly critique poems containing trauma, with a detrimental effect upon poets’ ability to receive feedback on their craft.<sup>362</sup>

The success of poems concerning personal trauma has led to an unhealthy sense within the spoken word scene that in order to achieve success, one must be traumatised, oppressed, or otherwise have experienced difficulties which they can describe through their poetry. My data indicate that some spoken word poets feel that narratives of personal health and joy are not as valued within the U.K. sphere, and thus that they must adjust their lives so that they have traumatic lived experiences to describe onstage. As Connor Macleod describes, ‘it’s a weird double-edged sword of – I feel like I can talk about my depression, but if I don’t have depression, I feel like I’m silent. And I feel like I don’t have something to contribute to this group’ (Interview). While the fact that poetry describing personal trauma and oppression is welcomed, witnessed, and celebrated in spoken word spaces facilitates an important social forum for disclosure, it also yields problematic side effects and potentially threatens poets’ mental health.

<sup>362</sup> Obviously it is challenging to evidence these claims as they refer to a lack of scholarship; while later in this section I will analyse an example of inadequate criticism, I cannot cite criticism which was not written due to the effects I describe. Instead, I rely here on the experiences of spoken word poets with the critical discourse as shared with me in our interviews.

Importantly: while I have argued in this section that poems concerning trauma and oppression tend to be disproportionately successful in the U.K. spoken word scene compared to poems on other subjects, I do not wish to imply that these poems do not achieve success on their own merit. Performances of ‘authenticity’ are not antithetical to craft: a piece may succeed both because its subject matter is associated with inherent ‘authenticities’ *and* because it is excellently composed and performed.

### **Shortcomings of the Critical Discourse**

Thus far in this chapter I have used the competitive framework of the poetry slam as a microcosm of the U.K. contemporary spoken word scene to evaluate how the critical discourse functions within these events. I now shift focus externally, to criticism and reviews of the art form in the media (i.e. newspapers, magazines, review websites, etc.). In the following sections I analyse the tendency within the (limited) U.K. media discourse concerning spoken word poetry to assume poets’ (and poems’) ‘authenticities,’ arguing that this elicits a stereotype of the genre as less aesthetically rigorous. I apply theories of ‘Outsider Art’ as a parallel field in which artists’ lives have been fetishised due to assumed inherent ‘authenticity’ to indicate the problematic nature of this discourse.

When I asked the poets I interviewed for their perception of the critical discourse concerning spoken word in the U.K., many of them laughed before telling me that one did not exist. Nearly every poet I interviewed expressed frustration with the lack of a healthy, informed critical culture for their genre. As previously discussed, the infrastructure for spoken word poetry in the U.K. has been slow to develop—there are few stable, funded institutions and limited opportunities for professionalisation—and this extends to the critical sphere as well. Spoken word performances are rarely reviewed within large arts publications, and almost never outwith major arts festivals.<sup>363</sup> When this work is reviewed, it is rarely by critics with a deep knowledge of the history, practices, and aesthetics of spoken word poetry, but

<sup>363</sup> Staging a solo show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe is commonly perceived as one of the few ways to get reviews and star ratings for one’s work, as there are many reviewers writing for multiple outlets throughout the festival; however, this is an expensive option which many spoken word poets cannot access.

more often by unpaid (or low-paid) critics accustomed to reviewing theatre or comedy. Thus these reviews generally lack adequate context and language to analyse spoken word poetry through an appropriate critical framework. Some dedicated spaces for spoken word criticism do exist—*Sabotage Reviews* being a notable one—but they face challenges with funding and sustainability.

Because spoken word poetry is grounded in counter-institutional movements which eschew traditional literary criticism, a stereotype lingers that spoken word poets do not seek critical attention for their work, or even that they relish bad press: for instance, Wheeler's U.S. slam scholarship contends that '[s]lam is often slammed by literary critics, as it hopes to be' (142). However, my data indicate that this is not the case in the U.K. spoken word scene: the majority of the poets I interviewed decry the current lack of critical discourse and contend that this is an obstacle to the professionalisation of the genre. They welcome the prospect of more rigorous, informed critical attention on their work. Anthony Anaxagorou's desire for more historical context in the critical discourse was shared by many of those I interviewed: he wishes for 'a more rigid, robust analysis of the history of spoken word: where it's come from, where it's got to be where it is now. Taking into consideration the political happenings that precipitated and gave impetus to this very thing. Cos that's all negated in the [current] discourse' (Interview). As many spoken word poets recognise, it is quite possible to focus rigorous critical attention on professionals while allowing amateurs to learn and progress in a welcoming environment: the development of an aesthetics and the accessibility of the genre are not mutually exclusive.

I argue that the primary issue with contemporary media criticism for spoken word poetry is the tendency not to recognise the performed, culturally constructed and contextualised nature of performances of 'authenticity.' Instead, in their reviews critics tend to assume that material is inherently 'authentic'; for instance, that it is autobiographical and true (much as I have argued audiences do). Evaluative statements are rarely couched with 'purportedly' or 'assumedly'—i.e. 'This work is purportedly autobiographical'—nor is there much rationale given for why the reviewer assumes the work is autobiographical. For instance, a page on the Poetry Society website describes various spoken word poets' work as 'raw,' 'emotional,'



and ‘honest,’ contending that ‘all good poetry should be honest’ and praising a poet who becomes ‘completely and emotionally involved ... in all of her performances’ (O’Neill n.p.; see also Fear; Kopotsha; Tirrell; Watts). The autobiographical and referential pacts are taken as implicit, and the ‘authenticity’ of the work as innate rather than performed. Recall Peacock’s review of Sara Hirsch’s show “How Was It For You?” analysed in Chapter 3—his description of the work as ‘*heartfelt* and *truthful* as she puts words to the emotional and sexual conflicts going on inside’ (n.p., emphasis added). The way in which spoken word poetry is represented in the media through the rhetoric of ‘authenticity’ is paralleled in the field of contemporary storytelling: McMaken’s research suggests that the media discourse concerning events such as *The Moth* emphasise ‘honesty’ rather than craft (154).

As analysed throughout this thesis, spoken word poets tend to project a sense of ‘authenticity’ through their work, making it appear honest, extemporaneous, and emotionally genuine. The conventions of live spoken word events further frame this poetry as ‘authentic,’ encouraging spectators to perceive the poet as an engaging, non-representative figure. Virtually all elements of the genre encourage the perception of ‘authenticity,’ leading to it being highly valued as an aesthetic and moral quality. However, I again return to the core contention of this thesis: that ‘authenticity’ is not a stable, objective factor but a negotiated, culturally constructed perception. The relationship between the experienced and the projected is unreliable: for instance, a poem which appears spontaneously and emotionally performed may have required months of heavy editing and rehearsal (as discussed in Chapter 3). Too often, critics reviewing spoken word poetry unquestioningly buy into the performance of ‘authenticity’ and perceive a vulnerable person diarising and emoting without filter or persona, rather than a skilled artist performing their poetry. ‘Authenticity’ denotes not only honesty, originality, and genuine presence, but also rawness, roughness, and lack of craft (Fine). For something to be ‘authentic’ is for it to exist in its original state: neither sophisticated nor well-rehearsed, but ‘natural.’ Within art, then, to perceive a piece as ‘authentic’ is to perceive it as having emerged more or less ‘as is,’ rather than through the actual process of painstakingly composing, editing, and rehearsing a work. In this sense, while such criticism may praise the ‘brave honesty’ of the spoken word poets ‘emotionally speaking their

truths,' it undermines their skills and labour as artists who have carefully crafted the poetry they perform.

This critical trend to overlook the crafted nature of poetry which performs 'authenticities' has been recognised within previous generations of poetics. Stein's scholarship has charted how answers to the question 'to be a great poet, must one be learned and mannerly, or instead, must one be intuitive and wild?'—essentially, perceived as sophisticated or 'authentic'—have shifted across time and culture (3). At some points opaque work that takes multiple readings (and often an academic degree) to digest is celebrated within the critical discourse; at other points more accessible work which seems to be grounded in relatable human experience and to lack filters or personas wins out. Robert Lowell, himself a poet who at various points could be associated with either camp, vividly described this as a binary between 'cooked' and 'raw' poetry:

The cooked, marvellously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by the graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dropping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners. There is a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal.<sup>364</sup> (n.p.)

Many of the critical challenges faced by contemporary spoken word poets were also faced by the 'confessional' poets of the 1960s. The work of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Lowell, and others was initially dismissed as low-quality, overly personal diarising (particularly in the case of those female poets who broke convention by making childbirth and domestic life the subjects of poetry) (Gill). Their (often dark and dramatic) biographies were mobilised as a selling point for their work: consider the fascination with the life and death of Plath. Just as with today's spoken word poets, these confessional poets' performances served as opportunities for audiences to witness and applaud their 'authenticity' in person. In 1973 a jaded Sexton wrote of feeling this pressure to be 'authentic' onstage: 'You are the freak ... Some people

<sup>364</sup> I initially discovered this quotation in Grobe (219). Lowell made these remarks while accepting the 1960 National Book Award for *Life Studies*, a text which significantly marked his shift in writing style from 'cooked' to 'raw' and identified him as one of the new wave of 'confessional' poets (Grobe 219).

secretly hope your voice will tremble (that gives them an extra kick)’ (33).<sup>365</sup> Then and now, the opportunity to witness the poet being ‘emotionally authentic’ and apparently transparently genuine is as central to the attraction of this poetry as the appreciation of their craft (if not more so).

The issues discussed thus far in this chapter—implicit assumptions of spoken word poets as ‘authentic’ figures; fetishisation of trauma and marginalised identity expression; inadequate critical discourse focusing on the lives of the artists rather than the material—have been thoroughly discussed within the discourse concerning ‘Outsider Art.’ This is a term coined in the 1970s<sup>366</sup> referring to art ‘made by people free of artistic training who were “untouched” by culture, and existed outside of or against cultural norms, thus serving as a critique of the pretentious and artificial nature of contemporary art’ (Wojcik 179).<sup>367</sup> These self-taught, marginalised artists were (and continue to be) considered inherently ‘authentic’ due to their existence apparently outwith commercial, institutional, and societal systems<sup>368</sup> and their work subsequently fetishised as ‘authentic’ through deeply problematic judgments. In this section I primarily rely on sociologist G. A. Fine’s research into the function of ‘authenticity’ within self-taught American folk art (i.e. carving, painting). Fine analyses how within this artistic sphere, the work of these ‘Outsider Artists’ is allocated cultural capital not through the aesthetic merits of the work itself, but rather through the perceived ‘authenticity’ and Romantic allure of the artists’ lives. In this section I analyse U.K. spoken word poetry through the theoretical framework of ‘Outsider Art’ in order to indicate the ways in which the ‘authenticity’ of these poets has been fetishised through the critical discourse.

<sup>365</sup> I initially discovered this quotation in Grobe (225).

<sup>366</sup> Art historian Roger Cardinal proposed this term in the 1970s, adapting it from French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet’s 1940s term ‘art brut’ (Barber-Stetson 115). The term ‘Outsider Art’ as a non-problematic descriptor has been thoroughly discredited: as Wojcik recognises, the label is ‘inaccurate, elitist, and dehumanizing’ (179). What I rely upon here is the scholarship regarding ‘Outsider Art’: the discourse investigating how these artists came to be grouped and fetishised through the valorisation of ‘authenticity’ and its association with marginality.

<sup>367</sup> For further scholarship on ‘Outsider Art,’ see Barber-Stetson; Hahl; MacLagan; Maizels; Peiry; Webb; Wexler.

<sup>368</sup> Of course, as discussed in the Chapter 4 section regarding ‘authenticity of motivation,’ no individual can truly operate outwith these systems; the notion of these ‘Outsider Artists’ as ‘pure’ from societal corruption cannot be accurate.

Practitioners of ‘Outsider Art’ are often depicted in primitive terms, as ‘natural’ and in touch with deep (‘authentic’) emotional realities. As discussed in Chapter 1, this effect is rooted in the underlying associations between ‘authenticity’ and primitivity, specifically the myth of the noble savage—in this case, the inherently ‘authentic’ self-taught artist uncorrupted by societal influence (Umbach and Humphrey). This problematic ideology also manifests in arts criticism through the romanticisation of madness as a source of creative genius: as Peiry has analysed, mental illness has been problematically interpreted in critical discourses as a font of ‘artistic purity and rawness’ (33).<sup>369</sup> My research discovered that this rhetoric is endemic in the criticism of contemporary spoken word: much of it implies that the power of the work derives from the poet’s honesty and emotional integrity, the emotional force with which they *mean* what they say onstage (see Fear; Tirrell).

Because ‘Outsider Artists’ are self-taught, their lack of formal education in the field is perceived as a mark of their ‘purity’ and their ability to provide ‘uncorrupted’ insight into deep elements of the human experience. My data indicate that the majority of U.K. spoken word poets are, at least to a certain extent, self-taught: most of the poets I interviewed have not participated in formal educational programmes to develop their craft. This is due in part to the relative lack of formal training programmes in spoken word practice,<sup>370</sup> as well as to the grassroots, do-it-yourself ethos of the genre. The key consideration in how these artists’ ‘authenticity’ is gauged in this regard, however, is not the actual extent of their formal education, but the *perception* of them as self-taught. A major aspect of the appeal of self-taught artists, Fine argues, is this concept of their ‘purity’: their ‘emotional directness [and] child-like virtue - the very ignorance of the artist who lacks theory that might interfere with the process of unmediated creation’ (161). Because they (purportedly) exist outwith these corrosive systems, the work of ‘Outsider Artists’ can be (inaccurately) conceived of as ‘unmediated, a direct expression of the self or of some

<sup>369</sup> See also Beveridge; Reid et al.; Richardson; Waltz and James.

<sup>370</sup> As noted in the Introduction, educational programming in U.K. spoken word has increased over the past twenty years through projects and collectives including SLAMBassadors and Leeds Young Authors and Writers, as well as higher education modules such as the Performance Poetry programme at Bath Spa University. Given these developments, the extent to which spoken word poets receive formal training in their craft may be gradually shifting.

originary culture – the ‘real thing’” (Webb 142). Although this Romantic perception of ‘purity’ may attract audiences tired of a mediatised culture replete with digitised copies, it also deeply condescends to these artists through the implication of their lack of craft, experience, and even intelligence. This patronising infantilisation is condescending at any level of the art form, but particularly for those artists who do not identify as amateurs, and rather are struggling to be perceived as professional artists.

Fine analyses how the work of self-taught ‘Outsider Artists’ is marketed and the priorities that its consumers express, finding that this art is allocated aesthetic power through the biography of the artist. He concludes that

the value of their works is directly linked to the biographies of the artists and *the stories of authentic creation* that the objects call forth. Life stories infuse the meaning of the work. It is *the purity or unmediated quality of the production of the work*, in the view of its audience, that provides the work with significance, and, not incidentally, with value as a commodity. (156, emphasis added)

In ‘Outsider Art,’ it is not the art in and of itself that is aesthetically valuable, but the context of the artist’s life which imbues it with cultural capital (Reid et al.). This again is unfortunately consistent with trends within contemporary U.K. spoken word criticism: as previously established, the tendency to fixate on the poet’s biography rather than their creative practice is endemic within this critical discourse (see Binta Breeze et al.).

Additionally, as discussed in the Chapter 4 section regarding ‘authenticity of identity,’ marginalised artists are especially likely to be perceived as ‘primitive’ and ‘natural’ due to deeply engrained societal prejudice, thus compounding these issues for them. Theories of ‘Outsider Art’ explain that artists who have experienced sociocultural marginality are particularly revered as ‘authentic’ (Webb). The perspective of one of Fine’s research participants that ‘[e]veryone believes to be a good folk artist, you need to be poor, black, dead, disabled, uneducated’ sounds remarkably similar to the rhetoric regarding trauma and marginality as prerequisites for slam success (170). Fine also observes how collectors of self-taught art are particularly interested in the biographies of the artists when they feature trauma

and/or oppression, noting that ‘within the field of self-taught art, a desire exists among collectors and dealers for gritty reality’ (165). Within U.K. spoken word poetry, this manifests through the incentivisation to perform material concerning personal trauma and the pressure experienced by some poets to have experienced trauma in order to legitimately participate in the scene (recall Connor Macleod’s comments cited above). It is the (‘gritty,’ traumatic) biography of the poet which authenticates and legitimises the artwork, that even elevates it to an aesthetic level in the first place. As Fine writes,

Through the workings of the art market these products by the disadvantaged and the outsider become prestige goods - not despite these backgrounds, but precisely because of them. The conditions of their production legitimate their otherness, and, hence, justify their value. (175)

Following this theory, it is less the stylistic rigour evidenced in the craft of the art that attracts consumers, but rather the understanding that the art was created by one of these oppressed, ‘rough,’ ‘pure’ spirits.

The discourse concerning ‘Outsider Art’ emphasises critical assumptions that the process of creating this work is somehow ‘pure’ and ‘unmediated’: that it is a relatively uncrafted expression directly from its maker. As Fine observes, it is the sense of unfiltered access to the artist’s self which not only attracts consumers but serves as the ‘authenticating’ factor for the art: ‘[t]he assumption of unmediated communication legitimates the works’ (161). Again, within spoken word poetry, this effect is facilitated when the material is perceived as ‘authentic’ across the strains examined in this thesis: when it appears to be original, honest, true, and emotionally felt. Furthermore, the ‘liveness’ of spoken word events—the illusion of authenticities of presence, as discussed in Chapter 3—bolsters spectators’ senses of the poetry’s worth, since it was co-created ‘live’ and thus (at least apparently) allowed them access to the poet’s ‘self.’

The theoretical framework of ‘Outsider Art’ also accounts for my concept of ‘authenticity of motivation.’ When artists are valued as self-taught, ‘pure’ individuals, any moves towards professionalisation or commercial gain can seriously damage their image and credibility: as Fine summarises, ‘[i]f authenticity sells art,

claims of inauthenticity can be damaging’ (166). If the ‘purity’ of the artist is the primary selling point of the art, once that purity is stained by commercialism, the work decreases in value. As analysed in Chapter 4, when some spoken word poets appeared in the Nationwide ads, to some fans they lost their appeal because their status as ‘real’ had been sullied by this marketing work.<sup>371</sup> This is also true for poets whose work is informed by personal trauma: if a spoken word poet perceives that their artistic image is contingent on their perceived ‘madness,’ this may disincentivise them from seeking support from professionals or their artistic community.<sup>372</sup> These underlying pressures reifying amateur status and mental illness, rooted in the fetishisation of ‘authenticity’ in contemporary spoken word, have deeply concerning implications for how this genre affects the wellbeing of participants and their abilities to progress in their careers.

The trend towards accessibility within spoken word further exacerbates this critical tendency to perceive the material as ‘authentic’ and thus uncrafted. As discussed in the Introduction, spoken word poetry is generally designed to be relatively accessible upon a single viewing (Somers-Willett). This is both because the audience is likely only to encounter that poem once (and thus needs to grasp it that single time) and because of the populist roots of the movement. When asked who their intended audience is, the majority of the poets I interviewed did not have a specific demographic in mind. Most make their work for whomever happens to be in the room during a performance, with a few specifying that they target their work towards ‘people that don’t like poetry, or think they don’t like poetry’ (Ash Dickinson, Interview). Unfortunately, the strategic reasons for this accessibility are often lost in the wider criticism, particularly when spoken word is reviewed in

<sup>371</sup> This is particularly the case for poets whose work focuses on sociopolitical advocacy. Matt Abbott, whose poetry often advocates for social justice, faced this sort of feedback following his appearance in a Nationwide ad. In 2019 Twitter user @MartinRollon1 replied to one of Matt’s tweets concerning the Battle of Orgreave during the miner’s strike admonishing ‘Gutted because you’re too busy serving your corporate paymaster as a cheap shill in adverts for a bank? So disappointed in you Matt: please stop feigning authenticity and embrace your capitalist, mercenary self’ (@MartinRollon1).

<sup>372</sup> As I have previously noted, further research is required into how participation within the contemporary spoken word scene influences mental health. The majority of studies have focuses on the positive effects of participation (see Maddalena; Alvarez and Mearns); however, there is currently a lack of psychotherapeutic research on how the valuing of trauma narratives within this genre affects participants’ wellbeing.

comparison with text-based poetry.<sup>373</sup> The notion that accessibility and aesthetic quality are mutually exclusive—that the broader appeal a work has, the less aesthetic value it has—has negatively affected the way in which spoken word is appraised as a legitimate poetic genre. It is often depicted as too basic and simplistic, lacking in artistic rigour, with critics failing to perceive both the literary and performative techniques involved. An excerpt from one article exemplifies this attitude:

Someone is spouting a string of tired clichés and bargain basement poeticisms into a microphone. But that’s okay; he’s “performing.” His speech isn’t just exaggerated, it’s over-exaggerated; the metre is a contrived hodgepodge of forced iambics and something that is trying desperately to resemble hip-hop, but isn’t. The idea, I suppose, is that the flailing, stylized vocals will be interesting enough on their own that no one will notice how bad the actual writing is. (Vermeersch n.p.)

Another review denounces spoken word’s ‘self-pitying clichés and bumbling clumsiness ... forced awkwardly into hip hop iambics’ and ‘contrived vocal mannerisms,’ complaining ‘I hate that it’s ubiquitous and now considered acceptable fare at literary festivals’ (A. P. Wood n.p.). While obviously there is a range of quality in spoken word poetry—some material could be perceived as ‘inauthentic of voice’ in that it relies heavily on cliché—the extent to which these reviewers tar the entire genre with this brush is indicative of the tendency to equate accessibility with poor quality.

These issues within the critical discourse for U.K. spoken word poetry have serious repercussions both for the development of the scene and for the poets working within it. First, the lack of a healthy critical discourse means that the system for professional validation is underdeveloped. While ‘page poets’ are able to have their books reviewed in outlets from blogs to newspapers, spoken word poets do not have equivalent critical gatekeepers to act as guarantors of quality. This means both

<sup>373</sup> While it is challenging to parse spectators from critics, given their heterogeneity and the fact that each perform the same basic roles (spectating, interpreting, and evaluating), I wish to clarify here that I perceive this condescension more within the media discourse than in the attitudes of typical spoken word audiences. It is the rhetoric of media articles that more often focuses on the biographies of the artists over their craft and describes poets using patronising terms such as ‘authentic.’



that wider audiences often are not exposed to this art form through popular media (whereas film and music reviews are ubiquitous) but also that spoken word poets have fewer quotes and star ratings to use to promote their work.

In terms of the cultural profile for the genre, the underdevelopment of the critical discourse has meant that there is a lack of language through which to describe and understand the genre. As previously established, there currently exists no standard framework for evaluating spoken word poetry: no accepted methodology for analysing performances and contextualising them within the broader history of the form.<sup>374</sup> This is not only a challenge for individual spoken word poets seeking to describe (and market) themselves, but also for the scene more broadly. Those unfamiliar with the practices and standards of the field—for instance, critics experienced in theatre, comedy, or ‘page’ poetry—lack an established framework through which to understand the nuances and merits of the genre, even if they wish to analyse it appropriately. Fortunately, as noted in the Introduction to this thesis, this language and critical framework are slowly developing, both through some evolving criticism and through increasing academic research into the field.

### **Case Study: “The Cult of the Noble Amateur”**

Rebecca Watts’ 2018 essay “The Cult of the Noble Amateur” exemplifies many of the issues endemic within the critical discourse for U.K. contemporary spoken word poetry.<sup>375</sup> When asked to review Hollie McNish’s 2018 book *Plum* for

<sup>374</sup> As I have noted, Novak’s 2011 book *Live Poetry* is the notable exception here and provides a helpful foundation for the further development of this methodology.

<sup>375</sup> While this piece demonstrates the flaws common to criticism of U.K. spoken word poetry, I should note that technically its target is not spoken word. It is an attempt to review Hollie McNish’s book *Plum*, which is a print work. McNish herself has publicly rejected the label ‘performance poet’ and ‘spoken word artist,’ despite starting her career in performance-based poetics and the fact that these labels are often applied to her. In her rebuttal to Watts, she writes ‘I do not shun spoken word, I just think that the label “spoken word poet” is so often used to imply all of the prejudices which this article achieves’ (“PN Review” n.p.). When Watts’ essay was published, many from the spoken word community (myself included) perceived how it reiterated many of the common attitudes in the criticism normally targeted at our genre. Additionally, one of the (loose) explanations that Watts makes for pairing McNish’s and Tempest’s work is that ‘both developed profiles on YouTube as an extension of their presence on the slam/performance scene’ (n.p.). So while Watts does not directly target all spoken word poetry, the essay serves as a representative sample of this criticism.

*PN Review*, Watts instead penned a diatribe on how the book was representative of a wave of contemporary young female poets whose ‘artless’ work is being validated by the academy (n.p.). In the weeks following Watts’ essay’s publication, dozens of online posts and articles appeared condemning it, with such publications as *The Guardian*, *The Bookseller*, *The Atlantic*, and the *New Statesman* covering the controversy (Flood and Cain; H. Wood; Hill and Yuan; and Leszkiewicz, respectively). For weeks social media sites played host to a passionate discourse with many criticising the essay for its inaccuracies and condescending tone. There was even a popular Twitter hashtag, #FEMALEPOETSILOVE, started by poet Salena Godden in a direct attempt to counter the inherent sexism Godden perceived in Watts’ article and to celebrate female poets within contemporary poetry.<sup>376</sup> In this case study I focus on Watts’ assumptions of ‘authenticities’ within McNish’s work and her framing of that ‘authenticity’ as antithetical to craft. I also indicate how Watts’ gendered and ageist choice of targets demonstrates the pervasiveness of assumptions of ‘authenticity of identity’ within the critical discourse.<sup>377</sup>

Watts begins by asking

Why is the poetry world pretending that poetry is not an art form?

I refer to the rise of a cohort of young female poets who are currently being lauded by the poetic establishment for their ‘honesty’ and ‘accessibility’ – buzzwords for the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft that characterises their work. (n.p.)

Consistently throughout her essay Watts refers to this poetry as ‘artless,’ concluding that this ‘slapdash assembly of words... celebrates the complete stagnation of the poet’s mind’ and that ‘[i]t is such stuff as madmen tongue, and brain not’ (Ibid). She does not allow that McNish has any creative abilities whatsoever, even accusing her of intentionally writing low-quality poetry: ‘The book is deliberately bad’ (Ibid).

<sup>376</sup> Godden began the hashtag with a thread of some of her own favourite female poets. The first tweet read: ‘Warning: You have been suckered in. Please use that energy to amplify women poets, empower women poets, discover new work, share your favourite books by female poets, #readwomen, please stop sharing that attention seeking article. Spread love. Use your poetry powers for good [black peace hand emoji]’ (@salenagodden).

<sup>377</sup> In this case study I focus specifically on the aspects of Watts’ article pertinent to this thesis. For a more thorough rebuttal to Watts’ article, see my essay “What Cult? A Critical Engagement with Watts’ Essay” (Ailes).

Watts' refusal to review *Plum* on the basis that it is not actually poetry echoes the aforementioned controversy in the U.S. dance world in which Croce refused to analyse Jones' "Still/Here" on the basis that it, too, was not 'art' on the basis of its apparently raw, uncrafted expression of human experience (Nereson). Watts identifies McNish's poetry as firmly in the 'raw' camp (to use Lowell's language): as purely confessional diarising with no attempt at craft.

Watts attributes the rise of what she perceives as this type of poetry (as supposedly practiced by McNish, Kae Tempest, and Rupi Kaur) to the aesthetic valuing of 'authenticity' in contemporary poetics. She frames these poets as pandering to an audience hungry for confessional material devoid of any artistic rigour:

Like the new president [Trump], the new poets are products of a cult of personality, which demands from its heroes only that they be 'honest' and 'accessible', where honesty is defined as the constant expression of what one feels, and accessibility means the complete rejection of complexity, subtlety, eloquence and the aspiration to do anything well. (Ibid)

Watts' essay thus reinforces the binary between 'authenticity' and craft, allowing for no possibility that work may be autobiographical and accessible *and* of a high aesthetic quality. Watts also furthers the idea that the poet is fully accessible through their work: that the poetry does not serve as a crafted filter through which the poet's life is refracted and reframed, but rather that the poetry is a flimsy conduit for the true commodity: the poet's personality. In stating that '*Plum* is the product not of a poet but of a personality' Watts' article falls directly into the trope of assuming that poets are 'authentic' across many of the strains discussed within this thesis (origin, autobiographical self, narrative, emotion, and voice, at least) (Ibid).

Frustratingly, Watts' article is correctly identifying a problematic trend, but I argue that it blames entirely the wrong targets. As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, 'authenticity' has been used as an aesthetic metric by audiences and critics of spoken word poetry, with detrimental effects for the overall critical discourse of the scene. Watts' frustrations here are valid:

When did honesty become a requirement – let alone the main requirement – of poetry? Curiously, the obsession doesn't apply to all literature; there is no expectation that the output of novelists or playwrights should reflect their personalities. Yet every one of the reviews and articles relating to McNish in the press in the past two years cites this feature as her work's main selling point. (Ibid)

The way in which criticism for accessible contemporary poetics—particularly spoken word poetry—has focused on the life of the poet rather than the craft of the work could indeed be viewed as deeply concerning. However, combatting this issue requires recognising that 'authenticity' is not an inherent trait but a perceived one, and a remarkably constructed and culturally contingent one at that. Watts' article misses this core factor by assuming that these poets are simply baring their souls onstage with no thought as to craft. Critics instead need do the work of *analysing the craft and intention* behind these performances of 'authenticity.' As this thesis has discussed, U.K. spoken word poets are conscious of the value of 'authenticity' within this sphere and thus work to perform it; their practices are influenced by their consciousness of the aesthetic and moral value systems within the genre. Rather than criticising poets for creating work which performs these values, it is more pertinent to examine how this aesthetic and moral framework functions (as I have done here) and to analyse the poetry through that lens. Only with this context (and a greater understanding of the history and socio-political function of the genre) can the critical discourse adequately evaluate the ways in which spoken word poets co-construct authenticities through their work.

Finally, Watts' specific targeting of 'young female poets'<sup>378</sup> exemplifies the tendency to assume 'authenticity' more automatically in artists of marginalised identities. Watts identifies the 'cult of personality' within contemporary poetry as emanating from 'a cohort of young female poets' and indicates Kae Tempest and Rupi Kaur alongside McNish as the culprits (Ibid). Each of these poets could be

<sup>378</sup> Here I cite Watts' language and refer specifically refer to the time at which the article was written, at which point Tempest was publicly using she/her pronouns. As I have previously noted, Tempest now uses they/them pronouns; however, in 2018 at the time this article was written Watts' identification of Tempest was consistent with the way in which Tempest publicly identified.

perceived as marginalised: Tempest is openly queer (Bourke) and their work addresses themes of sexuality and gender (see “Tiresias,” *Hold Your Own*) as well as class; Kaur is a Punjabi-Canadian woman of colour (Fischer) whose work discusses racism, xenophobia, and sexism; and McNish’s work has focused on the oppressive societal norms encountered by mothers, in addition to highlighting sexism, classism, and racism. However, very little unifies these three artists other than their youth, marginality, and popularity. The fields in which they operate differ substantially: Tempest writes poetry, books, scripts, and music for a wide variety of media; Kaur primarily distributes her short poems and illustrations via social media; McNish writes poetry, memoir, and plays primarily for the page. While Kaur and McNish’s work often draws upon personal experience, much of Tempest’s work is an exploration of characters, including retellings of classic mythology and a novel. Given this, Watts’ grouping of these disparate artists and omission of any of the many male poets writing purportedly confessional material is striking. Watts’ article is thus typical of the wider critical discourse in disproportionately assuming ‘authenticity’ in marginalised artists, and thus more easily perceiving their work as rough, raw, basic, and generally of inferior quality.

### **A Better Critical Framework**

As this chapter has demonstrated, the critical discourse regarding U.K. spoken word poetry tends to assume the ‘authenticities’ of this work in a manner which obscures the extent to which it is crafted. The lack of rigour within this discourse creates systemic barriers to artistic and professional development because spoken word poets are less likely to receive specific critical feedback on their craft or reviews which they can leverage to advance their careers. As this system is clearly not serving the art form, what would a more appropriate, tailored set of critical practices entail?

In this final section, I propose a critical framework for the analysis of contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry specifically designed to deter critics from automatically assuming ‘authenticities’ in this genre. As I will detail below, my system requires critics to apply scepticism regarding ‘authenticities’ in spoken word poetry by limiting the critical scope to the poetry and paratextual features; focusing on

technical craft (compositional and performance elements, engagement with audience); and contextualising the poetry within spoken word's history, styles, and practices. I urge critics to avoid myopically focusing on poets' lives; defining poets' style through their identities; framing 'confessional' expression and aesthetic excellence as mutually exclusive; and framing accessible poetics and aesthetic excellence as mutually exclusive. In order to rigorously analyse this poetry, these critical practices approach it with healthy scepticism, ample context, and respectful focus.

First and most centrally, spoken word poetry criticism must recognise the distinction between what is projected onstage and the reality of art-making. As this thesis has consistently shown, spoken word poets' experiences of their practices (i.e. carefully composed, rehearsed, and performed poetry) differ significantly from what they often project onstage (i.e. honest, extemporaneous, emotional confessions delivered for 'pure' reasons). This illusion is one that poets (and event organisers) work hard to maintain, but it cannot be taken as 'reality.' Within formal criticism of this genre, the *perception* of 'authenticity' must not be understood as the actual, 'genuine' nature of the work, since this belies the labour-intensive creative process of crafting it.

Avoiding assuming 'authenticity' in spoken word poetry first requires limiting the scope of the criticism to what is known: focusing on the poetry and any paratextual keys. For instance, unless a spoken word poet specifically indicates that a poem is autobiographical, critics should avoid describing that poem as autobiographical. Certainly much of the time this poetry does draw upon the poet's lived experiences; however, when critics assume the 'authenticities' of spoken word poetry without relying upon evidence of such, they further the notion that this material is universally 'authentic.' As previously noted, this notion is not only inaccurate (poets reframe, 'act,' fictionalise, and otherwise craft their work) but also curtails poets' abilities to compose material which does not adhere to these 'authenticities' (i.e. surreal or persona poems). Critics can acknowledge the general framing of this genre as 'authentic' without authoritatively describing specific material as 'authentic' (across varying strains) when they lack the evidence to do so.

In the interest of developing a critical framework from the inside of the genre out (rather than superimposing one based on my own tastes), I asked the poets I interviewed what elements, to their minds, constitute ‘good’ or ‘successful’ spoken word poetry. The results were mixed, as befits a diverse group of artists with varying tastes, but key themes included stylistic and technical innovation; excellent textual composition (including sophisticated linguistic play); dynamic performance; emotionally affecting content (i.e. material which induces sadness, rage, or laughter in the audience); and the ability to adapt material to engage with the performance context. In sum, spoken word poets value *craft*: unsurprisingly, they welcome material that feels accomplished and fresh and pushes the envelopes of the genre.

A corresponding critical discourse will similarly focus attention on the techniques (literary and performative) utilised within this work: the way in which this material is fashioned. On the level of the composition of the work, this includes considering the inclusion (or rejection) of poetic devices (rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, metaphor, etc.); the use of vernacular or heightened language; and any textual threads connecting the poet’s set (if performing multiple pieces). On the level of the performance, this means analysing the way in which the poet presents self (i.e. as a distinct character or as ‘themselves’); how the poet transitions between performance and paratext; use of physicality; vocal elements (i.e. volume, tone, pitch, speed); and engagement with the audience. Obviously this critical approach requires considering the entirety of the performed poem: spoken word poetry criticism should not solely rely upon textual transcripts. Critical consideration of the technical elements of this poetry not only develops a (sorely needed) critical language tailored to this genre, but also provides poets with specific feedback on their work. Additionally, focusing on the compositional and performance strategies also allows critics to analyse the ways in which poets *perform* ‘authenticities’ through their work, rather than assuming the innate presence of ‘authenticities.’

Furthermore, criticism of contemporary spoken word poetry must contextualise it within the traditions and present styles of the genre. In describing any given poet, the critic should be able to compare their techniques, themes, and approaches to the genre with the practices of their peers and predecessors. Obviously, such a contextualised approach requires the critic to understand the

history and multiplicity of practices influencing contemporary spoken word on a local and global level, from print-based poetry to performance art to political oratory. In order to analyse this diversely-sourced genre, critics' language and theoretical framework should be similarly varying and draw upon language from multiple art forms, as I have done throughout this thesis. Simply applying critical frameworks designed through analysing other art forms (such as print-based poetics, theatre, or comedy) is not sufficient.

Focusing on the craft of the poetry also means shifting attention away from the life of the poet: ensuring that the art under analysis is the poetry rather than the poet. Critics should avoid assuming that spoken word poetry is an uncrafted expression of the poet's lived experience: as noted previously, it is vital to apply scepticism regarding the relationship between what is experienced and what is performed. It is particularly necessary to avoid romanticising poets' biographies when they entail marginality and/or oppression, as is commonplace in 'Outsider Art' discourse. Importantly, I am not advocating that the poet's life and identity be entirely erased from the critical discourse concerning their work: particularly in a field so dominated by marginalised artists, it is important to acknowledge the context in which the work was created. Specifically, my argument is that critics need to avoid perceiving the poet's life so heavily and transparently in the poetry and instead to understand that spoken word is not transparent, emotional self-expression but crafted poetry.

A crucial part of focusing attention on the poetry rather than the life of the poet is avoid defining the style of a poet's work with recourse to their identity rather than the actual work. As discussed in Chapter 4, too often poets who do not actually have performance practices are inaccurately labelled as 'spoken word artists' simply based on their marginality (Binta Breeze et al.; Kean, *Free Verse*). Rather than assuming that a U.K. BAME writer is a spoken word poet based on the colour of their skin (for instance; this also applies to markers of class and other identity characteristics), it is a basic responsibility of the critic to actually examine the poetry itself to determine its genre.

Furthermore, the critical discourse for contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry must not frame personal content and aesthetic rigour as mutually exclusive:



there needs to be a recognition that perceived confessionality does not inherently drain any sophistication from this poetry. While I hesitate to praise this article due to its ‘clickbait’ title, the 2017 *VICE* piece “Is There More to Spoken Word Than All Those Terrible Adverts?” manages this balance. Citing interviews with such experts as Apples and Snakes director Lisa Mead, it acknowledges the social value of ‘authenticity’ (specifically here, the autobiographical and referential pacts enabling an atmosphere of mutual trust) and accessibility within the art form while cautioning that ‘[a]uthenticity and honesty don't necessarily make something good’ (A. Harrison n.p.). The article describes poet Theresa Lola’s work in a nuanced fashion: ‘[h]er poems convey raw, personal experience with fiercely inventive language that elevates them above less delicate demonstrations of trauma. Her work is proof that honesty and progressive ideas don't have to come at the price of artistic ingenuity’ (Ibid). While the autobiographical and ‘honest’ nature of Lola’s poetry is taken at face value (not ideal), the critical language clearly distinguishes between the content and craft of her work and praises her innovative style. This precision of language and contextualisation of material within the broader social and aesthetic framework of spoken word is much needed in the broader critical discourse.

In the same vein, any critical discourse for spoken word poetry in the U.K. must recognise that the accessibility of a work of art does not correspond to the effort put into creating it: work with a broader appeal does not inherently require less effort to create than work designed for a niche audience. Certainly, as Stein describes, the cultural preferences for accessible, confessional poetry or for more opaque, non-autobiographical material will continue to oscillate (15). However, there are steps critics can take to insulate their work from the extremes of these trends: to recall that accessibility and aesthetic value are not mutually exclusive, and that art for a wider audience should not be disqualified from consideration *as art* simply on the merits of its broad appeal.

When applied together, these critical techniques shift attention away from simplistic assumptions of ‘authenticity’ in spoken word poetry and instead focus on the crafted, contextualised nature of this multi-faceted genre. In concluding my proposal of this critical framework, I want to acknowledge an important point: the constructed nature of ‘authenticities’ does not mean that they are not *experienced as*

*legitimate*, by spectators (including critics) and even the poets crafting this work. As Cobb explains, ‘authenticity’ ‘is an effect, not a reality. This does not, I think, make it any less real’ (8). For instance, when I asked poets which elements constitute good spoken word poetry, while the majority of them focused on elements of technical craft, several also mentioned that they value ‘authenticity.’ The initial criteria Dean Atta uses to determine his appreciation for a poem are representative of these poets’ perspectives: ‘Does it feel honest? Does it feel important? Does it feel right coming out that person’s mouth? Did I enjoy it or feel moved by it? Do I feel other people need to see this?’ (Interview). More than anyone, spoken word poets understand the pressures to ‘be authentic’ within this genre and appreciate the level of craft entailed in composing, rehearsing, and performing work which feels ‘authentic.’ For some of them to appreciate perceiving ‘authentic’ expression, knowing the full context of its crafted nature, emphasises that the extent to which ‘authenticities’ are constructed and performed does not negate their being experienced—and valued—as ‘real.’

Finally, in advocating for a more rigorous critical discourse sceptical about the constructed nature of spoken word ‘authenticities,’ I am not allocating the challenge of changing this discourse on the genre’s fans, but firmly upon critics and scholars. Spectators are guided in their perception of the art form through the frames provided by poets and promoters: they are encouraged to perceive effortless ‘authenticity’ rather than laborious craft. Their role is not to apply scepticism in every engagement with the genre, to constantly question the underlying technical and sociological forces influencing their enjoyment of any given poem. Particularly given that spoken word is generally marketed towards a broad audience, especially those previously ‘put off’ by the responsibility of analysing poetry in school, I doubt that spoken word poets themselves would want to lay this burden on the audiences. Stern captures this sense in his analysis of the contemporary poetry reading:

“Let Derrida,” one can posit the audience thinking, “go hang. I feel the reality of the poetry when I hear the poet read it. What is more, not only is the poetry real, but it is alive, living, present in the sense that the poet, the author, is reading it now.” Whether such a feeling is self-deceiving or not is beside the point. It is one reason why the audience comes to the formal reading. (78)

It is not the burden of the audience to painstakingly break down spoken word poets' work in order to recognise its performative nature, thus shattering the illusion which forms much of the genre's appeal. Instead, I place this burden upon the critics and scholars whose job it is: to enact it with rigour, context, focus, and respect.

## Chapter Conclusion

As I conclude this somewhat grim overview of spoken word's critical discourse, I wish to acknowledge some hopeful signs of change. For one, the swift and nearly unanimous backlash against Watts' vitriolic essay indicates that there is a will to articulately defend the aesthetic rigor of accessible poetry, including spoken word. New platforms continue to emerge with the express aim of building this discourse,<sup>379</sup> featuring emerging critical voices more familiar with the scene and thus better equipped to develop this language. Additionally, recent projects to document the U.K. spoken word scene's history and the perspectives of its artists<sup>380</sup> are increasing awareness of the historical and stylistic context of the scene and archiving it for future researchers.

In this rapidly evolving art form—and in an age in which technology has accelerated the pace of change—aesthetic standards are constantly shifting. There are indications that the tired concept that (perceived) 'authenticity' and accessibility are antithetical to craft is eroding, at least within some critical circles. McNish and Tempest's success in literary prizes traditionally awarded to page-based poetics are promising signs of the academy's positive evolution.<sup>381</sup> Just as eventually the confessional female poets of the 1960s—Plath, Sexton, Rich, and more—were accepted by literary institutions into the canon despite (or perhaps because of) their rich transformation of the personal through their verse, so too is the artistry of today's spoken word poets gradually becoming recognised and celebrated.

<sup>379</sup> These include *Sabotage Reviews* and *All These New Relations*.

<sup>380</sup> These projects include Apples and Snakes' Spoken Word Archive, Tim Wells' "Stand Up and Spit" project documenting the Ranting tradition, the Lunar Poetry Podcast audio interview series, and Tyrone Lewis's work recording interviews with U.K. spoken word poets regarding their craft for the Process Productions YouTube channel.

<sup>381</sup> Both have won the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry (Tempest in 2013, McNish in 2016).



## Conclusion

It is a chilly Friday evening in September 2019, and I am in central Edinburgh attending a slam. It is the first event of the Loud Poets season, which I have helped to produce, and I know many of the poets competing personally. The theatre of the Scottish Storytelling Centre is busy and buzzing with excited conversation, with the poets nervously muttering their lines to themselves from their seats in the front row. I sit one row behind them with my judging sheet, tasked with the nigh-impossible challenge of reducing these three-minute-long pieces, ranging from the humorous to the polemic to the heartrending, into scores out of 20.<sup>382</sup>

Our sacrificial poet,<sup>383</sup> Glasgow-based spoken word poet Sarah Grant, takes to the stage amidst resounding applause to kick off the night. When she loudly lets loose the first line, ‘Dear Hermione!’<sup>384</sup> several spectators whoop in recognition and excitement, myself included. As the poem flits from humour—‘When you first floated down the hallways of the Hogwarts Express / hair like you licked the inside of a toaster’—to themes of empowerment—‘you would never change who you were to fit in / and in a world full of Bella Swans, / I needed to hear that’—I feel myself laughing, humming with recognition, fully immersed in the poem (“Dear Hermione”). It does not matter that I have heard this poem many times before; that I am aware that the text, vocal dynamics, gestures, and emotional expression are not spontaneous but relatively consistent across performances. I am conscious that the poem’s strong feminist message—‘There will always be daughters of the witches they forgot to burn!’—resonates strongly with my politics (and, from other

<sup>382</sup> At this slam, judges were instructed to give up to 10 points for composition and up to 10 points for performance.

<sup>383</sup> Traditionally, slams begin by ‘sacrificing’ a poet who is not competing. Their role is to warm up the audience, prepare the judges for their roles, and insulate the first poet competing from ‘score creep’ (an effect in which scores tend to increase over the course of the round, disadvantaging the early poets and benefitting the later poets).

<sup>384</sup> I am basing this description on my memory of the event. I have checked my recollections of these lines against a transcript provided to me by Grant, available in the database linked in Appendix B. In 2020 Grant created a video recording of the poem for BBC The Social in which she updated the line ‘you would never change who you were to fit in / and in a world full of Bella Swans, / I needed to hear that’ to ‘you never let anyone tell you that who you are was wrong / and in a world full of J. K. Rowlings / we needed to hear that’ to support trans rights (“A Love Letter To Hermione Granger | Poem By Sarah Grant”).

spectators' enthusiastic responses, theirs as well) and thus my reasons for appreciating it are due to more than its excellent craft. Yet still I grin throughout the piece and applaud it loudly at its conclusion.

In short: being conscious of the constructed, performative nature of 'authenticities' within contemporary spoken word poetry does not detract from my enjoyment of this poem. Nor does it negate my appreciation of this art form on a genre-wide level: having the language and critical framework to perceive the intricate compositional and performative craft of this genre need not detract from the 'magic' of experiencing it, but rather makes the work all the more impressive. As this thesis has examined, too often 'authenticity' and aesthetic quality are framed either as mutually exclusive or one and the same, making any analysis of their complex interplay a risky business. Yet, as I hope I have shown here, it is not a criticism of spoken word poets to examine the mechanics behind their performances but rather a celebration of their ingenuity in devising powerful, accessible material.

In examining the ways in which this poetry frames, performs, and upholds 'authenticities,' it is clear that these issues are highly complex and contested: there is no singular notion of what 'spoken word authenticity' denotes, nor should there be. Many U.K. spoken word poets resent the way in which 'truth,' 'presence,' 'integrity,' and other related concepts seem to be required and valued in the genre; many others uphold these notions as central to how they conceptualise and experience their practices. As the definitions, markers, and value (aesthetic and moral) of 'authenticities' in U.K. spoken word poetry continue to evolve, I hope that the taxonomy of authenticities proposed here will be helpful to other researchers, allowing them to be more exacting in their descriptions of performative authenticity.

While this thesis has advanced the discourse regarding 'authenticity' performance and perception in U.K. spoken word poetry, there are several avenues for further research which would helpfully build upon my conclusions here. First, as noted in the Introduction, this critical discourse has lacked reliable data regarding poets' and audiences' demographics, perceptions, experiences, and values. An important next step is to conduct direct audience research to further support my hypotheses regarding spectators' assumptions of various strains of 'authenticity.' A large-scale study in collaboration with spoken word event coordinators across the

U.K., while logistically challenging, could gather important data regarding the extent to which spectators perceive and value these ‘authenticities.’ Additionally, more direct research into the demographic composition of poets and audiences within the U.K. scene would aid in analyses of identity performance and perception, particularly regarding ‘authenticity of identity.’ Furthermore, as detailed in the Introduction, I hope to extend the data pool I collected in 2017 (and the public SOHC archive) by interviewing more figures in the U.K. spoken word scene. Specifically, any extension of this archive will target those figures who were less represented in my initial data set, including poets and producers of colour.

While I seek to continue collecting relevant data, there are also a considerable amount of data I gathered in 2017 that have not yet been intensively analysed. In designing my interview schedule, I intentionally gathered a broad range of information in order to assist fellow researchers and record this material for posterity. In the SOHC archive is ample evidence to support many research avenues, including whether the U.K. spoken word scene is considered a ‘safe space’ by participants and how they define that notion; attitudes and approaches towards print publication; and an examination of typical composition, rehearsal, and performance practices. These studies would be valuable contributions to developing a more well-rounded critical discourse regarding the technical, political, and social aspects of this genre.

There are also several theories presented within this thesis which could feasibly be applied within slightly different contexts. For instance, this thesis focused predominantly on live spoken word poetry; it would be fascinating to further investigate how ‘authenticity’ performance and perception functions within digital spaces. This research avenue might build upon mine and van der Starre’s work and consider how ‘authenticities,’ particularly authenticities of presence, can be performed through recorded, live-streamed, and otherwise mediated contexts. Additionally, as spoken word theatre continues to develop and grow in the U.K., research investigating how this genre negotiates the varying ‘authenticity’ expectations of spoken word poetry versus theatre would be a valuable contribution to the field.

The contemporary U.K. spoken word scene is not only remarkably diverse and regionally varying but evolving rapidly into sub-genres, cross-disciplinary collaborations, and new styles. I look forward to continuing to participate in its forward movement, and I am hopeful for the progressive development of the critical discourse for this extraordinarily multi-faceted art form.



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## **Appendices**

With the exception of Appendices A and B, the material in these appendices relates to my course of interview-based data collection, carried out throughout 2017.

**Appendix A:** Taxonomy of Spoken Word Authenticities

**Appendix B:** Index of Cited Poems

**Appendix C:** Index of Research Participants

**Appendix D:** Ethics Application

**Appendix E:** Risk Assessment

**Appendix F:** Invitation Email to Participants

**Appendix G:** Participant Information Sheet

**Appendix H:** Informed Consent Form

**Appendix I:** SOHC Recording Agreement Form

**Appendix J:** Interview Schedule

**Appendix K:** Follow-up Email Template

## **Appendix A: Taxonomy of Spoken Word Authenticities**

*A diagram of the taxonomy of 'authenticities' within contemporary U.K. spoken word poetry devised for and explained within this thesis.*

### Authenticities of Self

- authenticity of origin
- authenticity of autobiographical self
- authenticity of narrative

### Authenticities of Presence

- authenticity of persona
- authenticity of temporal state
- emotional authenticity

### Socially Mediated Authenticities

- authenticity of voice
- authenticity of identity
- authenticity of motivation

### Authenticities of Interaction

- authenticity of engagement

## Appendix B: Index of Cited Poems

*All of the poems analysed within this thesis are listed below. While many of the poems that I analyse throughout this thesis are publicly available on YouTube, several are not. Those private videos and transcripts were sent to me directly by either the poet or the person who filmed the performance, and are marked below with asterisks. I have uploaded links to all of the videos (public and private) and the transcripts<sup>385</sup> to a Google Drive folder, accessible at this link:*

<https://tinyurl.com/AilesPhDResources>

### Gilday, Kevin: “I’ve Fallen Out of Love with Poetry”

**Live video:** “THE HIGH FLIGHT XMAS ADVENT DAY SIXTEEN.” *YouTube*, uploaded by The High Flight Fanzine, 17 Dec. 2015, <https://youtu.be/ACcwg1xur6Y>.

### Grant, Sarah. “Dear Hermione”

**Staged video:** Grant, Sarah. “A Love Letter To Hermione Granger | Poem By Sarah Grant.” *YouTube*, uploaded by BBC The Social, 15 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pFkrU3vzm8>.

**\*Transcript:** Received by Katie Ailes, 28 Sep. 2019.

### Hirsch, Sara: “Death Poem”

**Live video:** “Sara Hirsch - Death Poem.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Process Productions, 30 Sep 2015, <https://youtu.be/WrdlbCCq4sM>.

**\*Transcript:** “Death Poem.docx.” Received by Katie Ailes, 13 June 2018.

### Jarrett, Keith: “Hip Hop Salvation”

**Live video:** “Keith Jarrett performs his poem They Call Me D.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Penguin Books UK, 13 Jul 2017, <https://youtu.be/uKP7cQmpfw0>.

**Live video:** “Keith Jarrett – “Hip-hop Salvation.”” *YouTube*, uploaded by

<sup>385</sup> I have not uploaded the print versions of Jarrett’s “Hip Hop Salvation” published in his collection *Selah* or Small’s “You Kept My Heart in a Jar in the Fridge” published in his collection *Pure Toilet* to this Google Drive folder in respect to copyright.

SmallWonderMedia, 19 Jun 2014, <https://youtu.be/i0Mo6lywYrU>.

**Staged video:** “Keith Jarrett - Hip Hop Salvation.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Muddy Feet Poetry, 11 Oct 2016, <https://youtu.be/NUuQV43e8I8>.

**Transcript (adapted for print):** *Selah*. Burning Eye Books, 2017.

### **Josephine, Leyla: “I Think She Was A She”**

**Live video:** “BBC Poetry Slam, Edinburgh - Unborn Child - Leyla Josephine.” *YouTube*, uploaded by dynamicmike, 12 Aug. 2014, [https://youtu.be/zQ0v2Kra\\_xc](https://youtu.be/zQ0v2Kra_xc).

**Live video:** “TEDx Whitehall Women Leyla Josephine | Leyla Josephine | TEDxWhitehallWomen.” *YouTube*, uploaded by TEDx Talks, 20 Nov 2017, <https://youtu.be/WbPuJ2b6RHc>.

**Staged video:** “I Think She Was A She by Leyla Josephine | Spoken Word.” *YouTube*, uploaded by guardianwitness, 26 Aug 2014, <https://youtu.be/FQhkEpT-n5c>.

### **Lewis, Tyrone: “Not Another Race Poem”**

**Live video:** “Tyrone Lewis - Not Another Race Poem.” *YouTube*, uploaded by TyroneLewis22, 12 Aug. 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zcyha\\_IDf0o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zcyha_IDf0o).

### **Macleod, Connor: “Flowers”**

**Live video:** “the itch season 1 episode 1: Connor MacLeod 'Flowers.’” *YouTube*, uploaded by Rife magazine, 2 May 2017, <https://youtu.be/2dVg81dmX5w>.

**\*Live video:** “Flowers.” Filmed by Tyrone Lewis, UniSlam 2018, CURVE Theatre, Leicester. Received by Katie Ailes 27 June 2018.

### **Macmillan, Jack: “Paracetamol”**

**Live video:** “UniSlam 2019 | Team Strathclyde | Paracetamol.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Process Productions, 4 Mar 2019, <https://youtu.be/YJz8XJ7x-Cw>.

**\*Live video:** “Paracetamol.” Filmed by Tyrone Lewis, UniSlam 2019,



Birmingham. Received by Katie Ailes 4 March 2019.

**\*Transcript:** “Paracetamol.” Received by Katie Ailes 22 May 2018.

**Mclean, Kevin. “Man in my Mirror.”**

**\*Transcript:** “Re: Research question.” Received by Katie Ailes, 11 April, 2019.

**Small, Sam: “You Kept My Heart in a Jar in the Fridge”**

**Live video:** “Loud Poets Glasgow Sam Small You kept my heart in a jar in the fridge.” *YouTube*, uploaded by dynamicmike, 18 Feb 2015, <https://youtu.be/T1-mIaqdyQs>.

**\*Transcript:** *Pure Toilet*. Speculative Books, 2017.

## Appendix C: Index of Research Participants

*This is an index of all 70 of the figures within the U.K. spoken word scene I interviewed as part of my research for this PhD. Not all of the interviews I conducted were directly quoted within the thesis but all significantly contributed to my understanding of the subject. All of these interviews are being archived with the Scottish Oral History Centre in 2020, with varying degrees of public access based on the poets' wishes.*

*The index is in chronological order: the interviews took place between May and November 2017. The locations listed reflect where the participant lived at the time of the interview; some participants have since moved. Please note that the location the poet lived is not necessarily where the interview took place; for instance, Jess Green lives in Leicester but I interviewed her in Edinburgh.*

*In the right-hand column I have briefly noted the participants' roles within the U.K. spoken word scene at the time of the interview using the following terms: poet, producer, critic, editor, educator. I have allocated these labels based on the comments participants made within their interviews, the way they publicised their work in 2017, and other contextual factors. As these labels were not self-reported, it is possible that these participants would describe their practices differently from how I have labelled them.*

| # | Poet Name          | Date of Interview (2017) | Poet Based In: | Interview Length | Roles within scene       |
|---|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Kevin Mclean       | 11 May                   | Edinburgh      | 2:01:47          | poet, producer, educator |
| 2 | Carly Brown        | 12 May                   | Glasgow        | 1:06:35          | poet                     |
| 3 | Kevin Cadwallender | 15 May                   | Dunfermline    | 2:06:32          | poet, producer, editor   |
| 4 | Dave Coates        | 17 May                   | Edinburgh      | 1:17:28          | critic                   |
| 5 | Sam Small          | 18 May                   | Glasgow        | 1:39:36          | poet, producer           |
| 6 | Catherine Wilson   | 20 May                   | Edinburgh      | 1:41:08          | poet, producer           |

|    |                       |         |                                       |         |                          |
|----|-----------------------|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------|
| 7  | Freddie Alexander     | 23 May  | Edinburgh                             | 1:38:27 | poet, critic, producer   |
| 8  | Robin Cairns          | 25 May  | Glasgow                               | 1:29:53 | poet, producer           |
| 9  | Leyla Josephine       | 5 June  | Glasgow                               | 1:05:05 | poet, educator           |
| 10 | Jim Monaghan          | 10 June | Glasgow                               | 1:57:41 | poet, producer           |
| 11 | Dan Simpson           | 14 June | London                                | 1:43:39 | poet, producer, educator |
| 12 | Ross McFarlane        | 15 June | Glasgow                               | 1:39:33 | poet, producer, critic   |
| 13 | Ash Dickinson         | 19 June | Edinburgh                             | 2:08:05 | poet, educator           |
| 14 | Bibi June             | 22 June | Glasgow                               | 1:06:13 | poet, producer           |
| 15 | Harry Josephine Giles | 17 July | Edinburgh                             | 1:45:20 | poet, producer           |
| 16 | Michael Pedersen      | 19 July | Edinburgh                             | 1:41:41 | poet, producer           |
| 17 | Anita Govan           | 24 July | Edinburgh                             | 2:50:53 | poet, producer, educator |
| 18 | Rachel McCrum         | 25 July | Montreal<br>(previously<br>Edinburgh) | 1:57:11 | poet, producer           |
| 19 | Matt Panesh           | 8 Aug   | Morecambe                             | 1:33:46 | poet, producer           |
| 20 | Jess Green            | 9 Aug   | Leicester                             | 1:18:34 | poet, producer           |
| 21 | Matt Abbott           | 9 Aug   | London                                | 0:54:08 | poet, producer, educator |
| 22 | Dominic Berry         | 10 Aug  | Manchester                            | 1:13:37 | poet, educator           |
| 23 | Sophia Walker         | 11 Aug  | London                                | 1:29:50 | poet, producer           |
| 24 | Keith Jarrett         | 13 Aug  | London                                | 1:56:54 | poet, educator           |
| 25 | Kate Fox              | 14 Aug  | Newcastle                             | 2:08:08 | poet, critic             |

|    |                       |        |              |         |                             |
|----|-----------------------|--------|--------------|---------|-----------------------------|
| 26 | Harry Baker           | 19 Aug | London       | 1:34:34 | poet, producer,<br>educator |
| 27 | Sara Hirsch           | 19 Aug | London       | 1:15:49 | poet, producer,<br>educator |
| 28 | Mark Grist            | 20 Aug | Peterborough | 1:37:12 | poet, producer,<br>educator |
| 29 | Rose Condo            | 21 Aug | Huddersfield | 1:03:11 | poet                        |
| 30 | Luke Wright           | 22 Aug | London       | 1:09:05 | poet                        |
| 31 | Jemima Foxtrot        | 22 Aug | London       | 1:24:12 | poet                        |
| 32 | Liz Counsell          | 23 Aug | London       | 1:05:04 | producer                    |
| 33 | Tyrone Lewis          | 23 Aug | London       | 1:00:38 | poet, producer              |
| 34 | Hannah<br>Chutzpah    | 24 Aug | London       | 1:23:09 | poet                        |
| 35 | Rob Auton             | 25 Aug | London       | 1:42:11 | poet                        |
| 36 | Sophia<br>Blackwell   | 27 Aug | London       | 1:04:32 | poet, producer              |
| 37 | Rowan McCabe          | 27 Aug | Newcastle    | 1:14:36 | poet                        |
| 38 | Kathryn<br>O'Driscoll | 28 Aug | Bath         | 1:15:25 | poet, producer              |
| 39 | Aliyah Hasinah        | 21 Sep | Birmingham   | 1:01:53 | poet, producer              |
| 40 | Bohdan Piasecki       | 21 Sep | Birmingham   | 0:43:34 | poet, producer              |
| 41 | Jenny Lindsay         | 25 Sep | Edinburgh    | 1:21:03 | poet, producer,<br>educator |
| 42 | Caroline Bird         | 29 Sep | London       | 1:09:17 | poet                        |
| 43 | Peter Hayhoe          | 1 Oct  | London       | 1:40:14 | poet, producer              |
| 44 | Anthony<br>Anaxagorou | 2 Oct  | London       | 1:27:13 | poet, producer, editor      |

|    |                         |        |            |         |  |
|----|-------------------------|--------|------------|---------|--|
| 45 | The Repeat Beat<br>Poet | 3 Oct  | London     | 2:23:33 | poet, producer   |
| 46 | Claire Trévien          | 4 Oct  | London     | 1:27:16 | poet, critic   |
| 47 | Joelle Taylor           | 4 Oct  | London     | 1:49:06 | poet, producer,<br>educator                                |
| 48 | Sean Mahoney            | 5 Oct  | London     | 1:30:01 | poet, producer   |
| 49 | Lisa Mead               | 5 Oct  | London     | 0:51:16 | producer (Apples &<br>Snakes Director)                     |
| 50 | Dean Atta               | 5 Oct  | London     | 1:28:10 | poet, producer   |
| 51 | Daniel Cockrill         | 6 Oct  | London     | 1:39:23 | poet, producer   |
| 52 | Francesca Beard         | 6 Oct  | London     | 1:07:18 | poet   |
| 53 | Ben Fagan               | 7 Oct  | London     | 1:01:30 | poet, producer   |
| 54 | Michelle<br>Madsen      | 7 Oct  | London     | 1:39:28 | poet   |
| 55 | Lucy English            | 9 Oct  | Bristol    | 1:04:34 | poet, educator, critic                                     |
| 56 | Connor Macleod          | 10 Oct | Bristol    | 2:11:15 | poet, producer, critic                                     |
| 57 | Pete the Temp           | 10 Oct | Bristol    | 1:13:39 | poet, critic, producer                                     |
| 58 | David Turner            | 10 Oct | Bristol    | 2:00:37 | poet, producer   |
| 59 | Mab Jones               | 11 Oct | Cardiff    | 1:11:54 | poet   |
| 60 | Renn Hubbuck<br>Melly   | 11 Oct | Cardiff    | 1:38:59 | poet, producer   |
| 61 | Fat Roland              | 13 Oct | Manchester | 1:17:33 | literary performer<br>(comedic short<br>stories), producer |
| 62 | Kieren King             | 13 Oct | Manchester | 0:36:34 | poet, producer   |
| 63 | Kirsten Luckins         | 28 Oct | Hartlepool | 0:39:19 | poet, producer   |
| 64 | Abby Oliveira           | 17 Nov | Derry      | 1:32:20 | poet, producer   |
| 65 | Mel Bradley             | 17 Nov | Derry      | 1:30:08 | poet, producer   |

|    |                      |        |         |         |                |
|----|----------------------|--------|---------|---------|----------------|
| 66 | Frank Rafferty       | 17 Nov | Derry   | 2:22:36 | poet, producer |
| 67 | Colin Hassard        | 19 Nov | Belfast | 1:13:50 | poet           |
| 68 | Clare<br>McWilliams  | 19 Nov | Belfast | 1:17:31 | poet           |
| 69 | Elizabeth<br>McGeown | 19 Nov | Belfast | 1:38:49 | poet           |
| 70 | Kevin P. Gilday      | 23 Nov | Glasgow | 1:28:18 | poet, producer |

## Appendix D: Ethics Application

*My course of interviews to collect data for this thesis was approved by the University of Strathclyde (submitted to Dr. Petya Eckler of the Ethics Committee in March 2017; corrections made and re-submitted to approval in April 2017). Below is my approved application form.*

|  |
|--|
| <b>1. Title of the investigation</b><br>UK Contemporary Performance Poetry Artistic Practices & Cultures<br>Please state the title on the PIS and Consent Form, if different:<br>n/a   |
| <b>2. Chief Investigator (must be at least a Grade 7 member of staff or equivalent)</b><br>Name: Eleanor Bell<br><input type="checkbox"/> Professor<br><input type="checkbox"/> Reader<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Senior Lecturer<br><input type="checkbox"/> Lecturer<br><input type="checkbox"/> Senior Teaching Fellow<br><input type="checkbox"/> Teaching Fellow<br>Department: English<br>Telephone: +44 (0)141 444 8334<br>E-mail: <a href="mailto:eleanor.bell@strath.ac.uk">eleanor.bell@strath.ac.uk</a> |
| <b>3. Other Strathclyde investigator(s)</b><br><br>Name: Kathryn Ailes<br>Status (e.g. lecturer, post-/undergraduate): Post-graduate (PhD)<br>Department: English<br>Telephone: 07562 990156<br>E-mail: <a href="mailto:kathryn.a.iles@gmail.com">kathryn.a.iles@gmail.com</a>   |
| <b>4. Non-Strathclyde collaborating investigator(s) (where applicable)</b><br>Name: n/a<br>Status (e.g. lecturer, post-/undergraduate): n/a<br>Department/Institution: n/a<br>If student(s), name of supervisor: n/a<br>Telephone: n/a<br>E-mail: n/a<br>Please provide details for all investigators involved in the study: n/a   |
| <b>5. Overseas Supervisor(s) (where applicable)</b><br>Name(s): n/a<br>Status: n/a<br>Department/Institution: n/a<br>Telephone: n/a<br>Email: n/a<br>I can confirm that the local supervisor has obtained a copy of the Code of Practice: Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/><br>Please provide details for all supervisors involved in the study: n/a   |
| <b>6. Location of the investigation</b>  |

At what place(s) will the investigation be conducted  
 Interviews will be conducted at locations convenient to the interviewees. When possible, they will occur on the University of Strathclyde campus (a room in the Scottish Oral History Centre will be booked in advance on a case by case basis). However, they may also occur in other quiet, central public locations such as the Scottish Poetry Library or Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh, or the local library or arts centre in any of the other cities where interviews may take place. Whenever possible I will conduct these interviews in person; however, in some cases where this is not a realistic option, they may occur through Skype or over the phone.

If this is not on University of Strathclyde premises, how have you satisfied yourself that adequate Health and Safety arrangements are in place to prevent injury or harm?

I will always hold interviews in locations that both myself and the interviewee are comfortable with. There are no health and safety hazards involved with the interview process, as it will just be myself and the interviewee sitting down together with an audio recorder, so I am satisfied that these interviewees will be safe for both parties. I will take regular health and safety precautions with each interview venue I use, i.e. familiarising myself with fire exits.

**7. Duration of the investigation**

Duration(years/months) : 9 months

Start date (expected): 02 / 03 / 2017                      Completion date (expected): 02 / 12 / 2017

**8. Sponsor**

Please note that this is not the funder; refer to Section C and Annexes 1 and 3 of the Code of Practice for a definition and the key responsibilities of the sponsor.

Will the sponsor be the University of Strathclyde: Yes  No

If not, please specify who is the sponsor:

**9. Funding body or proposed funding body (if applicable)**

Name of funding body: n/a

Status of proposal – if seeking funding (please click appropriate box):  
 In preparation  
 Submitted  
 Accepted

Date of submission of proposal:                      /                      /                      Date of start of funding:                      /                      /

**10. Ethical issues**

Describe the main ethical issues and how you propose to address them:  
 I do not anticipate any major ethical issues arising through this research, as I will be interviewing adults about their chosen artistic practices. However, there is a possibility that an artist might reveal some information during an interview that they later regret revealing (i.e. negative comments about a colleague or information that might harm their career). To prevent this becoming a problem, I will make clear to each participant that they will receive a copy of their transcript following the interview and be able to strike any material from the record that they wish. They will also be able to render their interview materials anonymous if they wish so that their name is not connected with their statements.

**11. Objectives of investigation (including the academic rationale and justification for the investigation)** Please use plain English.

The objective of this investigation is to record contemporary UK-based spoken word artists discussing their artistic practices and perspectives on their local scenes and the UK scene. The function of this is two-fold.



First, the data will be used to inform my PhD in English at the University of Strathclyde, which focuses on the performativity of selfhood through contemporary UK spoken word. The use of this evidence, in conjunction with my other methodology of closely analysing spoken word poems in performance, will help me to contextualise and roundly support my arguments.

The collection of these interviews is particularly important because it will provide valuable data in a critically under-studied field. There is very little academic research on spoken word cultures outwith the North American context, and virtually none commenting upon the scene in Scotland (where a portion of my interviews will be held). The last intensive academic study on UK spoken word cultures incorporating an interview component was Helen Gregory's dissertation (2009), which only surveyed artists based in London and Bristol. This interview series will attempt to remedy this gap in the research by surveying artists from a broader geographic area (I note, however, that Gregory's and my studies will not be directly comparable as her research was sociological and utilised coding as a methodology, which I will not be doing).

To this point, I have supported the arguments within my PhD through using personal experiential evidence from my work within the UK spoken word scene as a Scotland-based spoken word artist and events promoter. However, this methodology is obviously limited to my single perspective and contains the risk of personal bias. This interview series will allow me to draw upon the experiences of a broader range of individuals, many of whom will have more years of experience within this artistic scene, and thus to enrich my research with data from multiple perspectives.

The second objective is to record and archive these interviews for posterity: to capture the experiences, ideas, and perspectives of artists within this scene while it is enjoying a creative flowering and popularity boom in the UK. Because spoken word is a relatively recent, grassroots genre, there has been very little attention focused on it, especially in terms of intensively interviewing artists about their craft. In addition, because spoken word is a live, performance-based art form where the artistic material is ephemeral, there are few artefacts of the art form (other than video/audio recordings and printed transcripts of poems), so it is highly important to interview and record artists discussing their craft so that there is some archive for future researchers to access in order to study this art form.

In addition, it is important to me that these interviews be not only held for posterity and accessible to other researchers seeking to do critical work concerning contemporary UK spoken word, but also that they be accessible to the public. UK spoken word culture, as with most spoken word cultures internationally, is a grassroots movement often defined by its amateur status, with few artists being fully professional and with limited funding for oral history projects or other work to document this scene. It is vital that these records be kept accessible to the wider public so that members of the community as well as other interested citizens be able to access and make use of them.

The audio files and transcripts from these interviews will thus be archived at the Scottish Oral History Centre (SOHC). Each interviewee will be asked to sign a Recording Agreement Form indicating the level to which they are comfortable with their interview data being publicly accessible (i.e. whether the interview should be fully accessible online, only accessible to researchers, or fully anonymised). During the data collection process all data will be securely kept on my laptop in order to ensure the participants' privacy, and all participants' wishes will be honoured in terms of data publication through the SOHC archives. This archive will be accessible (again, according to the wishes of the participants) to future researchers who wish to utilise this data in their scholarship.

## **12. Participants**

Please detail the nature of the participants:

The participants sought for this study will be individuals who are actively engaged in the UK spoken word scene. I will be soliciting interviews with amateur and professional spoken word artists, spoken word promoters, and spoken word online and print publishers. All of my subjects will be adults who voluntarily engage in this art form. To the greatest extent possible I will work to interview subjects from across the UK to make my study geographically representative. I am not here dividing participants into groups as it would be virtually impossible to delineate between the categories of artist/promoter/publisher, given that most individuals occupy multiple roles and whose identities within the scene are constantly evolving.

Summarise the number and age (range) of each group of participants:  
Number: 25-50 (I have drawn up a list of approximately 75 individuals who, if I have the time and resources, I would ideally like to interview. However, given that my time and resources are limited [and that it is unlikely that each individual I approach will be able to do the interview] I am realistically projecting that I will be able to conduct between 25-50 interviews over the course of this period.)

Age (range) 18+ (no upper age limit)

Please detail any inclusion/exclusion criteria and any further screening procedures to be used: Priority will be given to those participants with the greatest level of experience within their spoken word scenes/communities. Only adults (over 18s) will be interviewed.

### **13. Nature of the participants**

Please note that investigations governed by the Code of Practice that involve any of the types of participants listed in B1(b) must be submitted to the University Ethics Committee (UEC) rather than DEC/SEC for approval.

Do any of the participants fall into a category listed in Section B1(b) (participant considerations) applicable in this investigation?: Yes  No

If yes, please detail which category (and submit this application to the UEC):

n/a

### **14. Method of recruitment**

Describe the method of recruitment (see section B4 of the Code of Practice), providing information on any payments, expenses or other incentives.

I will directly contact prominent and relevant artists, event promoters, and publishers within the UK spoken word scene. Because of my prior research and artistic engagement with the UK spoken word scene, I am conscious of which figures are notable within the scene and thus would have experiences and perspectives relevant to my study. Because of my engagement within these communities as a fellow artist and events promoter, I am already familiar with many of these figures and thus have access to their contact details. However, to avoid any personal biases (i.e. only interviewing those figures already known to me) I will ask each person I interview whether they have any suggestions of other figures who would also be useful to interview. This will help me to ensure I'm interviewing a range of figures knowledgeable about their scenes.

I will initially approach these figures via email, briefly describing my study and inviting them to participate. If they respond favourably, I will send them digital attachments of all of the relevant paperwork (the Participant Information Sheet, the Informed Consent Form, and the SOHC Recording Agreement Form) to review. If at this point they indicate that they are still interested in participating in the study, we will then arrange a time and place at which to meet for the interview which is mutually agreeable.

Because this study has no specific funding (other than my studentship funding provided by HASS), I am unable to offer any payments, expenses, or other incentives to participants.

### **15. Participant consent**

Please state the groups from whom consent/assent will be sought (please refer to the Guidance Document). The PIS and Consent Form(s) to be used should be attached to this application form.

Voluntary, informed consent will be confirmed from each participant before the interview is conducted. All participants will be adults who will not be asked to discuss any vulnerabilities or

traumas. There is no element of deception in this interview series and all participants will be given full and transparent information on the purpose and methodology of the study up front.

### **16. Methodology**

Investigations governed by the Code of Practice which involve any of the types of projects listed in B1(a) must be submitted to the University Ethics Committee rather than DEC/SEC for approval.

Are any of the categories mentioned in the Code of Practice Section B1(a) (project considerations) applicable in this investigation?  Yes  No

If 'yes' please detail:

Describe the research methodology and procedure, providing a timeline of activities where possible. Please use plain English.

I will be utilising a methodology consistent with oral history data collection for this interview series, through conducting semi-structured interviews. Following each interview I will fully transcribe the interview into a Word document. I plan to rely upon these interview audio files and transcripts as part of the data pool for my PhD research.

My PhD relies on several strands of data. I am primarily relying on close analysis of live/recorded performance poems, and analysing these through a performance studies critical framework. These interviews will serve as supplementary data, rather than as the backbone of the research.

At this point in my research, I am not planning to formally code these interviews or utilise any quantitative methodology. As I am using a semi-structured format for my interviews and as the questions in each interview will vary given the interviewee's specific experiences and roles within the UK spoken word scene, it would not make sense to quantitatively code these interviews since they will not be directly comparable. Rather, I will review the interview transcripts myself mining for any patterns or common arguments, and present my findings (using supporting quotations where relevant) through my PhD research.

As previously noted, I will approach participants via email, sending all relevant forms, and if they respond favourably we will establish a mutually agreement time and location at which to meet to conduct the interview.

When we meet for the interview, I will give the participant a printed out copy of the Informed Consent form and go through it again with them in person. If they are still comfortable with it, I will get their signature on this form prior to recording the interview. I will then conduct the interview and audio record it. Following the interview, I will remind the participant that they still have the right to strike any material from the record that they wish and that they are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time. I will ensure that they are still comfortable with the terms they agreed to through the Informed Consent form. If they are, I will then ask them to also sign the SOHC Recording Agreement Form.

Each participant will only be interviewed once (unless the interview is in any way cut off and requires an additional session to finish, or the interviewer and participant both agree that an additional session would be useful).

Following our interview, I will upload the audio to my computer (where it will be password protected) and change the file name to the last name of the participant (unless the participant has asked for confidentiality). I will then transcribe the interview. I will then send a copy of the

transcript, as well as a copy of the audio file, to the participant by emailing them an encrypted .zip file. I will again make clear to the participants that at this stage they are able to strike anything from the record if they wish to do so.

Following the conclusion of the audio data collection part of this research, I will archive all audio recordings and text transcripts at the Scottish Oral History Centre (SOHC).

What specific techniques will be employed and what exactly is asked of the participants? Please identify any non-validated scale or measure and include any scale and measures charts as an Appendix to this application. Please include questionnaires, interview schedules or any other non-standardised method of data collection as appendices to this application.

The interviews will be conducted using a questionnaire; however, the exact questions asked from the questionnaire will vary based on specific experiences and role of the interviewee in the UK spoken word scene. For instance, an interviewee who is a spoken word books publisher will be asked different questions from an interviewee who is a spoken word events promoter. This will be done to specifically tailor interviews to the interviewees' experiences and thus to receive the most useful information. The interview will be semi-structured, meaning that the questions asked will vary based on the identity and experiences of the interviewee, and that follow-up questions will likely be asked of the interviewee where more elaboration would be useful.

The full questionnaire bank is attached to this application.

Where an independent reviewer is not used, then the UEC, DEC or SEC reserves the right to scrutinise the methodology. Has this methodology been subject to independent scrutiny? Yes   
No   
If yes, please provide the name and contact details of the independent reviewer:  
n/a

**17. Previous experience of the investigator(s) with the procedures involved.** Experience should demonstrate an ability to carry out the proposed research in accordance with the written methodology.

This will be the first time I have conducted an interview series on this scale. However, I have worked to prepare myself as much as possible by researching and training in the techniques involved and gaining the support and advice of knowledgeable figures in my academic community.  
I have twice attended (in 2015 & 2017) SOHC training sessions (which serve as introductions to the methodology of oral history and include training on how to ethically conduct interviews, make transcriptions, and archive one's interviews).  
I have carefully reviewed the University of Strathclyde Code of Ethics and the ethics guidelines on the UK Oral History Society website.  
I am also in contact with figures at the SOHC (including director Arthur McIvor) who have been very supportive and responsive with all of my questions.  
I have purchased an audio recorder from the brand suggested by the SOHC (a TASCAM DR-40) and have practised extensively with it so I am prepared to use this technology in my interviews.

**18. Data collection, storage and security**

How and where are data handled? Please specify whether it will be fully anonymous (i.e. the identity unknown even to the researchers) or pseudo-anonymised (i.e. the raw data is anonymised and given a code name, with the key for code names being stored in a separate location from the raw data) - if neither please justify.

The interviews will be audio recorded using a TASCAM DR-40 audio recorder, which records in .wav format. The audio files of the interviews will initially be uploaded from the TASCAM recorder to Kathryn Ailes' personal laptop and re-named with the interviewee's last name in the file name. This laptop is password protected. The transcripts will similarly be stored on Ailes' laptop with the interviewee's last name in the file name. The only exception to this will be if a participant has asked that their interview be held anonymously, in which case a special code will be used to mark that file name rather than the interviewee's last name.

The interview data will be backed up to an external hard drive to be kept safely in Kathryn's flat. There will be no backups via Internet services (i.e. Dropbox or The Cloud) to ensure the data is kept safe.

At the conclusion of the interview series, both the audio files and the transcript files will be transferred to the SOHC in accordance with their general practices. Participants' wishes for anonymity will be respected as indicated on their submitted Recording Agreement forms.

Explain how and where it will be stored, who has access to it, how long it will be stored and whether it will be securely destroyed after use:

During the interview series, these files will be stored on Kathryn Ailes' password-protected personal laptop. At the conclusion of the interview series, the audio files and transcripts will be given to the SOHC for archiving. At this point, researchers and members of the public interested in viewing/listening to the files need to formally request access. The archive is kept securely behind a key-code protected door in the SOHC, and Arthur McIvor, the director of the SOHC, handles the access requests.

Will anyone other than the named investigators have access to the data? Yes  No

If 'yes' please explain:

No one other than the named investigators (Kathryn Ailes & Eleanor Bell) will have access to the data while the investigation is taking place. Dr. Bell will not have primary access to the data (as it will be housed on Kathryn's laptop and external hard drive). However, should Dr. Bell request access to the data, Kathryn will bring in the external drive and transfer files to Dr. Bell's university computer, where they will be password-protected. No files will be shared via email or other Internet sharing services.

Once the investigation has concluded (i.e. all interviews have been conducted, transcripts completed, and forms collected from participants) then the audio files and transcripts will be given to the SOHC for archiving in accordance with the participants' wishes. As previously noted, once the files are archived at the SOHC, researchers interesting in viewing/listening to the files need to formally request access.

### 19. Potential risks or hazards

Describe the potential risks and hazards associated with the investigation:

There should not be any notable risks or hazards associated with this investigation, other than the previously noted possibility than a participant may wish to strike certain comments from the record, in which case he/she is of course welcome to do so.

Has a specific Risk Assessment been completed for the research in accordance with the University's Risk Management Framework ([Risk Management Framework](#))? Yes  No

If yes, please attach risk form ( [S20](#)) to your ethics application. If 'no', please explain why not: Form S20 is attached to this application.

### 20. What method will you use to communicate the outcomes and any additional relevant details of the study to the participants?

Following each interview, I will send the audio file of the interview and the transcription to the interviewee, so they are able to review their statements.

I will keep all interviews updated on the progress of my research (and thus the use of their

interviews), most notably by letting them know when my PhD has been completed (and viva passed) and sending them a copy of the completed thesis. I will also notify interviewees if/when their interviews are utilised in any other fashion (i.e. conference papers, journal articles, web publication, broadcasting, etc.) as far as I am aware of these uses.

As there are no major risk factors or exposure of vulnerabilities expected in the interview process, it should not be necessary to debrief participants following the interview by offering counselling, etc.

**21. How will the outcomes of the study be disseminated (e.g. will you seek to publish the results and, if relevant, how will you protect the identities of your participants in said dissemination)?**

The primary way in which these interviews will be used is to inform my PhD research on the performance of selfhood in spoken word in the UK context. However, as the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form and SOHC Recording Agreement form detail, these interviews will be archived at the SOHC and accessible to the public. Thus, it is possible that the interviews will be utilised in other fashions (i.e. by future researchers of spoken word using them in their research processes, or by broadcasters using them for television/radio programmes). I will reveal the identities of the participants only if they have given consent to my doing so through the Informed Consent form and the SOHC Recording Agreement Form.

| Checklist                                  | Enclosed | N/A |
|--|----------|-----|
| Participant Information Sheet(s)           | —        | —   |
| Consent Form(s)                            | —        | —   |
| Sample questionnaire(s)                    | —        | —   |
| Sample interview format(s)                 | —        | —   |
| Sample recruitment email(s)                | —        | —   |
| Any other documents (please specify below) |          |     |
| SOHC Recording Agreement Form              | —        | —   |
| S20 Risk Assessment Form                   | —        | —   |
|  | —        | —   |
|  | —        | —   |
|  | —        | —   |

## 22. Chief Investigator and Head of Department Declaration

Please note that unsigned applications will not be accepted and both signatures are required

I have read the University's Code of Practice on Investigations involving Human Beings and have completed this application accordingly. By signing below, I acknowledge that I am aware of and accept my responsibilities as Chief Investigator under Clauses 3.11 – 3.13 of the [Research Governance Framework](#) and that this investigation cannot proceed before all approvals required have been obtained.

Signature of Chief Investigator

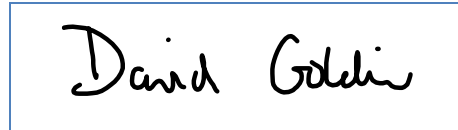


Please also type name here:

Eleanor Bell

I confirm I have read this application, I am happy that the study is consistent with departmental strategy, that the staff and/or students involved have the appropriate expertise to undertake the study and that adequate arrangements are in place to supervise any students that might be acting as investigators, that the study has access to the resources needed to conduct the proposed research successfully, and that there are no other departmental-specific issues relating to the study of which I am aware.

Signature of Head of Department



Please also type name here

David Goldie

Date:

17 / 3 / 17

## Appendix E: Risk Assessment

*As part of my Ethics Application I completed and submitted the following Risk Assessment.*

### GENERAL RISK ASSESSMENT FORM (S20)

Persons who undertake risk assessments must have a level of competence commensurate with the significance of the risks they are assessing. It is the responsibility of each Head of Department or Director of Service to ensure that all staff are adequately trained in the techniques of risk assessment. The University document “Guidance on Carrying Out Risk Assessments” will be available, in due course, to remind assessors of the current practice used by the University. However, reading the aforementioned document will not be a substitute for suitable training.

**Prior to the commencement of any work involving non-trivial hazards**, a suitable and sufficient assessment of risks should be made and where necessary, effective measures taken to control those risks.

Individuals working under this risk assessment have a legal responsibility to ensure they follow the control measures stipulated to safeguard the health and safety of themselves and others.

#### SECTION 1

|   |  |   |     |
|---|--|---|-----|
| <b>1.1 OPERATION / ACTIVITY</b>   |  | Complete the relevant details of the activity being assessed. |     |
| <b>Title:</b>   | UK Contemporary Performance Poetry Artistic Practices & Cultures |   |     |
| <b>Department:</b>  | English  |   |     |
| <b>Location(s) of work:</b>   | Varying locations within the UK                                  | <b>Ref No.</b>  | n/a |
| <p><b>Brief description:</b> This is a series of interviews taking place within the UK during the calendar year 2017. The purpose of this study is to collect the perspectives, opinions, and experiences of spoken word artists, publishers, and event programmers from across the UK. These interviews will be a source of data informing Kathryn Ailes’ current PhD research into UK spoken word practices and cultures in the English department at the University of Strathclyde. They will be archived at the Scottish Oral History Centre (SOHC) for posterity, where they will be accessible to future researchers and also to members of the public. Given that spoken word is a relatively recent and grassroots art form, there has been very little critical attention focused on it, especially on scenes outwith North America. This study attempts to remedy that gap by gathering and preserving information about the current UK spoken word scene from those figures engaged in the scene who know it best.</p> |  |   |     |

|  |              |                  |                          |
|--|--------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>1.2 PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR MANAGING THIS WORK</b> |              |                  |                          |
| <b>Name:</b>   | Eleanor Bell | <b>Position:</b> | Senior Lecturer, English |
| <b>Signature:</b>                                    |              | <b>Date:</b>     |                          |



|                    |         |
|--------------------|---------|
| <b>Department:</b> | English |
|--------------------|---------|

|  |               |                   |  |
|--|---------------|-------------------|--|
| <b>1.3 PERSON CONDUCTING THIS ASSESSMENT</b> |               |                   |  |
| <b>Name:</b>                                 | Kathryn Ailes | <b>Signature:</b> |  |
| <b>Name:</b>                                 |               | <b>Signature:</b> |  |
| <b>Name:</b>                                 |               | <b>Signature:</b> |  |
| <b>Date risk assessment undertaken:</b>      |               |                   |  |

|  |                 |                 |                 |                 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| <b>1.4 ASSESSMENT REVIEW HISTORY</b>   |                 |                 |                 |                 |
| This assessment should be reviewed immediately if there is any reason to suppose that the original assessment is no longer valid. Otherwise, the assessment should be reviewed annually. The responsible person must ensure that this risk assessment remains valid. |                 |                 |                 |                 |
|  | <b>Review 1</b> | <b>Review 2</b> | <b>Review 3</b> | <b>Review 4</b> |
| <b>Due date:</b>   |                 |                 |                 |                 |
| <b>Date conducted:</b>   |                 |                 |                 |                 |
| <b>Conducted by:</b>   |                 |                 |                 |                 |

**SECTION 2**

**Work Task Identification and Evaluation of Associated Risks**

| Component Task / Situation | Hazards Identified | Hazard Ref No. | Who Might be Harmed and How?                         | Existing Risk Control Measures (RCM)   | Likelihood | Severity | Risk Rating | Risk L, M, H, VH | RCM's Acceptable Y/N |
|----------------------------|--------------------|----------------|--|--|------------|----------|-------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Interviews                 | Safety issues      | 1              | Potential for participants to feel physically unsafe | Interviews will be conducted at locations convenient to the interviewees. When possible, they will occur on the University of Strathclyde campus; however, they may also occur in other quiet, central public locations such as the Scottish Poetry Library or Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh, or the local library or arts centre in any of the other cities where interviews may take place. Whenever possible I will conduct these interviews in person; however, in some cases where this is not a realistic option, they may occur through Skype or over the phone. I will always hold interviews in locations that both myself and the interviewee are comfortable with. There should be no health and safety hazards involved with the interview process, as it will just be myself and the interviewee sitting down together with an audio recorder, so I am satisfied that these interviewees will be safe for both parties. I will take regular health and safety precautions with each interview venue I use, i.e. familiarising myself with fire exits. | 1          | 1        | 1           | L                | Y                    |

|            |                        |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|------------|------------------------|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Interviews | Participant Discomfort | 2 | Potential for interview subject to feel discomfort with a question or with the response they have given. | I do not anticipate participants experiencing distress during these interviews, as I will be interviewing adults about their chosen artistic practices. However, there is the possibility that some uncomfortable memories or thoughts could be triggered by a question and that the participant might then feel uncomfortable. To avoid this being an issue, I have made it clear in the Participant Information Sheet that participants are welcome to skip any questions they feel uncomfortable answering. There is also the possibility that an artist might reveal some information during an interview that they later regret revealing (i.e. negative comments about a colleague or information that might harm their career). To prevent this becoming a problem, I will make clear to each participant that they will receive a copy of their transcript following the interview and be able to strike any material from the record that they wish. | 1 | 1 | 1 | L | Y |
|            |                        |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|            |                        |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|            |                        |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|            |                        |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|            |                        |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|            |                        |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|            |                        |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |

**SECTION 4**

|   |                              |                              |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>RECORD OF SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS</b>   |                              | <b>Page 4</b>                |
| of 5  |                              | <b>Ref No.</b>               |
| <p>Where this Section is to be given to staff etc., without Sections 2 &amp; 3, please attach to the front of this page, a copy of the relevant Section 1 details.</p> <p>The significant findings of the risk assessment should include details of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The identified hazards</li> <li>• Groups of persons who may be affected</li> <li>• An evaluation of the risks</li> <li>• The precautions that are in place (or should be taken) with comments on their effectiveness</li> <li>• Identified actions to improve control of risks, where necessary</li> </ul> <p><b>Alternatively</b>, where the work activity/procedure is complex or hazardous, then a written Safe System of Work (SSOW) or Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is advised that should incorporate the significant findings. Such documents should again, have the relevant Section 1 attached. Please state below whether either a SSOW or SOP is available in this case.</p> |                              |                              |
| Relevant SSOW available   | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | Relevant SOP available       |
| No <input type="checkbox"/>   |                              | Yes <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   |                              | No <input type="checkbox"/>  |
| <p><b>Significant Findings:</b> (Please use additional pages if further space is required)</p> <p>This risk assessment has found that the risks associated with this study are low. There are no unacceptable risks in this interview series. Interviews will be conducted with the full consent of the interviewees and will be held in public spaces that are mutually agreeable to both parties. The person conducting the interviews will take every precaution to ensure that the spaces in which the interviews are conducted are safe for both parties. Interview questions will not target any personal or vulnerable areas, so distress to the interviewee is not anticipated. Should the interviewee feel any discomfort at any question, or at any response they have given, it has been made clear to them that they are welcome to skip any question or strike any answer from the record.</p>   |                              |                              |

**SECTION 5**

|  |                  |                    |
|--|------------------|--------------------|
| <b>RECEIPT OF SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS OF RISK ASSESSMENT</b>  |                  | <b>Page 5 of 5</b> |
| Please copy this page if further space is required.  |                  | <b>Ref No.</b>     |
| <p>All individuals working to the risk assessment with the Ref. No. as shown, must sign and date this Section to acknowledge that they have read the relevant risk assessment and are aware of its contents, plus the measures taken (or to be taken by them) to safeguard their health and safety and that of others.</p> <p>If following review of the assessment revisions are minor, signatories may initial these where they occur in the documentation, to indicate they are aware of the changes made. If revisions are major, it is advisable to produce a new risk assessment and signature page.</p> |                  |                    |
| <b>NAME (Print)</b>  | <b>SIGNATURE</b> | <b>DATE</b>        |
| Eleanor Bell   |                  |                    |
| Kathryn Ailes  |                  |                    |

## Appendix F: Invitation Email to Participants

*This is the template I used to email participants inviting them to take part in the study. As this was just an initial communication to gauge interest, I did not send the Participant Information Sheet, Informed Consent Form, and SOHC Recording Agreement Form at this point. If the participant expressed interest in the study or had any questions, I sent these forms in the next email before arranging our meeting.*

Dear [NAME],

### IF I AM FAMILIAR WITH THE POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT:

Hope you are doing well! I'm writing to you in relation to the PhD I'm currently working on at the University of Strathclyde. My research focuses on artistic practices and cultures within the UK spoken word scene, and as part of this study I'm conducting a series of interviews with artists, publishers, and event promoters in the scene.

### IF I AM NOT FAMILIAR WITH THE POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT:

Hello! My name is Katie Ailes and I'm a researcher at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. I'm currently working on a PhD focusing on the UK spoken word scene, and as part of this research I'm conducting a series of interviews with artists, publishers, and event promoters in the scene.

I was wondering whether you might be interested in participating in this study. It would entail meeting up in person for an interview at some point over the next eight months. I would ask you questions regarding your artistic practice, your thoughts on the spoken word genre, and your local scene's history and current set-up. The interview would be audio recorded then transcribed and archived for posterity at the Scottish Oral History Centre, where it would be accessible to other researchers and members of the public if you consent (there are also options to have it be available for researchers but not the public, or to be fully anonymised, depending on your preferences). Unfortunately I am unable to offer any monetary compensation for participation in this study; however, I will do my best to ensure that it is a cost-free and enjoyable experience for you.

If you are interested in taking part in this study, I can send you more information on what the study entails, along with consent forms for you to review. If you are still interested, we can set up a date and time to meet for the interview.

Thank you for your time; looking forward to hearing back from you soon!

Best,  
Katie

## **Appendix G: Participation Information Sheet**

*This information sheet was included in my application for ethical approval. It was sent to each participant prior to the interview in order to fully inform them about the purpose of my research and how the interview would be conducted. I also brought copies with me to each interview and gave a physical copy to the participant if they requested it.*

U.K. Contemporary Performance Poetry Artistic Practices & Cultures  
Kathryn Ailes & Eleanor Bell  
English Department, University of Strathclyde  
May 2017

### **PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET**

We are sending you this information sheet because we would like to invite you to take part in our research study. Before you decide whether to participate we would like to outline why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information and ask us any further questions you may have or if anything is unclear.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of this study is to collect the perspectives, opinions, and experiences of spoken word artists, publishers, and event programmers from across the U.K. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, these interviews will be a source of data informing Kathryn Ailes' current PhD research into U.K. spoken word practices and cultures in the English department at the University of Strathclyde. Secondly, these interviews will be archived at the Scottish Oral History Centre (SOHC) for posterity, where they will be accessible to future researchers and also to members of the public. Given that spoken word is a relatively recent and grassroots art form, there has been very little critical attention focused on it, especially on scenes outwith North America. This study attempts to remedy that gap by gathering and preserving information about the current U.K. spoken word scene from those figures engaged in the scene who know it best.

#### **Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is being undertaken by Kathryn Ailes, a PhD student in English at the University of Strathclyde. The research is supervised by Dr. Eleanor Bell. The research is funded via a studentship from the University of Strathclyde.

**Why have I been asked to take part?**

You have been asked to take part because you are engaged in the U.K. spoken word scene, and thus have experience and knowledge of the scene which will help to inform this study.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is not compulsory for you to take part. However, we believe that your perspective would add important context and information to our study, and would be a valuable resource not only for the present research (i.e. Kathryn's doctoral work) but also for any future researchers seeking to study the U.K. spoken word culture from this time. If you agree to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. Please note that you will still be free to withdraw at any time and we will not ask you to give any reasons if you choose to do so.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

This study will allow us to gather information from various perspectives on the spoken word art form and its practices and communities in the U.K. Because spoken word is a critically under-studied area, the information we collect from your (and other artists') interviews will help us to build a study of this vital and booming scene. Your participation will ensure that your unique experiences and insights are accounted for in this study.

Your participation will help not only the scholars currently working on this project, but also future generations of scholars accessing the interview archives to study the U.K. spoken word scene. Our study will help to remedy the current lack of data on the U.K. spoken word scene, leading (we hope) to a healthy tradition of criticism of this art form.

Additionally, the archive of your interview will be (if you consent) accessible to the public. This means that you and your peers will be able to listen to the interviews of the other participants and draw upon them if you wish, so that this archive will exist not only as a resource for scholars but also for the entire U.K. spoken word community.

Unfortunately the University is not in a position to be able to pay participants for their time on this study. We hope that you will find the experience of contributing to this study rewarding, and we will work to ensure that you do not accrue any costs for participating.

**What does taking part mean?**

If you agree to take part, we will arrange a mutually agreeable time and place to meet for the interview. It is anticipated that these interviews will take place in public locations, such as the University of Strathclyde, the Scottish Poetry Library, or a local public library in your area. However, we would like these interviews to be convenient to you, so alternative locations may be arranged based on your circumstances.

The interview will be conducted by Kathryn Ailes, the PhD student carrying out this research, and will last for as little or as much time as the interviewee is comfortable with the discussion. The interview will be semi-structured, meaning that Kathryn will have a list of questions she would like to ask, but it is completely OK if these questions shift to follow the natural flow of discussion, or if not all questions are able to be asked. It is estimated that interviews will last between 30 min – 2 hours, although again this duration is flexible and entirely based on the convenience and comfort of the interviewee. The interview will be audio recorded.

**What happens next?**

If at this point you are happy to be involved in this project, please reply to this email indicating your agreement. We will then through email decide on a mutually agreeable time to meet for the interview. When we meet for the interview, Kathryn will give you printed copies of the Informed Consent form and the SOHC Recording Agreement form (which you have been emailed for your convenience, to review in advance of the interview). If you are comfortable with these forms, you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent form before we begin the interview, and the SOHC Recording Agreement form after we finish the interview.

After the interview, we will send you the audio file of your interview and the transcript of the interview. If upon reviewing the interview you realise that you shared any information you are now uncomfortable with, you will be welcome to strike this material from the record.

If you do not wish to be involved in the project, thank you very much for your attention and interest thus far. If you later decide that you do wish to be involved, you are more than welcome to contact us again.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**



We hope that the experience of taking part will be enjoyable. No personal or intentionally intrusive questions will be asked; all questions will focus on your artistic practice and perceptions of your local scene. However, should you experience any discomfort, the interview can be concluded. At any point in the process (even following the interview and the transcription of the interview) you are welcome to withdraw your data from the study if you are uncomfortable with it being included.

### **What happens to the interviews?**

The audio file of the interviews will be uploaded to Kathryn's laptop (which is password-protected) and Kathryn will transcribe the interviews into a Word document on this laptop. A backup of these files will be kept on Kathryn's external hard drive. Eleanor Bell (Kathryn's supervisor) will have access to these files upon request, but all transfers will be made via external drives: there will be no internet sharing of the files during the collection period to ensure data security.

At the conclusion of the study, all audio files and documents will be transferred to the Scottish Oral History Centre Archive. Your interview will be archived there in accordance with your wishes as you mark them on the SOHC Recording Agreement Form (i.e. you decide whether you would like your interview to be fully accessible online, only accessible to researchers, or fully anonymised).

The University of Strathclyde is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office who implements the Data Protection Act 1998. All personal data on participants will be processed in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

### **What happens at the end of the project?**

Kathryn will notify you when the interviews have been uploaded to the SOHC archive. She will also notify you when her PhD is completed, and send you a copy of her doctoral thesis should you be interested in reading it.

### **Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

You are in full control over whether or not your name will be attached to your interview. Following the interview, you will be asked to indicate your preference in the SOHC Recording Agreement Form, where you can mark whether you would like your interview to be fully accessible online, only accessible to researchers, or fully anonymised.

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The interviews will be used primarily at this point to inform Kathryn's doctoral thesis, which you will be welcome to read upon its conclusion. They may also be used to inform conference presentations, journal articles, and other related works Kathryn produces as part of her doctoral studies. If you indicate that you would like your interview to be accessible to the general public, or to researchers, then it may be utilised by future researchers or educators, broadcasters, etc. as well.

### **Use of Quotations**

Publications or reports which come out of the project may use quotations of your words from the research interview. In your consent form you will be asked to confirm that you are happy for your quotations to be used.

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University Ethics Committee - <http://www.strath.ac.uk/ethics/>.

### **Contact for Further Information:**

The PhD student conducting the research is Kathryn Ailes.

You may email her at [kathryn.a.iles@gmail.com](mailto:kathryn.a.iles@gmail.com) (preferable) or mail to:

Kathryn Ailes

2/6 Rosevale Terrace

Edinburgh EH6 8AQ

Phone: 07562 990156

The Chief Investigator on this study (Kathryn's PhD supervisor) is Dr. Eleanor Bell.

You may contact her via [eleanor.bell@strath.ac.uk](mailto:eleanor.bell@strath.ac.uk), or mail to:

Dr. Eleanor Bell

c/o Department of English,

Lord Hope Building,

141 St. James Rd

Glasgow G4 0LT

Phone: +44 (0)141 444 8334

This investigation was granted ethical approval by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee. If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the investigation, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:

Secretary to the University Ethics Committee  
Research & Knowledge Exchange Services  
University of Strathclyde  
Graham Hills Building  
50 George Street  
Glasgow G1 1QE  
Telephone: 0141 548 3707  
Email: [ethics@strath.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@strath.ac.uk)

Thank you for considering taking part in this study.

## Appendix H: Informed Consent Form

*This is the Informed Consent form I devised for my data collection. I emailed this form to all participants prior to the interview (alongside the Participant Information Sheet and SOHC Recording Agreement Form) so they had the chance to review it. All participants were required to sign the Consent Form prior to the interview.*

UK Contemporary Performance Poetry Artistic Practices & Cultures  
Kathryn Ailes & Eleanor Bell  
English Department, University of Strathclyde  
Feb. 2017

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.

I understand that I am under no obligation to respond to all aspects of the investigation: for example, I know that I may refrain from answering any survey question(s) about which I feel uncomfortable.

I understand that I can withdraw my data from the study at any time.

I understand that if I wish to be anonymous, any information recorded in the investigation will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.

I consent to being audio recorded as part of the project.

I have reviewed the Scottish Oral History Centre Recording Agreement Form indicating my preference for how my interview will be stored and used.

I consent to quotations from my interview being used in research projects or publications drawing upon this interview, as long as they respect my preferences as I have established them in the Recording Agreement Form.

YES / NO : I consent to being a participant in the project. (Please circle one.)

|                           |
|---------------------------|
| Print Name:               |
| Signature of Participant: |

Date:

## Appendix I: SOHC Recording Agreement Form

*The data collected for this thesis is being archived at the Scottish Oral History Centre (SOHC). This is the Recording Agreement form that the SOHC requires each participant to sign ensuring they understand how their material will be archived and giving them the chance to set the access level. I emailed this form (alongside the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent form) to each participant prior to our interview. I then brought printed copies of both this form and the Informed Consent form to each interview. While I required each participant to sign the Informed Consent form before their interview commenced, I waited until after the interview to have them sign this form. That was because, not being able to predict what they would say in the interview, I wanted the participants to feel fully in control of their data and able to make the decision regarding access after they knew what would be on record.*

Scottish Oral History Centre  
 Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences,  
 University of Strathclyde,  
 McCance Building, 16 Richmond St,  
 GLASGOW G1 1XQ  
 Director: Professor Arthur McIvor  
 Tel: 0141 548 2212 Email: a.mcivor@strath.ac.uk

### RECORDING AGREEMENT FORM

The purpose of this deposit agreement is to ensure that your contribution is added to the research collections of the University of Strathclyde (UoS) / Scottish Oral History Centre in strict accordance with your wishes. All material will be archived and preserved.

*I hereby assign the copyright in my contribution to the Scottish Oral History Centre Archive / UoS Archives. I understand that it will be stored and used as detailed here. PLEASE TICK ONE BOX TO INDICATE YOUR PREFERENCE:*

I am happy for this to be fully accessible online in compliance with Research Council UK Guidelines on open research data sharing..... =

I would like this to be preserved as a permanent public reference resource for use in research, publication, education, lectures broadcasting (but not open online access)  
 =

I would like to be anonymous (that is NOT have my real name used)..... =  
*In this case we retain a de-personalised transcript only – no audio files.*

The recording and/or interview transcript will be copied and sent to you for checking, when you can indicate if you wish anything to be changed or taken out.

Other instructions:

.....  
.....

Signed:.....

Date.....

Name:.....

Address:.....

Postcode..... Tel no. ....

Signed (for

SOHCA):.....Date.....

Archive Reference: 1. TRANSCRIPT.....2. SOUND

FILE/MD/TAPE.....

## Appendix J: Interview Schedule

*Interviews were semi-structured; this schedule was utilised as a reference point but not necessarily strictly followed in each interview. Interview questions were tailored to the specific interviewee (i.e. questions differed between performers and promoters). Additional questions (especially follow-up questions) were asked where relevant. The questions I asked evolved over the course of the data collection as I learned which questions were most effective at yielding the most informative answers. As noted in the Introduction to this thesis, there were several topics on which I gathered data which I do not directly address in this thesis (for instance, poets' influences, their perspectives on print and digital publication, their perspectives on the concept of spoken word events as 'safe spaces'). I asked these queries in order to gather data for the archive which will be helpful for other researchers within this critical discourse and to build the body of available information on this field.*

### Introduction

- Could you briefly introduce yourself and your engagement with poetry?

### Context

- Where did you first encounter spoken word?
- How did you get into performing yourself?

### Defining the Genre

- What is your preferred term for the genre in which you work? (i.e. 'spoken word,' 'performance poetry,' 'slam poetry,' etc.)
- How do you generally identify yourself creatively? (i.e. as a 'poet,' 'writer,' 'performer,' 'spoken word artist,' etc.)
- How would you define the genre in which you work?

### Artistic Practice

- Who/what are your artistic influences?
- Tell me about your composition and rehearsal process.
- To what extent do you consider how you will perform a poem while you're composing it? Do you plan vocal inflections, choreograph gestures, etc.?
- Do you write poems intended only to be read on the page (not performed live) in addition to composing poems for live performance?
  - o If yes: Are there differences in your composition process when you are writing for the page versus writing for the stage?
- Who is the intended audience for your work? Do you write with the audience in mind?



- When do you consider a poem to be finished, if ever?

### **Publishing/Ephemerality**

- Beyond live performance, in what ways (if any) do you publish your work (i.e. YouTube videos, CDs, pamphlets, etc.)?
- Considering all of the ways in which your work is disseminated, could you rank them by your preference for which way an audience will experience your work? (i.e. 'I want people to experience it live, but if they can't then YouTube is the second best, then print...')
- [If they publish work which they perform in print] What is your relationship with those text poems? Do they feel like the complete poem or more like a transcript of the poem?

### **Authenticity/Autobiography**

- Where does the inspiration for your work come from?
- To what extent would you characterise your work as 'confessional' or 'autobiographical'?
- Would you characterise any narratives you share within your work as 'true stories'?
- Do you think that audiences assume that everything you're saying onstage is 'true'?
- Do you feel as though you adopt a persona when you're performing?
- When you perform, would you characterise what you're doing as 'acting'?
- When you're performing a poem, do you feel as though you need to connect to the emotions that the piece is about, or the emotions that you felt while writing the poem, in order to deliver an effective performance?
- Do you retire poems if you feel as though you can't emotionally connect with them anymore?
- Has your work ever been covered by someone else?
- What are your feelings regarding being covered (removing any issues regarding plagiarism, financially benefitting from the cover, etc.)?
- Would you have any poems that you would feel uncomfortable with someone else covering?

### **Identity Politics**

- Would you characterise your work as political?
- When you perform, do you feel as though you are speaking on behalf of any group or identity, or only on behalf of yourself?
- Do you feel as though any ideas and opinions are welcome at spoken word events?
- Would you characterise spoken word spaces as 'safe spaces'?

**Aesthetic Standards/Criticism**

- What is your perception of the critical discourse around the U.K. spoken word scene at the moment (i.e. have you received reviews, have they been well-written and appropriate to your genre, etc.)?
- Are there any changes you would like to see to the critical culture around U.K. spoken word?
- What are your criteria for a successful spoken word piece?
- How do you solicit and receive feedback on your work (if at all)?
- What do you think wins poetry slams (i.e. any styles of poems, specific content, etc.)?

**Regional/Local Scene**

- Do you perceive there to be any regional/cultural distinctions in styles of spoken word across the U.K.?
- Tell me about the history and current demographics of your local scene.

**Shifts in the Genre**

- Have you perceived any major shifts or developing trends in your scene/the spoken word scene more generally over the past 5-10 years?
- Projecting ahead 5-10 years, what do you think is the future of the U.K. spoken word scene?

**Concluding Questions**

- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about that we haven't yet discussed here?
- Who else would you recommend that I talk to?

## Appendix K: Follow-up Email Template

*Once I had completed transcribing an interview and then editing that transcript to ensure accuracy, I emailed both the audio file and transcript to the participant. In this email, I reminded them of the level of public archive access they had requested at the time of our interview for their interview and invited them to change their decision if their perspective had shifted. I also reminded them that if they were comfortable with the majority of the interview being public access but wished for any material to be removed, that was also an option. Finally, if I had questions about any phrases or spelling in the interview, I highlighted these sections in the transcript and asked the participant for clarification in the email. Below follows the template I used in composing these emails to participants.*

Hello [PARTICIPANT'S NAME],

Hope you're doing well! I'm following up on the interview we did as part of my research in 2017 to send you the audio and transcript. Apologies for the delay in sending this to you - I ended up interviewing 70 poets and collecting 100+ hours of audio, so you'll appreciate that the transcribing process has been rather time-consuming!

The full transcript is attached to this email. You should also be receiving an email from WeTransfer with a link to download the audio file (this link expires in 7 days, so if you don't get the chance to download it before it does, just let me know and I can send it again).

As we discussed when we met, all of the interviews I conducted are being archived at the Scottish Oral History Centre (SOHC) in Glasgow. You signed an Informed Consent form consenting for me to draw upon this interview in my thesis, and an SOHC Recording Agreement Form indicating

[PASTE A, B, OR C BASED ON WHAT THE PARTICIPANT CHOSE]

A - "I am happy for this to be fully accessible online in compliance with Research Council UK Guidelines on open research data sharing"

B – "I would like this to be preserved as a permanent public reference resource for use in research, publication, education, lectures broadcasting (but not open online access"

C - I would like to be anonymous (that is NOT have my real name used) - *In this case we retain a de-personalised transcript only – no audio*

(if you'd like to review these terms, let me know and I can re-send these documents).

If you're still happy with that, we're all set! If, however, you've changed your mind, that's completely fine - just let me know and we can discuss other options for archival. It's also possible for me to edit the audio & transcript in case you're generally happy with the interview but wish to remove a section.

[IF THERE ARE HIGHLIGHTS]

Finally, you'll see in the transcript that there are some items highlighted - these are spellings of names/locations that I wasn't sure of. If you could let me know if I've gotten them wrong and correct me, I'd really appreciate that!

Thank you again for participating! If you have any questions, please just let me know. Looking forward to hearing back from you soon!

Best,  
Katie