

*'Words Go Past There':*  
**Reading and Pedagogy of Mediatized Spoken Word Poetry**

by  
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MA (English and Creative Writing), The University of British Columbia Okanagan, 2017

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in the  
Department of English  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
Summer 2024

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## **Abstract**

*'Words Go Past There': Reading and Pedagogy of Mediatized Spoken Word Poetry* by Cole Mash begins with the notion that Spoken Word poetry, as a recognizable genre of contemporary writing, has been somewhat excluded from literary canons, classroom syllabi, as well as critical study more generally despite its historical-cultural significance and recent proliferation worldwide. In the past 20 years, there has been an influx of socio-cultural work done on Spoken Word poetry; however, Mash clarifies that what is needed for the genre to enter the economies of academic research and the university classroom is further study on form. Current methods of the study of literature are inadequate to the formal richness of contemporary Spoken Word poetry as a live and mediatized art form that contains print, sonic, and visual elements. Engaging contemporary work on spoken word/Spoken Word poetry, literary sound studies, performance, media studies and theories of reading, Mash puts forth a new method for the study of Spoken Word poetry and tests it through a global case study of the work of four Spoken Word poets from different backgrounds, global communities, and aesthetic approaches. Finally, the work concludes with a digital resource, created through with an ethos and methods of social practice, that can be used by educators, students, researchers, and aficionados for the critical study of Spoken Word poetry.

**Keywords:** mediatized; pedagogy; performance; poetry; audio; video; print; reading; spoken word/Spoken Word poetry; social practice; community-engaged research

For Erin, Rawle, and Mark

## Acknowledgements

There are always more people to thank and acknowledge than there is space for in this kind of section. I want to thank my supervisory committee, Steven Collis, Constance Crompton, and Jeff Derksen for their feedback and support over the past (almost) six years. I want to thank Carolyn Lesjack and Peter Dickinson for their guidance and generosity during my secondary field exam. Much appreciation to the other teachers and administrators in the SFU English department for endless class and radicality. Special shout outs to Michelle Levy for helping me reshape my SSHRC into a successful grant and always having a contract for me, Clint Burnham for steering me towards thinking about practices of reading, and Jason Camlot and the Spoken Web project for the opportunities and theoretical context it provided to build this work within. Thanks to the OC and UBCO scholarly communities that listened to me complain, provided insight, or helped me pay my bills. Thanks to Kate Moffatt for cleaning up Chapter 2 and 3 when I really needed the support. Thanks to SFU, The CERi, and SSHRC for funding me well enough to feed my brood of children.

Thanks to all the writers, thinkers, poets, and performers who came before me and offered their shoulders to my shoes: Julia Novak, Rawle James, Pete Bearder, Jason Camlot, Anis Mojgani, Kae Tempest, Caroline Levine, Sheri D Wilson, Tawhida Tanya Evanson, and many many many more. A special thanks to Mark Bertolutti for letting me read and interpret his life's work and for always grabbing and setting up the chairs whenever I need it. Gratitude also to the unceded traditional territories of the Sylix/Okanagan, the səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh), the kʷikʷəłəm (Kwkwetlem), the Sḵw̓xw̓7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish) and the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations, and their peoples for housing me as an uninvited, settler guest. Thanks to the IWC community for inspiring this project and giving me a connection to community that gives this project life. Respect and admiration to all the teachers and youth poets who participated in yoothspohk the last four years.

Finally, I want to thank my family. Thanks to my kids, Cedar, Lennon, Mackenzie, and Heath for putting up with how much I have worked the past few years—I promise to practice saying no, more, as long as we all shall live. Thanks to my mom for picking up my kids and all the sleepovers that saw me get some space to breath. But most of all, I want to thank my partner Erin for her endless support and tireless labour (both affective and real). Without you I would not only not have a PhD, but I would have a life bereft of all three major elements I study below (sounds, bodies, text) as well as those elusive things not studied below: home, sweet love, and joy, too.

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*“I am inclined to call this act by the Dakota warriors a poem.  
There’s irony in their poem.  
There was no text.  
‘Real’ poems do not ‘really’ require words.’”*

- Layli Long Soldier, “38”

*“Words don’t go there; words go past there.”*

- Fred Moten, *In the Break*



## **Introduction**

### **Shake the Dust: A Way of Beginning**

*“Do not settle for letting these waves settle and for the dust to collect in your veins.”*

- Anis Mojgani, “Shake the Dust”

#### **You’re Not *Just* Going to Work on Spoken Word, *Are You?***

When you begin a graduate degree there is that wonderful, horrible time when each new person you meet at the institution—presumably out of a courteous/radical valuing of student work—asks you that dreaded question. You know the one, grad students of the world; it is a variation of: *what is your research about?* Your gut sinks. You start to sweat. You have only been part of this program for a few weeks, so, other than possibly what you cobbled together for your application to the program or last year’s unsuccessful SSHRC, you haven’t actually completed any significant research yet. You wish you had. You want to be the person who has started their project in significant ways before your program even began, or at least be the person who can articulate with certainty what you plan to do. But you aren’t. And more so, you are acutely aware that although they may not be your supervisor, the generous question askers are your new colleagues, people who may or may not hold your academic and social future at this institution in their hands. So, rather than admitting your personness each time you are asked the question and saying *I haven’t really done much yet*, you try, somehow, to distill this not-yet-done work into a few elevator-sized sentences. Does this sound familiar? Just me?

As a way of beginning, I would like to tell a personal story. When I began my

PhD at SFU, I took part in a couple of meet-and-greet events where faculty, university staff, and grad students (both new and senior) shared some drinks and catering. Eating something like grapes and crackers and maybe drinking red wine, a senior colleague asked me the dreaded, aforementioned question. Through sweaty gut drop, I responded with something like, *Using digital methods, I want to study form and the aesthetics of Spoken Word*<sup>1</sup> *and its relationship between performance and page*. I told them about an older version of this project that has since changed greatly: TEI-based research I planned to undertake, and the poets on which I wanted to focus. They were ultimately supportive, but part of their immediate response was something along the lines of: *But you aren't just going to focus on Spoken Word are you?* Like that, but with a real kind of emphasis on *just* and *Spoken Word*. To be fair to this person, in retrospect, I do think they meant it positively, or at least, they were trying to support me as a nascent scholar. *Surely*, I was going to think about other performance poets or poets in performance more generally—folks like Ginsberg or Dylan Thomas or even Steve McCaffery, writers to whom contemporary performance poetry owes a debt of gratitude. However, despite the intentionally helpful place I think it came from, this question about my object of study was still underpinned by the attitude that Spoken Word alone would not be an adequate focus for my doctoral work. In my experience, this is not an isolated comment, but rather an idea that pervades the academy. And underpinning this idea are a host of criticisms linked to Spoken Word's perceived inadequacy as a literary form.

The critique that Spoken Word is not a worthy object of focus is common enough,

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<sup>1</sup> I capitalize Spoken Word here as I feel this distinguishes it as a term that refers to a particular type of performed literature. However, many of the scholars with whose work I engage in this section refer to spoken word in lower case. I will unpack this further below.

both inside and outside of academic and poetic circles. Outside there are the playful and clichéd pop-culture portrayals a la Mike Myers in *So I Married an Axe Murderer* or Shatner doing Eminem’s “The Real Slim Shady” on *Futurama*. Inside, there are more harsh moments of critique like that of poet George Bowering, who called poetry slams (one of the main venues for disseminating so-called Spoken Word) an “abomination” (“Border Disputes” 3), or literary critic Harold Bloom quite dramatically citing the slam as “the death of art” (“The Man” 379). The most common critique of Spoken Word is that it privileges “oral performance over the writing itself” (“Poetry Performances”); that is, without the performance element the print writing alone isn’t very ‘good.’<sup>2</sup> In her chapter “Was that ‘Different,’ ‘Dissident’ or ‘Dissonant’? Poetry (n) the Public Spear: Slams, Open Readings, and Dissident Traditions” poet and critic Maria Damon suggests that “‘people’s poetry’ venues—slams, open-mike [sic] readings, the ‘spoken word’ movement that includes rap and other highly vernacular verbal forms” are often criticized for being “too public and [aiming] too aggressively for mass appeal,” tending towards a “low common denominator” through “a utilitarian, semantically overdetermined ‘message,’” (327-28). That is, Spoken Word and other types of verbal forms sacrifice quality, craft, nuance, and complexity to be palatable to a wide audience in an ephemeral context. Their content is perceived as not challenging or dense enough to “[reward] frequent engagement”<sup>3</sup> (Evanson et al. 179) by readers, as literary work ought to do. But for Damon, this response to Spoken Word or other types of oral and performance

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<sup>2</sup> How writing is judged as ‘good’ or not is one of the prominent questions explored in this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> This is a quote by Spoken Word poet El Jones from an interview I did with her in *Resistant Practices in Communities of Sound*. I will return to this idea below when engaging Jones’ ideas about the types of poetry that are valued in a Eurocentric paradigm and why.

literature comes from “a narrow conception of what poetry is: the highly crafted, aesthetic transmutation of private emotions into lapidary objects a select audience can, with much specialized training, learn to appreciate” (326). Therefore, it is not Spoken Word that is the problem, but the academy’s fetishization of particular forms of cultural production and the ways in which we as scholars have been taught to approach poetry primarily as a print-based artifact.

In many ways, excluding Spoken Word and other vernacular verbal forms is just a rehashing of the high/low cultural divide that was debated and overcome long ago in cultural studies and other fields outside of literary studies. In Douglas Kellner’s “Cultural Studies and Social Theory: A Critical Intervention,” he explores the rise of British cultural studies in relation to mass culture. He argues that, in its very formation, British cultural studies “rejected high/low culture distinctions and took seriously the artifacts of media culture, thus surpassing the elitism of dominant literary approaches to culture” (Kellner). While the separation of high/low culture has been transcended in contemporary cultural studies, arguably some corners of literary studies, and the study of poetry in particular, has held onto these older divisions around literary value, which we now know to be bound up in white, male, upper-class, cis-heteronormative hegemony as opposed to objective textual qualities. While there is no shortage of scholarship on fellow mass cultural artifacts such as *Harry Potter* or *the Simpsons*, for example, vernacular and verbal forms of poetry have struggled to find their footing within the academy in the same way as print.

Until recently, perhaps because of these negative attitudes towards Spoken Word, very little academic work has been produced on the genre, or, for that matter, other forms

of writing that finds themselves, as Damon suggests, outside of the “parameters of text-dependant institutions” (325). However, Damon was writing over twenty years ago, and though, as I will explore below, many still feel that oral forms of literature have not yet had their due within the walls of the academy, there is a growing body of work that has moved to fill that gap. This Introduction will survey current work done on Spoken Word and its perceived discursive exclusion, ultimately suggesting that for Spoken Word poetry to more fully enter the economies of the classroom and academic research contexts, ultimately new methods for reading it in its rich, contemporary, mediatized form are required.

However, before I present this argument, I think it is important to unpack the term ‘Spoken Word.’ To paraphrase writer Raymond Carver: *what do we talk about when we talk about Spoken Word?* In the next section, I will briefly examine Spoken Word as a keyword, ultimately narrowing the focus of this study to what I name ‘Spoken Word poetry.’ This will be followed by sections that outline my methodology, provide a chapter overview, and articulate my positionality within this research.

### **Spoken Word/the spoken word, Slam, and Spoken Word Poetry**

Many works that have focussed on Spoken Word or so-called slam poetry have moved to define these terms, and other descriptors of performance literature, over the years. In fact, a whole separate study could likely focus on parsing terms like performance literature, Spoken Word poetry, performance poetry, poetry in performance, page poetry, live poetry, oral poetry, orature, and oral practice (the list goes on), though, I am not sure this would be useful for anything other than writing grants or facilitating further division

between the page and the stage. Instead, I will focus this keyword study in particular on the terms ‘Spoken Word’ and ‘slam’, arriving at the term ‘Spoken Word poetry,’ which most adequately describes the work I focus on in the dissertation to follow.

The most famous text on defining keywords, Raymond Williams’ canonical *Keywords* (1985), approaches this task under the assumption that we need to define our usage of particular words as they have diverse meanings depending on historical, socio-cultural, and, often, geographic contexts. Williams suggests that “individual words should never be isolated, since they depend for their meanings on their actual contexts” (19-20); however, he also argues that studying keywords is never as simple as focussing on the context of their usage. For him, there is value in isolating the perceived, objective meaning of words while then simultaneously drawing connections and parallels to other usages, words, and contexts. Therefore, for Williams, it is important to study “both particular and relational meanings” and to recognize that from past to present, from speaker to speaker, and from area to area words and their meanings are both congruent and incongruent (or perhaps fluent and disfluent). That there is “radical change, discontinuity, and conflict” in the relationality of keywords over time and space (20). In parsing Spoken Word, slam, and Spoken Word poetry as keywords, I do not advance these formal descriptors of performed poetry as having easy or singular definitions. Rather, I undertake this task as an exercise in narrowing the scope of my work to focus specifically on a particular type of poetry that I see both as deserving of scholarly attention and in need of new methods of study for that attention to be possible. However, I have (a la Derrida) embraced *différance*, knowing, like Williams, that these terms both have particular and relational meanings that are not always congruent, and which also

lack consensus around their usage.

I begin with the distinction between ‘Spoken Word’ and ‘the spoken word’. The spoken word is not inherently literary as a keyword, instead broadly denoting linguistic or non-linguistic orality, including pragmatic, as opposed to artistic, oral activities. Spoken Word poet and scholar Corey Frost asserts that “[t]here is no question anymore that there is such a thing as spoken word, as distinct from ‘the spoken word’” (*The Omni* 1). In Frost’s formation, ‘the spoken word’ is literal, referring generally to voiced language and utterance,<sup>4</sup> as in *words* that are *spoken* or *sounds* that *express meaning* or *communicate*, but which could also include orature, cultural storytelling, public speaking and speeches, or even auctioneering; and ‘Spoken Word’ refers to vernacular literary performance forms like rap, comedy, Dub, poet’s theatre, dramatic monologue and any number of oral/aural literary forms. But Frost also speaks to the nebulousness of the name Spoken Word, suggesting that “[t]he term has been embraced by popular culture, even if it is not always clear what it means” (*The Omni* 1). Frost attempts to offer a definition for the literary art of Spoken Word: “a performative artistic practice incorporating writing and speaking that is often defined chiefly by context—in other words, it is what people do at spoken word events” and further that “spoken word can be defined as that which is claimed as spoken word” (*The Omni* 2). Rather than a genre with recognizable boundaries and conventions, literary Spoken Word is simply performance writing that is disseminated at Spoken Word events. In this way, for Frost, ‘Spoken Word’ is perhaps not a literary genre or form, but a method or vehicle for the dissemination of performance

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<sup>4</sup> See JL Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1955) and Tracy Morris’s *Who Do with Words* (2018) for more on the utterance.

literature, albeit still distinct from the very general umbrella term ‘the spoken word.’

Spoken word, as a literary art form, is bound up in the histories and genealogies of many forms of cultural production. Peter Middleton notes the “long history of oral performance of written texts, which reaches back through the renaissance and medieval cultures to the classical world” (273). Poetry, too, began as an oral form—metred verse a fossil of poetry’s origins, a mnemonic device so that bards might remember the epic narratives they told. As print technologies advanced, poetry became more and more bound to the page, intensifying with the invention of the printing press in 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a turn back to poetic orality. Poet-critic Charles Bernstein outlines that “since the 1950s the poetry reading has become one of the most important sites for the dissemination of poetic works in North America” (5). However, Bernstein and Middleton rehearse a common white, Western teleology that oral poetry’s origins go far beyond. Spoken Word owes much to hip hop<sup>5</sup> and other forms of black orature, as explored in numerous works on the history and genealogies of Spoken Word and performed poetry.<sup>6</sup> Literary performance, more generally, can be traced back through Dub poetry, the Black Arts movement, jazz and blues traditions, the poet-performer movement “that lasted from 1870-1930 and involved the careers of Will Carleton, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, James Whitcomb Riley, Vachel Lyndsay, and others” (Thomas 302), and all the way back to IBPOC oral practitioners like the West African

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<sup>5</sup> Pete Bearder (61) and Corey Frost (*The Omni* 89) among others make this claim.

<sup>6</sup> See Tyler Hoffman’s *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (2010); Lorenzo Thomas’s “Neon Griot: The Functional Role of Poetry Readings in the Black Arts Movement”; and Sascha Feinstein’s *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present* (1997), and many others for in-depth studies outlining this history.



Griot tradition. Additionally, Indigenous peoples and other global, oral cultures have been engaging in oral performance of text (which is not limited to simply print text, but sonic, embodied, and emplaced texts) since time immemorial. Like Spoken Word itself, the history of oral literature is broad and far reaching in terms of culture, geography, and temporality. And too often, IBPOC histories are erased from this narrative.

In *Spoken Word in the UK* (2021), one of the newest and arguably now the most significant texts on the poetic mode, Spoken Word poet-scholars Lucy English and Jack McGowan purposefully define Spoken Word broadly, thus “preserving the potential to explore the influence of many different forms of oral performance and acknowledging similar mediums such as stand-up, postdramatic theatre, and 1- 2- 1 performance” (3). In poet-scholar Pete Bearder’s *Stage Invasion: Poetry and the Spoken Word Renaissance* (2019), he suggests that the difficulty in pinning down a definition is actually “proof of how successful [Spoken Word] has been” at incorporating aspects of many genres of writing, performance, media, and other forms of cultural production. He argues that “spoken word draws on worlds beyond ‘literature’ alone and this openness is a defining feature of the genre” (70). Ultimately, returning to the question of if Spoken Word can be defined as a unique genre or style, Bearder suggests that the “short answer” is “no” (69). That over time, not only have the lines of division between different modes under the umbrella of Spoken Word, as well as the lines between page and stage, collapsed, but Spoken Word has also “defied the tropes that characterize it” (69). However, contradiction abounds—to romanticize the openness of Spoken Word’s boundaries as a genre, according to literary scholar Steve Larkin, is to conflate the term’s present with its past. For Larkin, Spoken Word was once a very general genre but has since become

overdetermined to contain less range. He states: “when performance poetry was less well-defined and found practitioners from theatre, comedy, music, literature, and hip-hop there was a stronger likelihood of a diversity of approaches.” But Larkin does offer a defining characteristic of Spoken Word: one “of the most significant markers of contemporary spoken word” is the combination of “everyday speech and dialect with strict rhythm and rhyme structures” (37). Though, I agree with the assertion that Spoken Word tends towards everyday speech, the latter half of this definition is somewhat limiting, as I have encountered just as much free verse Spoken Word as Spoken Word that follows rhyming and metre. However, Larkin is also writing about Spoken Word in the UK, which has its own particular writing context. And indeed his criticism of the openness of the term is a valid one, as what we talk about when we talk about Spoken Word is something more specific than just any oral, performative text.

In defining Spoken Word, there are important questions of liveness and sociality as well. Is Spoken Word inherently live? Or rather, must it be? Is it something limited to that which happens in community, or as literary scholar Julia Novak, in *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (2011), puts it, “a physical copresence of poet-performer and audience” (64)? To this, I would say no. Spoken Word can be engaged with by an audience in many mediatized (to borrow Philip Auslander’s term)<sup>7</sup> ways, such as listened to on a digital album, streamed from *Spotify* or *Apple Music*, or watched on *YouTube*. There is a romanticization of liveness that characterizes much of the work currently written on Spoken Word poetry. For example, philosopher Karen Simecek argues that:

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<sup>7</sup> I return to unpack this term at length in Chapter 1.

hearing a poem read aloud as part of a live performance can play a valuable role in a certain kind of emotional and moral activity that differs from what we can get from reading poetry alone off the page or even watching a recording of a performance. (166)

Simecek goes on to clarify that she doesn't feel mediatized iterations of Spoken Word "aren't valuable" and that she "merely [wants] to highlight what is unique in the live poetry performance" (166). This echoes Novak, who toolkit from *Live Poetry* focusses specifically on live rather than mediatized poetry, as well as a number of other studies on Spoken Word that limit their work only to the live.<sup>8</sup> What constitutes "the live" is itself a complicated question that has been debated famously by scholars such as Peggy Phelan, Philip Auslander, and Diana Taylor.<sup>9</sup> I will return to this debate in a sustained way in Chapter 1, but ultimately I do not take Spoken Word to be something that must be experienced live. Further, in the context of reading and interpretation, this study will suggest that limiting one's scope to the live closes down much of the possibilities for interpretation and pedagogy offered to us by mediatized Spoken Word, especially in an academic context; and, from a purely logistic and technological standpoint, if we can only engage with the live it is more difficult to teach, study, and reference Spoken Word and Spoken Word poetry.

Finally, there is also the question of the socio-cultural aspects of the mode.

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<sup>8</sup> See for example English and McGowan's introduction to *Spoken Word in the UK* (35), Novak's *Live Poetry*, or Laura McNamara's "Audience as Coauthor" for other examples.

<sup>9</sup> See Auslander's *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999); Peggy Phelan *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*; and Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*

Spoken Word is painted as the preeminent social literature that is emplaced in particular, often underserved, communities, which a number of scholars and practitioners of Spoken Word foreground as its defining qualities.<sup>10</sup> For example, hip hop comes out of a long tradition of black orature and the origin of the poetry slam as a venue for disseminating Spoken Word poetry is often credited to Marc Smith, a construction worker in Chicago, who wanted to bring poetry back from the ivory tower of the university to its democratic roots in the pubs and coffee shops of the common person (Frost 120-21).<sup>11</sup> But is Spoken Word, a form now seen on HBO, at the Olympic Games, and Presidential Inaugurations<sup>12</sup> still defined by association with underserved communities? And is it inherently more social than other forms of writing? These are complicated questions. Certainly, as explored above, Spoken Word and other oral forms of literature have deep roots in black and Indigenous literary and cultural histories, as well as, in the case of the poetry slam, lower socio-economic communities. And this is still true today, especially if we consider the myriad vernacular performance literatures such as hip hop or amateur poetry at open mics. However, I would also suggest that the form of Spoken Word itself does not guarantee a particular politics or a particular social position, especially considering its now global reach and popularity. However, that said, *Words Go Past There* will suggest in Chapter 1 that the exclusion of Spoken Word from the academy is bound up in

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<sup>10</sup> See Susan Somers-Willett's *Authenticating voices: Performance, black identity, and slam poetry* (2003); TL Cowan's *Vox Populi: The Genealogies, Cultures, and Politics of Spoken Word Performance in Canada* (2009); and Javon Johnson's *Killing Poetry*.

<sup>11</sup> In *Killing Poetry*, Javon Johnson notes that some "cultural insiders and outsiders contest" this narrative, instead citing other origins of the poetry slam (5).

<sup>12</sup> Here, I speak of *Def Poetry Jam*, a show on HBO, Shana Koyczan performing at the opening ceremony for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, and Amanda Gorman reading a poem at President Joe Biden's Inauguration in 2020.

institutional structures and historical value systems inextricably linked to interlocking systems of oppression such as classism, sexism, colonialism, and white supremacy.

The sociality of Spoken Word is questionable as well as a defining characteristic of the genre. In popular culture, print writing is often portrayed as a lonely writer vs. the page, but, in reality, all writing, like most cultural acts, have always already been social. By the time any piece of writing hits your eyes or ears, it has been shaped by fellow poets and mentors, copy-edited, touched, proofread, read aloud, workshopped, open mic'd—the list goes on. Print writers have always created in community: one need only to look at the many examples of coterie-based writing such as TISH, the lost generation's Stratford-on-Odeon, all the way back to the Devonshire Manuscript in Tudor England.<sup>13</sup> So, perhaps we can say that the sociality of Spoken Word is more immediate because it devolves to who-is-in-the-room-together-now. Its sociality is characterized by its liveness, but sociality is not necessarily the characteristic that distinguishes the mode from something like print poetry. With Spoken Word, there is an immediate exchange between the writer and the audience; however, this exchange still happens with print authors and their audiences, even if it lacks the immediacy of its performative cousin.

Despite the romanticized sociality of the term, some scholars (and poets)<sup>14</sup> resist using the term Spoken Word altogether. Damon dismisses Spoken Word as a “marketing term coined to dispel anxieties about ‘poetry’” (332). Bearder considers certain poet's

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this manuscript, see [https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/The\\_Devonshire\\_Manuscript](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/The_Devonshire_Manuscript).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, my and Deanna Fong's interview with Tracie Morris in *Resistant Practices in Communities of Sound*. Morris says, “I resist is the term ‘spoken word.’ That term – people have struggled to try to make that term a thing and I'm just absolutely not going to make it a thing. It doesn't mean anything except talking” (Morris et al. 146).

rejection of the term to have socio-political implications, writing that “[m]any poets of colour” in particular “reject the terms ‘spoken word artist’ or performance poet because of their associations as a lesser art form than page poetry” and that these titles can “serve to reinforce the ‘literary ghettoization’ of belonging to an art world of black writers” (73). He goes on to argue that “[t]his is understandable given the history of discrimination, tokenism, and exoticism that has been used to depict poets based on their colour, or their class, gender, nationality, or region” (73).<sup>15</sup> Bearder adds that casting off this label is not only a move to avoid the racist delegitimization of a poet’s work but is also more generally done by poets from a number of cultural backgrounds who find success. He contends that as Spoken Word artists move closer to the “platforms, funds, and festivities of the ‘literary establishment’” that is, the legitimate, the literary, the ‘successful’, that they tend to “reject the designations ‘spoken word artist’ or ‘performance poet’” as these labels signal they are “not proper poets” (71). Again, an example of the term’s use as a pejorative—calling oneself a Spoken Word poet or artist, then, is tantamount to labeling yourself not a poet at all, but a performer who happens to write.

Others do not necessarily disparage the term itself, but rather take issue with the reductive page/stage divide that the label of Spoken Word invites. Helen Gregory in her article “Poetry Performances on the Page and Stage” resists the dichotomy between Spoken Word/slam and print poetry. For Gregory, “written poetry is implicitly associated with the work that is taught, promoted, and sanctified through the institutions and publications of the dominant literary world” whereas Spoken Word and performance

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<sup>15</sup> Bearder outlines later that Spoken Word has “played a big role” in the diversification of contemporary poetry, exemplified by the number of diverse poets who are published by presses and win large awards such as the Ted Hughes award having risen dramatically since 2002 (73-74).

literature are relegated to the public spaces of poetry slams and events, but the “division is, of course, an artificial one that conflates many different forms” (86). In her formulation, the page/stage dichotomy flattens the plurality and multiplicity of poetic practice, and dividing poets into constructed categories is an overly academic exercise of semantics, categorization, and essentialization. However, she admits that for many the distinction between the page and stage is “undoubtedly salient,” with what she calls ‘slam poetry’ positioned “as inferior to the ‘legitimate’ art of written poetry” due to an ideological divide within academic and poetic circles (“Poetry Performances” 86). For Gregory, then, the terms Spoken Word and slam aren’t always useful terms, but the divisions between these communities and the academic and print poetry communities are real. Similarly, in Novak’s *Live Poetry*, a book that seeks to create a toolkit of shared language to discuss poetry in performance, she claims to not

assume a fundamental opposition between the traditional ‘poetry reading’ and ‘performance poetry.’...[suggesting that] ‘performance poetry’ has been revealed as a controversial concept, sometimes implying a mode of presentation, at other times a genre of writing. The clichés of the quiet, static, ‘literary’ poetry reading with no entertainment value on the one hand and the flash, over dramatic presentation of the performance poet (possibly compensating for ‘non-literary’ writing) on the other can at best be regarded as two extreme poles of a continuum that encompasses a wealth of different styles and text types, all of which can be encountered in live poetry. (44)

Novak resists the reductive aspects of labels, suggesting that not all page poets are poor performers with great writing and not all performance poets are great performers with

poor writing. Instead, she chooses to focus on how live poetry is consumed and categorized, noting that performance poetry is at times a method of dissemination and other times a genre in and of itself (44). Frost echoes both Gregory's perceived page/stage division and Novak's uncertainty towards labels noting that

there are those who insist that spoken word should not and must not be considered poetry, or who reject (even more vehemently, which is telling) the claim of spoken word performers to call themselves poets. In my opinion, this is an example of generic purism that defies logic, and yet I find myself agreeing that poetry is not exactly the right label for what happens at spoken word events. (11)

Thus, there is a nuance in the way writers and scholars approach the term—knowing that it is reductive to draw a hard line between page and stage poetry but also knowing that the form, aesthetics, and communities of these two modes of writing are not homogenous.

Another term we must consider in defining Spoken Word is 'slam.' Perhaps due to the poetry slam being one of the main sites for the social dissemination of the mode, *Spoken Word* is often incorrectly called *slam*. Some, like Javon Johnson and Helen Gregory seem to use the term slam almost synonymously with Spoken Word,<sup>16</sup> while others, like myself and Chris Gilpin, maintain that slam is not a style, but a competition.<sup>17</sup>

Slam, as a synonym for Spoken Word, is a misnomer for two reasons: (1) As noted, a

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<sup>16</sup> See *Killing Poetry* wherein although Johnson does not define the terms, he uses the word slam reciprocally with the term Spoken Word. His book is an autoethnographic account of the mode comes largely out of his own experiences as a prominent poet from the American Slam scene. Similarly, Gregory considers slam to be "representative of contemporary oral poetry forms" ("Poetry Performance" 86).

<sup>17</sup> See "Slam Poetry Does Not Exist: How a Movement Has Been Misconstrued As a Genre" by Chris Gilpin.



slam is a competition rather than a style or genre of writing;<sup>18</sup> and (2) If Spoken Word contains a number of genres and modes of expression outside poetry and into music and other orature, and a slam is a competition, with rules and parameters and usually limited to poetry or another specific type of writing (like story slams, for examples), then slam cannot include the multitude of non-poetic forms of Spoken Word. Bearder lands somewhere in the middle of this debate, suggesting that there is a style of performance literature he refers to as “Slammy” (58). He describes an anecdotal experience of a trip to Germany where he was asked to perform in a poetry slam that was not a competition and was actually just a set of Spoken Word poetry, all with a particular style (58). He offers the term “Slammy” as a way of describing this style he encountered: a type of Spoken Word poem with shared characteristics that sees consistent success in slam competitions. He defines it as: “**Slammy (adjective):** Crowd-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 typically associated with poetry” (58). He goes on to note that the Slammy is an unstable “archetype” that doesn’t necessarily ring true in real life (58). Rather, there are innumerable styles, genres, modes, mediums, and approaches that make up what lives under the big tent of Spoken Word or that can be performed in a poetry slam. While I don’t disagree with Bearder’s description of the type of poetry that finds success in poetry slams, having been a slam master in Kelowna for years, this dissertation takes the position that a poetry slam is a competition for Spoken Word poetry (just like a story

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<sup>18</sup> An assertion that in part comes from my 10+ years as a community organizer of spoken word and slam poetry with Inspired Word Café, Kelowna Poetry Slam, Of(f) the Mountain Reading Series, Milkcraters of the Moon Reading Series and more.

slam is a competition for storytelling), and slam or slam poetry are not genres of performance writing themselves.

In sum, I argue that Spoken Word is an open mode of performance literature, containing many forms and genres within it. This is different than the even more general term, the spoken word, which encapsulates Spoken Word within it, but includes a wider range of utterances and speech acts, both literary and non-literary. Spoken Word describes the range of things we do at Spoken Word events, though this may simply be marketing tactic. It is performance literature that combines everyday speech with metre and rhyme (for some), and music or comedy for others. Liveness, and the communal nature of the live events and grass-roots communities that contextualize that liveness, is an important element of Spoken Word, but as we will see, Spoken Word also has a robust artistic and social existence as a mediatized object as well. Some poets embrace the term and others reject it, but we can say confidently that for many Spoken Word has come to be recognized as a genre of community-based performance literature with contemporary and historical connections to equity deserving communities that has since become a global phenomenon practiced in a wide range of communities and with a wide range of forms and styles.

However, these parameters still pole a big tent—too big for the purview of this dissertation. Therefore, in order to narrow the scope of my project, I further distinguish between the terms *Spoken Word* and *Spoken Word poetry*, the former being a general umbrella term as outlined above, and the latter referring to a very specific type of contemporary poetry found within that umbrella term. Simply put, *Spoken Word poetry* is a type of *Spoken Word*. Bearder devotes a whole chapter in *Stage Invasion* to defining

*Spoken Word poetry*.<sup>19</sup> He notes that many terms “*spoken word, poetry, performance poetry, live poetry, oral poetry and live literature*” (his emphasis) are often used interchangeably (to this I would add *slam*) and that all these terms are mobilized by people, among whom are “differing groups, agendas, and trends that form a complex and evolving ecosystem” (Bearder 49). There are personal and political stakes in which terms are used, especially when we consider the literary capital associated with particular poetic genres and movements, not to mention shrinking funding for the arts (both public and private) as they fail to justify their value within the increasingly budget-driven metrics of neoliberal institutions under late capitalism.<sup>20</sup> Bearder prefers the term “spoken word poetry,” because he sees it as “the best synthesis in a single name” of the adjacent terms mentioned above. For Bearder, the term is still complicated: “a name that both betrays and re-presents a history of the verbal arts that has existed under many names and many forms throughout humanity” (82). He notes that ultimately, many of the qualities that we ascribe to Spoken Word poetry, could be attributed to poetry more generally (82). This, in many ways, echoes Julia Novak; however, rather than collapsing Spoken Word poetry into the genreless term ‘live poetry’ like Novak, Bearder does outline the “generic” traits he sees as constituting it as its genre (82), including: work with a “[h]eightened recognition of the audience’s role in the reception, ritual, and community of performance”; work for which performance, and the “‘audiotext’ and ‘bodytext’” are

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<sup>19</sup> Though, for him it is not capitalized.

<sup>20</sup> For one very recent example of arts funding being cut by the government, see Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts Michelle Chawla’s “CEO Letter to the Community” in which she outlines the cuts made to the CCA through the federal government’s Refocusing Government Spending Initiative. This is just one example of many and can be found online here: <https://canadacouncil.ca/spotlight/2024/02/supporting-the-arts-community>.

crucial in the process of meaning making; work with an “emphasis on reading the poet’s own work, with value placed on identity and authenticity”; a dominance of every day speech alongside often politically progressive work; work existing as part of a “grass-roots organizational structure” or literary context that seeks openness rather than elitism; and finally, work with “an innovative engagement with new technologies in the production, publication, and dissemination of poetry” (82). Additionally, Bearder posits the idea that part of what cements the definition is that many writers “identify” themselves as Spoken Word poets (83). Similar to Frost’s assertion that Spoken Word can be defined by context rather than content, Bearder suggests that it too can be defined through identification and embodiment by those who claim the title.

While I agree with Bearder’s assertion that Spoken Word poetry is a more useful and historically specific term than some of the others presented above, and while I think he crafts an accurate set of qualities that are important to a definition of Spoken Word poetry, I depart from his position in fundamental ways. First, I suggest he is wrong to state that Spoken Word poetry is a term that includes spoken word (a term he uses synonymously with Spoken Word poetry in the book), poetry, performance poetry, live poetry, oral poetry, and live literature. These terms contain too many other genres and preclude any sort of formal or stylistic uniqueness, focusing instead, like Novak, on mode of distribution. I suggest, rather, that Spoken Word poetry, though sharing many of its generic traits with these other modes, is a more particular term, which is why I have chosen to capitalize it throughout the Introduction. Recalling Larkin’s criticism of the openness of the term Spoken Word as a conflation of its present with its past, I extend this criticism to Bearder’s definition of Spoken Word poetry: despite my definition

containing similar nuance and openness in regards to form, unlike Bearder, I do not hold Spoken Word poetry to be a contemporary re-presentation of a long history of the verbal arts; rather, as mentioned, I define Spoken Word poetry as a recognizable, contemporary movement and genre of writing (like autofiction or conceptual poetry for example), and while it owes much to the myriad oral arts it is preceded by it is also unique in its current formation.

My formulation of *Spoken Word poetry* builds upon the work of the many scholars (and Bearder in particular) whose work I have engaged with thus far and can be characterized in the following ways:

- A contemporary type of poetry (not performance writing generally, but poetry specifically) for which performance is constitutive rather than secondary. In particular, the printtext, audiotext, and visualtext<sup>21</sup> are critical to the meaning making and affective experience of the work. This may be live performance, but may also be mediatized, engaging innovatively with new media as part of the production, distribution, and reception.
- Poetry that is crafted as part of, or by a poet who is embedded in, a performance community. This community can be local, as in a slam or open mic scene, or global, through platforms like YouTube, Bandcamp, or Instagram.
- Poetry that determines itself as Spoken Word poetry through a dialogic of reception and identification: Spoken Word poets often define themselves and their work as such and/or they participate in a Spoken Word community and their

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<sup>21</sup> I will theorize and unpack these terms at length in Chapter 1.

physical or digital co-presence with the audience of that community inscribes this title.

- The content of the writing often employs a public appeal or plain/colloquial language; personal, cultural or political elements; and may have a ‘Slammy style’ (via Bearder). Further, the poet’s identity is often crucial to the content, though not exclusively.
- Spoken Word poetry has long and rich historical roots in the IBPOC oral traditions, the Black Arts movement, jazz, Dub poetry, western oral poetry, and Hip Hop, and many more historical forms of orature; however, contemporary Spoken Word poetry has more recent origins in the poetry slam movement beginning in the 1980s with important communities like Marc Smith’s Uptown Poetry Slam and the Nuyorican Poets Café.

This definition is in some ways overly, yet necessarily, broad. It speaks very little to both form and content. Interestingly, Novak has noted the way that poetry itself, and what formally constitutes or determines it, is hard to define. Novak argues that poetry is “notoriously difficult to delimit” suggesting that many definitions of poetry would actually exclude much work that has been called poetry (50). However, Novak draws on the way that Eva Muller-Zettelmann’s *Lyric and Metalyrik* “overcomes” the difficulty of defining poetry by “invoking [Ludwig] Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblance’ according to which elements of a ‘family’ resemble each other by a set of overlapping features none of which is necessarily common to all” (51). Family resemblance, as theorized in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), posits that certain things are not connected by total homogeneity, but rather by a grouping of overlapping features, which they may not all share. So, poetry may have many common features (brevity, metre, imagery, rhyme etc.) but not every poem needs to have every feature to be considered a poem. Spoken word, as an umbrella term including many forms of performance and performance literature, exemplifies the idea of family resemblance in the qualities that define the genre are not shared by each piece of writing we consider to be Spoken Word. Spoken Word poetry too has numerous elements of performance, form, and content that are key to many poets, styles, and movements, for example: the list poem, hand and body gestures, heavy reliance on anaphora or refrains, rhyme and metre, musical accompaniment, fast reading style that ignores page-based cues, melo-dramatization, and much more; however, via Wittgenstein, not all Spoken Word poems do all of these things.

Therefore, to remain open to the many approaches in Spoken Word poetry, I have directly avoided a homologous, formal definition of the mode. Instead, I position myself somewhat loosely in relation to the formal elements of this term: rather than rigidly defend a set of formal qualities, or even the definition I have provided above, in the chapters that follow, I am more interested with how to approach reading and interpreting the mode. Though, I do share some of the skepticism of these terms and their usefulness, ultimately, I find ‘Spoken Word poetry’<sup>22</sup> to be a keyword with utility; that is, people (sort of) know what you mean when you say it. By focusing my work on Spoken Word poetry, rather than Live Poetry, the spoken word, or Spoken Word, I can fill the gap of formalist work done on the mode with a narrow scope in order to create pathways for future study of Spoken Word poetry, which may lead back to formal, academic work on these other vernacular oral forms. My definition notwithstanding, there is value in the open formulation of the term as McGowan and others have defined it. These many other terms (spoken word, poetry, performance poetry, live poetry, oral poetry, and live literature and others) represent genres of work that have similarly seen limited attention by the academy due to complex formal existence across media and performance. The formalist work done herein could be usefully extrapolated to include all forms of Spoken Word as well as be useful to the study of poetry in performance more generally. However, ala Frost, I am aware also that genres as complex as Spoken Word or Spoken Word poetry cannot be adequately captured in a survey section of a dissertation as “there can be no simple linear history of spoken word that doesn’t focus only on one specific

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<sup>22</sup> Unlike Bearder, Frost, and others who use lower-case letters as I believe this distinguishes that we are talking about Spoken Word opposed to the spoken word.



aspect...or present a limited or reductive understanding of the form” (The Omni 90). Therefore, limiting the focus of *Words Go Past There* to Spoken Word poetry, is a pragmatic act of scope as much as it is an act of circumscribing the boundaries of the genre. As such, I carry forward with my term Spoken Word poetry apprehensively, knowing that many may reject my construction of the term formally, historically, socioculturally, artistically, or personally, but that ultimately without a working definition of the term there cannot be a critical discourse around its form, and, as Fortner Anderson says of Spoken Word, “without a critical discourse there is also no history” (45). Without history and discourse, Spoken Word poetry cannot have the future of critical study in the academy it has long deserved.

### **Not Just Another Page/Stage Dichotomy**

In a recent interview I did with Afro-Canadian Spoken Word poet El Jones,<sup>23</sup> she told a story about her and a friend going to the Griffin Poetry Prize reading with David Chariandy. In this story, she jokes about how, at the beginning of the reading, she thought the host of the show was reading a poem, but actually they were just introducing the next poet (Evanson et al. 179). The host was speaking in an elevated tone with a slow, dramatic cadence, something akin to “poet voice” or what Marit Macarthur has called “monotonous incantation” that is, a particular way of reading poetry using a “flattened affect,” a repetitive “falling cadence,” and ignoring page-based reading cues, such as line breaks, in favour of a steady, slow pace (44). Jones’ point is not to make fun of the host,

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<sup>23</sup> This interview can be found in *Resistant Practices in Communities of Sound* (2024), a coedited collection of essays, interviews, and concrete poetry with Dr. Deanna Fong. The book extends work on the political potential of sound more fully into literary studies.

nor the poetry (which she notes is quite good), but instead to explore poetic value systems. She goes on to specifically trouble the idea that “a good poem rewards frequent engagement” (Evanson et al. 179). She resists the notion that well written poetry need be dense or to have come from a lengthy drafting process, putting forth her own writing practice as example, which does not participate in these traditions. She suggests that her writing method, which is rooted in a black literary tradition of orality, makes people angry sometimes because, presumably, writing should not be that easy to accomplish or clear to understand. That the very existence of writing that does not participate in the “Europeanized, intellectual exercise” of dense writing crafted over time, and instead upholds “ideas of improv...and ephemerality,” bothers people (Evanson et al. 179-80).

What her anecdote exposes is twofold: (1) it speaks to the way that oral cultures and cultural production are and have been historically devalued as a part of ongoing practices of colonization and white supremacy: the written word (as part of the tyranny of visual hegemonies)<sup>24</sup> is upheld over oral forms of cultural production, and this is not simply an arbitrary aesthetic choice, but part of greater cultural assimilation, silence, and genocide; and (2) it speaks to a way that the current culture surrounding writing in the western tradition (whether in institutional spaces, like contemporary literary studies and creative writing, or public spaces, whether amateur or professional) is one that fetishizes<sup>25</sup> literature, and poetry more specifically, of a certain kind: poetry that *rewards*

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<sup>24</sup> Catherine Kroll uses the phrase ‘the tyranny of the visual’ throughout her article “The Tyranny of the Visual: Alex La Guma and the Anti-Apartheid Documentary Image” when describing the critical documentary/photography work of Peter Magubane, David Goldblatt, and Omar Badsha. I use it here to refer to historical dominance of visual culture in the west.

<sup>25</sup> A Marxist term borrowed from Jones in the aforementioned interview, specifically when thinking about literary value (Evanson et al. 187).

*frequent engagement*. That is, presumably work that is so dense and layered that only upon multiple readings does it reveal its most complex opportunities for meaning. This is not merely another page/stage dichotomy I am referring to here. Rather, I mean something closer to the debate of highbrow culture vs. lowbrow culture, or modernist vs. mass culture, but with a distinct focus on contemporary literature.

Now, I have already explored above the ways in which cultural studies has moved beyond the high/low cultural divide long ago and suggested that this has not yet happened in the study and practice of contemporary literature in institutional contexts. But it is also worth noting that postmodernism, and the scholars who described this 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-cultural shift, have also rejected hierarchical value systems based on high and mass culture and departed from stable ideas of “good” and “bad” or high and low art. In his book, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992), Frederic Jameson critiques the movements of modernism and postmodernism from a Marxist lens. He describes the fracture that occurred in artistic spheres that broke the modernist inclination towards stable hierarchies as analogs of progress and modernity, in particular noting that in the wake of postmodernism “our older critical and evaluative categories (founded precisely on the radical differentiation of modernist and mass culture) no longer seem functional” (64). Jameson points toward the historically constructed nature of categories of value, and their relation to the project of modernism more generally: institutional systems of value are related to antiquated notions of high and low culture. There are certain artworks that are ‘good’ and certain artworks that are ‘bad’ and we must strive to progress towards high art, high culture, and intellectual enlightenment. A postmodern departure from these “categories of evaluation,” as Jameson puts it, is then

also a departure from the white western qualities that have seen certain groups (and their cultural works) be read, researched, and valued within the institution. El Jones puts this another way, arguing that “the very idea of literature...has always excluded things that involve youth poetry, queer poetry, feminist poetry, Black poetry, Indigenous oral traditions” (Evanson et al. 180) (to which I also add Spoken Word poetry). However, not all feel that the high/low divide has passed. In their book, *When Highbrow Meets Lowbrow*, Peter Swirski and Tero Eljas Vanhanen suggest that “the brow-based distinctions are still in place, it’s just that today we are freer to navigate between them” (3). That is to say, artistic categories of modernist value still exist, but artistic audiences move more freely between a Van Gogh painting and, say, Zack Snyder’s *Rebel Moon*.

Whether these categories still exist or not for art generally, and despite best efforts of cultural studies and postmodernism to eradicate them, these antiquated categories of evaluation have somewhat remained in literary circles and institutional literary studies. We see this, for example, in constructions of the word ‘literary’ itself, which denotes a particular type of literature that follows long established rules of craft as well as well as intellectual depth or goals beyond entertainment. We also see these historical notions of value and literariness reified through institutional canons. The works that were once part of *The Canon* (this too part of the legacy of Modernism) now make up the various canons that have come since its fall: the great works, the lucky few in particular fields, included in syllabi, conference papers, literary journals, edited collections, and onto dusty bookshelves in special collections and offices of full professors. However, although elitist definitions of literature have shifted and opened over time, DH scholar Matthew Wilkens outlines the way that canonicity still persists:

As I say, canons exist. Not, perhaps, in the Arnoldian-Bloomian sense of *the* canon, a single list of great books, and in any case certainly not the *same* list of dead white male authors that once defined the field. But in the more pluralist sense of books one really needs to have read to take part in the discipline? And of books many of us teach in common to our own students? Certainly. These are canons. They exist. (249)

So, for Wilkens it's not that there is one great, white canon that still exists somewhere out there where some books are on it and others are not anymore, but rather this has been replaced by groups of discipline-specific texts that are 'canonized' for that particular field. Of course, the conversation about canons and the dismissal of their power is not new. The idea of the great canon has long been dismantled, at least as far back as Terry Eagleton's seminal *Literary Theory* (1983). According to the canonical (wink wink) book by John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), due to "liberal pluralism" by the early 90s literary studies saw a "successful transition to an expanded syllabus of literary study," (3) that is, a breakdown of the great canon of English literature.

I would extend Wilken's argument to also suggest that if oral work and performance work are in fact literary texts (they are), the works that currently dominate the various canons of literary studies still largely do not include sound and performance-based works, and certainly do not include Spoken Word poetry. Print still dominates, and even when it doesn't, the sound and performance-based work you are most likely to encounter in the academy (your Robert Frosts, Dylan Thomases, Zurich Dadaists, Ginsbergs, John Cages, BP Nichols, or more contemporarily, someone like M. NourbeSe

Phillips) still meets the criteria of institutional value systems, is densely crafted and ‘literary,’ or, via Jones, *rewards frequent engagement*. Furthermore, the dominance of print is not merely aesthetic, but rather also deeply political. Historically, one of the ways oral cultures were assimilated and eradicated is through print indoctrination (see for example, Canadian Indian Residential Schools and five centuries of missionary work, among the project of colonialism more generally).<sup>26</sup>

In literary studies, the continued dominance of print has strong connections to canons as Wilkens and Guillory have formulated them. For Guillory, the “politics of canon formation” is tantamount to “the politics of representation” that is “the representation or lack of representation of certain social groups in the canon” (5). Certain social groups (namely women, IBPOC peoples, queer folks, disabled folks, and working-class people) have historically been excluded from the canons of English literature, and print’s dominance is part of this. For Wilkens, canonical formation occurs in part due to what is read, interpreted, and taught (249), which I add is tied to the universities and publishing houses more generally. Oral and performance literature, and Spoken Word poetry more specifically, generally fall outside those lists of what are read, interpreted, and taught. But how do we resist this persistent canonicity? For Wilkens, the way to more effectively move beyond canonical formation is to embrace the techniques of Morettian distant reading, a position that scholar and educator Barbara Smith takes issue with (65). She suggests rather that “if the offense is that many worthy or interesting texts remain

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<sup>26</sup> However, sound studies has shown us that print is not alone in the colonial enterprise. Recent works by Nicole Furlonge, Dylan Robinson, and Jennifer Lynn Stoever have explored the way that the audile and practices of listening are also inextricably bound up in ongoing structures of white supremacy, colonialism, and genocide. Stoever argues that there is a “long historical entanglement between white supremacy and listening in the United States” (2) a sentiment that Robinson and Furlonge echo and expound upon in their own ways. I will expand upon this in Chapter 1 in the section “Listening.”

unread because of past biases, then what is wanted, surely, is to have those texts read, not just counted” (65). Smith outlines that since “structuralism, semiotics, New Historicism, deconstruction, feminism, critical race theory, postcolonial criticism, and queer theory” the myriad “types and cultural status of the text examined by literary scholar *and* read closely” have continued to expand every year to include a wide variety of forms, modes, media, time periods, cultures and identities (65). Despite Wilkens and Smith disagreeing on which method is best suited to guide us out of the darkness (or rather, whiteness) of canons, they do see eye to eye on one thing: canons are produced and upheld by economies of cultural, literary, and intellectual capital. Wilkens boldly suggests that canonical formation has in fact been the result of close reading. And while I don’t know that something so complex can be narrowed down to one cause, I agree that close reading, or literary interpretation more generally can have a large part to play in which works have a seat at the table and which ones do not. Despite the evolution of literary studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through technological advancement, digital texts and scholars opening the circumscribed boundaries for what we consider a readable, valuable text, literary studies and its canons have not strayed too far from ‘literary,’ printed materials, especially when it comes to the practices of reading, interpreting, and pedagogy.

Wilkens has suggested in turn to do less close reading; Smith has suggested we do more. I am inclined to agree with Wilkens formulation of canons, but like Smith, disagree with his assertion that Morettian distant reading is the only answer, instead agreeing with Smith’s reassertion of the values of close reading. I am not alone in doing so. In *CanLit Across Media: Unarchiving the Literary Event* (2019), sounded literature scholars Jason Camlot and Katherine McLeod note the way that scholar Laura Moss has furthered the

project of diversifying CanLit through the teaching and studying of diverse voices like “Jeannette Armstrong, Julianne Okot Bitek, Dionne Brand, [and] Nicole Brossard” (53). They suggest that this kind of futurity demonstrates “what is possible” for the CanLit (a term that speaks to a geopolitical literary canon as well), and a potential way forward out of past archival and pedagogical reification of “the settler-colonial and hetero-patriarchal power structures” that have determined literary value within CanLit (18). Like Smith and Wilkens, Camlot and McLeod agree that one possible way forward to wider inclusion within literary canons is by changing what names are on works cited and syllabi—that is, by changing what works we *read* (18).

Though Spoken Word poetry and other forms of non-print-based literature now represent “a significant portion of contemporary English-language literary production” (*The Omni* 1), they do not represent a significant portion of literary canons or a significant focus by literary scholarship. Spoken Word poetry is one of the many modes of cultural production that hasn’t yet found its way onto syllabi and into classrooms,<sup>27</sup> despite its popularity and dominance as a poetic mode of expression over the last few decades (and despite the opportunity it provides for diversifying and opening the canon to formerly excluded voices). As a community-based, multimodal genre of writing, as well as a global network, so-called Spoken Word poetry, and its many sister and sub genres, have created new and large audiences for poetry and creative writing. For instance, although poetry slams emerged in Chicago in the 1980s, they are now popular in Spain, Holland, and the Arab world, as well as Spoken Word poetry featuring heavily on

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<sup>27</sup> As I will note below, here I refer specifically to literary classrooms, not creative writing classrooms where Spoken Word poetry is beginning to take hold.



websites like [YouTube](#) and [Button Poetry](#).<sup>28</sup> Spoken Word poet Neil Hilborn’s “OCD” has upwards of fifteen million views on YouTube, as do a number of other poetry videos (see Rudy Francisco’s “[Scars/To the New Boyfriend](#)” which has over two million views, and Sabrina Benaim’s “[Explaining Depression to my Mother](#)” with over nine million views). Now, amassing YouTube views doesn’t necessarily equate to generational art—if it did, Pink Fong (creators of [Baby Shark](#)) would have won a Pulitzer in 2016 for their eight billion (and counting) views (“Baby Shark Dance”). But certainly, a poem being viewed (or ‘read’) two or fifteen million times is a significant achievement in this digital day-and-age, especially considering that poetry often garners a smaller, more intimate readership than other dominant literary modes such as fiction or non-fiction. If we also consider the explosion of Instagram poets, a Grammy for Spoken Word now being given out, and [Amanda Gorman’s reading at the presidential inauguration](#), poetry off-the-page in 2024 finds itself closer than ever to the centre of the culture as a literary mode. Despite the proliferation of Spoken Word poetry and compared to its global circulation and reception, until recently there have been relatively few academic studies on these modes of contemporary performance poetry, which alongside the lack of a saleable object easily studied by students, teachers, and academics, and the limitations of technology in the classroom in showing nonprint works, has prevented it from fully entering the economies of the classroom and other research and pedagogical contexts, and therefore the various canons that constitute the critical study of literature today.

Over the past twenty years, several scholars have written about the critical silence around Spoken Word poetry in the academy. UK-based performance poet and scholar

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<sup>28</sup> See Cullell 551; Muhammad; Novak; and Somers-Willet 7.

Jack McGowan plainly notes “Performance poetry has been relatively absent from critical study of poetry and the formation of a poetic canon” (“Abstract”). Other scholars and critics have echoed the idea that Spoken Word poetry has been avoided by the academy.<sup>29</sup> Spoken Word scholar Corey Frost expands on the simple assertion of discursive lack and posits potential reasons for it, writing: “among literary scholars there has been, so far, a neglect of spoken word which may range from simple ignorance to disinterest to active vilification” (*The Omni* 137), suggesting that perhaps literary scholars have ignored the mode intentionally. Spoken Word poet and scholar Javon Johnson suggests this neglect is due in part to Spoken Word being an historically black tradition and therefore excluded by white cultural hegemony (112). I would add that this ignorance is also likely due to long-standing forms of academic gatekeeping and elitism, the reproduction of academic value and the reservation of canonicity, as well as western epistemological approaches to knowledge that privilege the print-based and the empirical over the embodied and the oral (a value system rooted in colonialism and white supremacy).

Spoken Word’s perceived exclusion from the academy and western literary canon is well-trodden area by the above-mentioned scholars and others. As recently as 2021, in the intro to *Spoken Word in the UK*, Lucy English and Jack McGowan wrote:

We propose Spoken Word in the UK as a response to the fragmentation of the current academic field in the UK, with hopes that it will catalyse a new critical focus on spoken word as a significant medium for the production and consumption of contemporary poetry...[a] driving motivation for the project was

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<sup>29</sup> See Somers-Willet 134; Novak 358; and Damon 325.

that no similar companion for the study of contemporary spoken word existed. (3)

Despite English and McGowan's very recent affirmation of anxiety around a lack of Spoken Word scholarship, I suggest the tyranny of print and the lack of critical attention on Spoken Word and Spoken Word poetry is no longer the case—at least to the same extent that it was ten or twenty years ago. More scholarly texts are written each year on Spoken Word, slam, and Spoken Word poetry<sup>30</sup> and Spoken Word classes are becoming more and more common in creative writing departments. For example, the Ontario College of Arts & Design University now has a Spoken Word program headed by Dub poet Lillian Allen and the Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity offers a Spoken Word program started by Canadian Spoken Word pioneer Sheri-D Wilson, now headed by Tawhida Tanya Evanson. I myself taught the Spoken Word course at UBC Okanagan in Winter 2023 and will again in 2024. However, the majority of these courses are focused on Spoken Word as craft, finding themselves in Creative Writing departments rather than in English or literary studies. A large amount of the academic discourse that does exist on Spoken Word and slam can be characterized as context driven or as having a mixture of historical, genealogical, or sociocultural focus.<sup>31</sup> However, one of the key suggestions of this current study is that despite the turn towards Spoken Word and Spoken Word poetry

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<sup>30</sup> Such as Peter Bearder's *Stage Invasion: Poetry & the Spoken Word Renaissance*, TL Cowan's *Vox Populi: The Genealogies, Cultures, and Politics of Spoken Word Performance in Canada*. Dissertation, and Lucy English and Jack McGowan's *Spoken Word in the UK*, which is arguably now the defining text on contemporary Spoken Word.

<sup>31</sup> See Diana Cullell's "(Re-)Locating Prestige: Poetry Readings, Poetry Slams, and Poetry Jam Sessions in Contemporary Spain"; Javon Johnson *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*; Susan Somers-Willet *Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*; Helen Gregory's "Texts in Performance: Identity, Interaction and Influence in U.K. and U.S. Poetry Slam Discourses" and many others for examples.

by the academy, and the many wonderful books that have been written (and that support the text you are currently reading), these modes, in comparison to so-called ‘page-poetry’ and other forms of writing, are still relatively understudied, and perhaps more so, poorly understood. This is due in part to a lack of formal work done on Spoken Word poetry, and, as noted above, due to a lack of reading, interpreting, and teaching of the mode specifically within literary studies.

So why the lack of understanding of a mode so popular (especially since the so-called ‘digital turn’)? Literary scholar Susan Somers-Willett suggests that these modes demand “of [their] critic a new, interdisciplinary language that takes into account the complex set of literary, performance, and cultural issues that such work brings to the fore” (134). Spoken Word and slam, for Somers-Willett, have seen little attention due to the manifold interpretive considerations they asks of their readership and critics, and the fact that those readers and critics are ill-equipped to do this work due to a lack of training and knowledge. The ways that poetry in the academy, historically, has been understood, taught, and disseminated are designed around a print-based understanding, rather than performance-based or mediatized understandings, of poetry. Novak echoes this sentiment, writing that the academy has failed to “update and adapt its concept of poetry to meet” the new definition of poetry in the wake of the rise of live and performance poetry (358). That is, literary studies has been historically constructed to engage with a very particular, largely print-based, type of text, whereas contemporary Spoken Word poetry, as an interdisciplinary, multimodal, multisensory form thus requires new ways of studying the mode. Spoken Word poetry, and Spoken Word more generally, are therefore understudied and undertaught not only due to being rooted in an oral, and IBPOC history

as Johnson suggests, but also because current methods of study and understanding of the genres are inadequate to the particular elements of form, medium, and (socio-cultural) context.

If we turn back to Jones' salient assertion of dominant poetry as that which requires multiple readings, and Wilkens' thought that close reading dictates what is canonized, it becomes clear that Spoken Word poetry has not only been excluded due to social, cultural, political, and economic reasons, but also for formalist reasons: how do you read, reread, teach, and study a mode of poetry that is ephemeral, emplaced and, especially in a contemporary context, plural in existence (that is, lacking a stable, singular text to be studied due to a simultaneous existence across media and performance)? When poetry is written down for the purposes of reading, there can be a density that does not as easily lend itself to live performance simply because readers and listeners relate differently to a live performance of words they hear/see once compared to a piece of writing that they can *engage frequently* (touches nose). So, the type of poetry that is successful in this Eurocentric, print-based context is poetry that fits this model of dense, literary work that is not always accessible to a wide audience. This contrasts Spoken Word poetry that is more oral, colloquial, and often written for clarity so that a live audience can understand and follow along without the aid of printed text. This is not true of all Spoken Word or performance poetry, nor is it true of all page poetry—there are always many exceptions (there are clear, colloquial page poets and dense, isolating performance poets). Again, I'm not interested in reifying the print/oral dichotomy, but there is a difference in how one approaches these types of poems as reader and interpreter. And certainly, there has been one mode that has dominated (*print, right?*).

When focussing this discussion of canonical formation in relation to reading practices to my own object of study, Spoken Word poetry, I specifically ask: How can we work to give students and researchers the tools they need to engage with it in the same way they effortlessly unpack “Ode to a Grecian Urn” or “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”?

Ultimately, if texts are going to be studied and taught, we need a method for approaching them that is appropriate to their richness and existence across media and performance; a method, despite great work done by literary sounds studies in the wake Charles Bernstein’s seminal text *Close Listening* (1998) and more recently by Novak in *Live Poetry* (2011), I argue is missing from our toolboxes for reading.

In addition to the long history of oral-poetic production and study in literary discourse, some of the work of developing aesthetic and material interpretative strategies for poetry in performance has already been done in tangential fields such as literary sound studies and poetry in performance studies as well as the myriad texts on Spoken Word I have previously mentioned. These fields, thanks in-part to projects like PennSound and SpokenWeb (a project on which I was an RA for four years) as well as a number of scholars working on the topic, grows each year (something I will return to in Chapter 1). There are also a number of craft-based books on Spoken Word and slam that do touch on the multitude of considerations of aesthetics and form (see for example Smith 2004; and Wilson 2011); however, these books are not grounded in scholarship, and typically focus solely on Spoken Word and slam as creative acts. Whatever gesture towards aesthetics or form these craft-based books make, it is only cursory in the interest of teaching lay-readers skills in performance poetry. These books are wonderful for studying the craft of Spoken Word poetry, but do not greatly contribute to the critical

study of the mode as a literary form or give any insight into how we go about reading in the in-depth way my dissertation will.

In my dissertation, *Words Go Past There: 'Reading and Pedagogy of Mediatized Spoken Word Poetry*, I take Novak and Somers-Willett's statements a step further to add that Spoken Word poetry not only demands a "complex set of literary, performance, and cultural issues" be considered, but also a complex set of formal consideration due to the rich existence of these texts as plural, multimedia, multitextual pieces of writing. Due to technological advances (like the ubiquity of smartphones), platforms like YouTube, and popular forms like video poetry, sound poetry, Spoken Word albums, and of course, recorded live performance, Spoken Word poetry more than ever has become embodied in the kind of saleable object that I have previously noted prevented it from wider study and distribution. How do we read and teach performance literature in a classroom context? How do we study it as researchers? Largely, with audio, video, and print literature rather than live.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, as Somers-Willett notes, a new mode of consideration is necessary for proper study and engagement: one that can capture the complexity of performance poetry not just in relation to its predecessor, page-poetry, but also as a mode of cultural production in the digital age. With a new method for reading Spoken Word poetry, not just as live and ephemeral but as a complex interrelation of the mediums of video, audio, and print as well, more interpretive work can be done in order to better understand the mode not just as a historical or socio-cultural movement, but as a distinct genre with recognizable form and aesthetic that can be studied and taught as such.

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<sup>32</sup> Novak's *Live Poetry* has outlined how one might approach studying live poetry; however, this text precludes the notion that Spoken Word and other forms of performance literature take many other mediatized forms.

But what constitutes the full field of interpretive considerations of such a pluralistic mode of literature as contemporary performance poetry? Could developing critical and pedagogical resources on these genres lead to a better understanding and thus more widespread study and dissemination in the institutional and public literary economies? How can this study be conducted without removing Spoken Word poetry from its “highly social and community-based” context (*The Omni* iv)? And further, how might work on Spoken Word poetry continue to expand notions of the literary arts to include marginalized groups and alternative forms, media, and modes of community building? In order to answer these questions, *Words Go Past There* theorizes the considerations for poetic interpretation and analysis of mediatized Spoken Word poetry and develops a new critical interpretive method for its academic study with community-based, Social Practice methods. According to Gregory, the field of production and reception of a poem in performance “cannot be understood as isolated components, divorced from each other or from their social context” (89). Therefore, I will consider aspects of form and medium (print, audio, video); performativity and liveness; textuality; as well as contexts of production and reception (such as persona, audience, venue, or YouTube), among other considerations of socio-cultural context; however, I will not focus heavily on historical, genealogical, or socio-cultural narratives of Spoken Word as many texts I have previously mentioned have taken up this work in the past. Importantly, this dissertation avoids homogenization of Spoken Word poetry and putting forth a definitive understanding of such a wide-ranging and diverse genre that extends past the keywords analysis in the previous section. Rather, in the chapters that follow, I outline the particular set of formal and interpretive considerations necessary for reading and



interpreting Spoken Word poetry in order develop a suitable method for engaging with this unique poetic mode. Finally, as Spoken Word poetry is a highly social form, growing and thriving in part thanks to the many local and digital communities of Spoken Word ‘dark matter,’<sup>33</sup> I will not study Spoken Word poetry outside of a community context, instead completing this work through community-engaged methods.

*Words Go Past There* takes the form of a more than 300+-page dissertation with an accompanying digital pedagogical resource designed for dissemination to teachers, professors, and students of Spoken Word poetry.<sup>34</sup> The objectives of my project are fourfold: (1) to theorize the formal considerations for reading mediatized Spoken Word poetry; and; (2) to develop a method for ‘reading’ it in the literary studies classroom; (3) to create a digital resource that in addition to raising the profile of Spoken Word poetry, will be practically useful in the academy and other research and classroom contexts; and (4) in keeping with the sociality of Spoken Word and Gregory’s assertion that the two are never separate, I have completed this work in an emplaced and community-based way through a Social Practice method of pedagogy, dialogue, and creation in the local art community in Kelowna, which has in turn informed and shaped my dissertation and resource in invaluable ways. This work increases resources for teachers, students, and aspiring poets, and bolsters representation for the (often) equity deserving writers who practice Spoken Word poetry or compete in slams, and with the ultimate goal of these

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<sup>33</sup> This term was coined by Gregory Sholette in his book *Dark Matter* (2010) to refer to all the non-professional artists that uphold the art world through creation and consumption.

<sup>34</sup> At this stage, the digital nature of the resource is underdeveloped, as you will see. Eventually, this open access resource will be housed on the web for free.

modes entering the canons of literary studies on the genre's own interdisciplinary, socially-minded terms.

## **Methodology**

*Words Go Past There* is a transdisciplinary project that borrows tools and strategies from several different discourses including public scholarship, sound studies, Social Practice and community-engaged research, literary studies, visual culture studies, the digital humanities, performance studies, film and media studies, critical race and decolonial studies, creative writing, and pedagogical studies. But my methodological approach relies most heavily on the textual interpretation of literary scholarship; the accessibility, public facing, and collaborative spirit of Social Practice (and adjacent fields such as public scholarship), and the multimodal, multimedia nature of the digital humanities.

In order to develop a new method for 'reading' Spoken Word poetry, my work combines literary methods of close reading, close listening, and close viewing with theorizations of what Julia Novak refers to as the "audiotext"<sup>35</sup> to which I will add the terms 'visualtext' and the retronym 'printtext', as well as deliberation upon the mediums of print, audio, and video as the chief considerations for reading Spoken Word poetry (all of which I will theorize more fully in Chapter 1). However, as we will see in Chapter 1, I complicate the formalist project of reading both through the inclusion of socio-cultural context, but also in questioning practices of looking, listening, and interpretation in the context of critical race, decolonial studies, and sound studies. Therefore, the reading

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<sup>35</sup> The term audiotext was originally coined by Charles Bernstein in *Close Listening* (12) and further developed in Julia Novak's *Live Poetry* (13). Peter Bearder adds the term 'bodytext' to this and reifies the audiotext as an important consideration for Spoken Word poetry in *Stage Invasion* (82).

strategies I cultivate herein are simultaneously formalist and deeply political in their socio-cultural formation. In addition to expanding understandings of Spoken Word poetry, my work might also expand literary discourse. Corey Frost notes the potential for the academic study of Spoken Word to change literary scholarship to a more diverse paradigm that offers a “contextual, relational, and non-evaluative understanding of literature” (*The Omni* iv). In other words, studying Spoken Word could shift scholarship away from evaluating literature based on historically and discursively produced notions of value, thus radically shifting institutional standards built on the very same outdated and inequitable systems of power that have caused its fracture from the public. Therefore, rejecting cultural elitism and rethinking the value systems of both the art world and the university could be a good step towards building stronger coalitions between the academic and the public sectors.

In recent years, Social Practice has emerged as a major field, following a longer history of public and participatory artistic and scholarly practices. Here, I mobilize Social Practice as an umbrella-term, which refers to the many subfields of socially conscious work (including but not limited to public art, public scholarship, community art, and community-engaged research) and more generally to a method of scholarly and artistic production with public, community, social, or participatory focus or involvement (whether in theory or practice, despite the name). A Social Practice model provides an opportunity for the Arts and the Humanities to reimagine their roles and functions in society. Shannon Jackson has noted the potential for the term ‘Social Practice’ to denote “the goals and methods” (12) of work rather than a homogenous form or content.<sup>36</sup> I

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<sup>36</sup> Not all agree with this open definition of social practice. Curator and Art History professor Miwon Kwon rejects this potential and homogenous formation, writing: “despite the efforts of many artists, critics, and

mobilize the unique tools and methods of Social Practice and its subfields, as well as their shared goals of social benefits through artistic and scholarly praxis, in order to both create work that is valuable to audiences wider than the university and help reconnect the public and private intellectual and artistic communities. Additionally, Spoken Word poetry is a social, community-based mode of writing. Importantly then, my methods, guided by the ethos of Social Practice (a spirit of radical inclusivity, interdisciplinarity, and accessibility), are mirrored by the open and highly social mode of Spoken Word. Therefore, it is also important that this work happens emplaced in public communities rather than siloed solely in an academic context. I will expand on this context and the methods undertaken during this phase of the project in Chapter 3.

The field of the digital humanities (DH), though not synonymous with Social Practice, has frequent overlap with practices of public scholarship as well as socially conscious research. DH has long privileged the collaborative tendencies of computer science, and the potential for open access that digital tools offer researchers. DH scholar Constance Crompton and her many co-authors suggest in *Doing Digital Humanities* (2016) that the collaborative and open-access leanings of DH are the result of the field's ability to draw on varied skill sets and different disciplinary frameworks, to involve people with different levels of expertise including for pedagogical and mentoring purposes, to scale up research by involving a larger number of people than is usual in humanities research (potentially including citizen scholars from

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historians to unify recent trends in public art as a coherent movement, there are numerous inconsistencies, contradictions, and variations in the field” (116).

beyond academia), and to allow contributors to work asynchronously and across distances. (49)

Though the theory and practice of DH and Social Practice are not remotely homogenous, ultimately they share certain goals: to foster inclusive community, to promote the creation and democratization of robust and critical knowledge, and to aggregate these actions to the social, political, economic, and environmental benefit of our lives.<sup>37</sup>

However, DH does not just offer my methodology socially conscious opportunities, but also, and in fact primarily, it offers the tools and discourse to study digital literary work. Peter Bearder notes that the “principle method of publication for [Spoken Word poets] is performance (whether live or digitally mediated by video or recording)” (56). Because performance poetry has entered the digital realm, with videos and sound files being legitimate modes of publication for many of its practitioners, it lends itself to the tools and strategies offered by the digital humanities. The study of digital texts is important to my formulation of interpretive considerations of mediatized Spoken Word poetry in Chapter 1 (in particular my study of form, medium, and the three texts) and to the case studies in Chapter 2. Moreover, in Chapter 3, I will rely on the discourse of DH to consider how to create a born digital resource—about digital literature—that will be expanded later into a website presenting a myriad of open access Spoken Word poetry resources.

In sum, my methodological approach of literary studies, Social Practice, and DH will guide my development of a critical framework for reading Spoken Word poetry and

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<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that DH has seen criticism over the years for a lack of inclusivity. For more on this, see, for example, Tara McPherson’s “Why Are the Digital Humanities So White? or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*.

Community-Engaged Research in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, as well as the creation of my public facing, digital resource, found at the end of Chapter 3. I will expand on the chapter-specific methods, as they connect to my methodological approach, in the following Chapter Overview section.

A final methodological point I would like to note is the importance of positionality to this work, the personal approach the writing often takes, and my rationale for this. In the upcoming section “Who is Your Daddy and What Does He Do?” I will position myself as a Spoken Word poet and community organizer, which is important when considering my relationship to my object of study as well as my relationship to community-engaged work. But my position as a white, hetero, cis, male, settler is also important to a number of sections of the dissertation. In Chapter 1, when thinking about reading bodies (and in the case of Spoken Word poetry often culturally and gender diverse bodies) as text, as well as reading cross-culturally, I am very conscious of my subject position. In Chapter 2, my close readings/listenings/viewings come very much from my subjective experience of these poems, again with my subject position being important, especially when reading the bodies of queer, IBPOC, and disabled poets. Finally, in Chapter 3, when approaching community-engaged work, my own relationship to community work as well as my strong ties to the local Spoken Word community and community arts organization I work with are important. Finally, throughout this dissertation, I use personal anecdote and experience heavily (always alongside rigorous academic discourse) to explore certain topics like listening, looking, and the relationship of Spoken Word poetry to the academy. There was once a time when scholars were not to use the ‘I’ in their work in the pursuit of objectivity; however, this has shifted in recent

years as the academic community has, in the wake of cultural studies, realized that objectivity or apolitical scholarship is not necessarily possible. The positionality of a researcher can be quite important, especially in certain fields like critical race studies or decolonial studies. The rise of more personal scholarship has seen the interweaving of personal elements into scholarly writing no longer be considered taboo, at least, and enrich and open the possibilities for scholarship, at best. Therefore, *Words Go Past There* takes a personal approach to the scholarship akin to many other works such as the preface to Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness* (2021), Deanna Reder's *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* (2022), not to mention myriad works on and of research creation such as Natalie Loveless's *How to Make Art at the End of the Word* (2019) or Jordan Abel's *NISHGA* (2021). Though, this personal element does not supplant scholarly discourse or fact-based argumentation, it is important to *Words Go Past There* because where the boundary of my scholarly work ends, and my work as a poet, organizer, and person begins, constitutionally blurs.

## **Chapter Overview**

### *Chapter 1*

*'What the fuck is a word': Towards New Methods for 'Reading' Spoken Word Poetry*

In Chapter 1, I theorize a new method for 'reading' Spoken Word poetry. I consider the various textualities and plurality of Spoken Word poetry, including: current and historical reading practices, form and affordances, interrogations into the complex interrelation of different mediums it appears in (print, audio, and video) as well as the textuality of each medium (visualtext, audiotext, printtext), liveness and mediatization, performance and

performativity, theories of looking and listening, and audiovisuality in order to develop my new theory of reading.

I begin by engaging work from a number of fields and academics whose work is important when considering how one ‘reads’ a mode of poetry that has an entangled existence as page poem and performance text (whether live or mediatized). To do so, I briefly survey the changing practice of reading from close reading up through surface reading and symptomatic reading and finally to distant reading and performance studies. Next, I consider form and medium as key interpretive considerations for reading Spoken Word poetry. I also survey the scholarship that does exist on aesthetics and form in Spoken Word poetry (and poetry in performance more generally), and engage work from sound studies and literary and cultural listening,<sup>38</sup> media studies and visual culture,<sup>39</sup> and performance and performativity<sup>40</sup> in order to theorize the three texts present in a Spoken Word poem (printtext, audiotext, and visualtext) and, finally, develop a method for reading contemporary performance poetry in ‘plurality’, a term I will unpack further. I will note that while many books model formal and aesthetic interpretation and analysis of poetry in performance, ultimately many of these have a print-based or sonic focus (failing often to consider looking and the body) and do not anticipate the digital turn. I will build on this work, shifting focus to Spoken Word poetry.

As is *well* established above, Spoken Word poetry has a complex interrelation of

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<sup>38</sup> See Bernstein’s *Close Listening*; Robinson’s *Hungry Listening*; Stoeber’s *The Sonic Color Line*.

<sup>39</sup> See Monaco’s *How to Read a Film*; Sturken and Cartwright *Practices of Looking*; and Chion *Audio-Vision* (1994).

<sup>40</sup> See Auslander’s *Liveness*; Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words*; and Hoffman’s *American Poetry in Performance*.



forms, media, and liveness, but how does reading the body and embodiment inform, alter, or supplement how we read Spoken Word poetry (and poetry in performance generally)? Further, how is the reading of subjective bodies also a political question? How do considerations of racialization, ableism, gender normativity, colonial history complicate this question as well as the question of listening? Great work has been done in recent years to trouble the power dynamics involved in reading, looking, and listening, and the potential violence enacted by these practices when we consider race, class, disability, and gender. For example, Jennifer Stoeber's *The Sonic Color Line* (2016) exposes some of the racial biases and difficulties in listening cross-culturally. Alexandra Vasquez's theory of 'listening in detail' (Gingell 16), Kimberly Blaeser's theory of 'responseability' (Gingell 10), and Dylan Robinson's decolonial listening (11) offer ways of looking and listening cross-culturally to creative work in considerate, and respectful ways, which is especially important considering Spoken Word's black and Indigenous historical roots and the living, vibrant cultural practices that are carried through the mode today. I extrapolate this work on listening to my own work on visibility, and specifically looking at/viewing the body. To my knowledge there is only one comprehensive academic study on how to read the visibility of contemporary poetry in performance, and that is a subsection in Novak's *Live Poetry*. This book and others will guide the creation of my new reading method; however, I make fundamental departures from Novak to develop an ethical, nuanced, politicized method for reading the body as part of Spoken Word poetry's visualtext. I will explore my own positionality here and conclude that a turn to the body can prove productive not only in our construction of meaning in a Spoken Word poem but also in how we formulate the totality of poetic production and reception;

however, as with all reading practices, practices of looking and listening are bound up in complex and unequal power dynamics that we as scholars and researchers must be conscious of. If we are to move forward with care, we must read, listen, and watch ‘responseably,’<sup>41</sup> while acknowledging our own subject position within the continuum of white supremacy and other power structures.

Finally, Chapter 1 ends with a section entitled “Reading Audiovisually.” This section brings together all of the work the chapter has done up until this point theorizing the interpretive elements and considerations in Spoken Word poetry and filters this work through Michel Chion’s theory of ‘audiovision.’ For Chion, when we watch a film, the visuals and the audio are not separate entities. Rather, they combine, complement, and augment our experience of one another not as just the sum of its part, but something distinct. Here, I extend Chion’s theory into my considerations of Spoken Word poetry, arguing that when we listen/read/view Spoken Word in both plural and singular iterations, the audiotext, the visualtext, and the printtext similarly combine to create a unique and complex reading experience.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Physiology Flutter: Case Study and Findings*

In this section, I will use my method for reading Spoken Word poetry theorized in Chapter 1 to do a ‘reading’ of a case study of contemporary Spoken Word poets. I will study three prominent performance poets from different national traditions (Canada, America, and the UK) important in the genre today, as well as a Kelowna-based, amateur

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<sup>41</sup> I will unpack this term further in Chapter 1.

poet. My case study has been constructed with considerations of diversity of gender, cultural background, content, and formal approach as well as to include poets whose work exists as print text, live performance, and mediatized performance to gain a varied sense of contemporary Spoken Word poetry as I develop my theoretical framework for ‘reading’ the mode. My chosen poets are Antiguan-Canadian performance poet Tawhida Tanya Evanson, Iranian-American slam poet Anis Mojgani, British poet Kae Tempest, and amateur poet Mark Bertolutti.

I analyze one poem by each poet across three mediums (print, audio, and video) to generate a case study in four parts. Through this global study, I test my methodology for ‘reading’ Spoken Word poetry. Here, I mobilize this ethos: rather than search for a homologous form of contemporary performance poetry in these poets, I theorize how selected poets have undertaken the genre, in order to showcase and further develop a reading method that is inclusive of the diversity of people, practices, mediums, and texts available in the study of Spoken Word poetry.

### *Chapter 3*

*Communities Are the Ones Who Know the Answers to Their Own Problems:*

*Development of a Spoken Word Resource in Community*

Chapter 3 shifts gears to the development and presentation of the digital pedagogical resource. It expounds on my use of Social Practice strategies outlined in my methodology; it explores and analyzes the process for creating the resource; and it contains the resource itself.

Chapter 3 proceeds in two sections: Section 1 takes an autoethnographic style,

documenting the Community-Engaged Research process for creating the digital resource. The resource was created through a combination of community work with the scholarly methods surveyed and developed in previous chapters. For example, Section 1 outlines my work developing ‘yoothspohk’ (sic), a youth Spoken Word mentorship that saw me teach Spoken Word poetry to both local community members and university students, alongside the Kelowna-based organization Inspired Word Café. This community work was an important context for the creation of my method, digital resource, and dissertation as a whole. Further, I include unexpected realizations about the audience of the resource as well as what it means to truly do Community-Engaged Research. Section 1 also outlines the content of the resource itself, exploring the rationale for its creation, and outlining the way it repurposes elements of my dissertation into sections of the resource. I then explore the formal elements of the resource, including my incorporation of the principles of plain language to make the document as accessible and clear as possible. Finally, I investigate the resource’s limitations and future.

Section 2 contains the resource outlined in previous sections of this Introduction. The resource itself has three parts. Part 1 begins with a basic introduction to Spoken Word, outlining its history, defining the term and the value of studying the mode, and approaching some of the keywords such as printtext, audiotext, and visualtext. Part 2 presents an adapted version of the method outlined at the end of Chapter 1 for teachers, students, and researchers to begin critically studying Spoken Word poetry. Part 3 contains a number of links and readings for teachers and students to continue practice the reading of Spoken Word poetry.

## **Who Is Your Daddy and What Does He Do?**

Finally, I think I should be forthcoming about other elements of my positionality as a researcher and my hope for the project that follows. Why should you care what I say? Who am I to speak so boldly and take such ownership over Spoken Word poetry? It is worth noting that this project is, in many ways, unique to me as a person and comes directly out of my experiences as an artist, academic, and community member. I am a settler scholar, poet, performance poet, and community art organizer from Syilx/Okanagan Territory in Kelowna, BC. I am grad student at SFU and a sessional lecturer at OC and UBCO, so I am embedded within the institution. But my primary focus for over 10 years has been to write and perform, and create spaces for others to write and perform, locally in Kelowna, BC. For over 10 years, I organized or co-organized over 500 events, workshops, and gatherings in the Okanagan and the Lower Mainland including poetry readings, workshops and training, poetry slams, interdisciplinary performances, wonderments, and concerts (not to mention institutional events such as roundtables, conferences, and academic talks). I am a founding member of the Inspired Word Café collective, and the Executive Director of non-profit arts organization the Inspired Word Café society, which provides low-barrier literary arts programming that is inclusive of and accessible to under-served and non-institutional communities<sup>42</sup> with a focus on performance, spoken word, and creating safe and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ2SIA+. This work sees me constantly navigating the sociopolitical and economic realities of equity deserving communities, working under the power dynamics of the state apparatuses to which arts non-profits must submit themselves for funding, and

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<sup>42</sup> To learn about what we do, visit <http://www.inspiredwordcafe.com>.

negotiating relationships with local collaborators. Inspired Word Café is guided by our Open Access Tenets, which were developed to help navigate the complex work of creating community amongst groups that have, sometimes, competing needs and points of access. Additionally, I am a practicing poet, Spoken Word poet, and writer who has performed locally and nationally for over a decade. I feel that as someone with three feet in various camps (the artistic, the institutional, and the community/public organizer) I am uniquely positioned with the knowledge and experience to take up this work (that similarly has artistic, critical, and community elements to it) in an informed way.

Now, in knowing that I identify as a Spoken Word poet, I hope this does not make you think that what follows is going to be a passion project in which I try to convince you of the unique merit of Spoken Word, or how romanticize live art and the ineffable, intangible feeling that separates it from page-bound writing, or that the social nature of the mode makes it more valuable and morally strong than other types of poetry. Even if there are elements of truth in the previous sentences, rather, I hope only with this project to create the tools for Spoken Word poetry to be studied and taught more easily both inside and outside of the institution. Thanks in large part to the internet, more than ever people can find Spoken Word poetry, and more than ever Spoken Word poetry can find people, get them out of the house to the slam, and get them up on their feet or clapping their hands or snapping their fingers or watching and smiling silently on their phone. Poetry, as Anis Mojgani (one of the poets I will study in my case study in Chapter 2) suggests, can be, among other things, a catalyst for change: it moves people to feel, guides readers to see the world differently, and sometimes it prepares them to transform. Put in Mojgani's lyric language, it pumps and pushes, "making you live / shaking the

dust” so that when your door knocks you “clutch the knob tightly and open on up” (Mojgani 88). With my work here, I hope to be a part of the shift that is happening in literary studies to see poetry differently, and to create the tools and knowledge to open up the formal study of poetry to a mode too-long ignored. I hope to create a new door in the dusty walls of the institution that might one day be opened.

## Chapter 1.

### **‘What the fuck is a word’: Towards New Methods for ‘Reading’ Spoken Word Poetry**

*“What the fuck is a word other than something that represents sound . . .”*

- Etheridge Knight (Hoffman 180)

In his book, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), poet and cultural theorist Fred Moten writes: “We see the poem, read it, hear it, feel it—is it, in the midst of these various experiences, the same? Does it change? Where is the poem? Is the entirety of the poem ever present to us in any of its manifestations?” (96). *Present to us*, as in the way a dream or an epiphany (or spirit or spectre) may appear before, or present itself to, us. This is of course figurative. By using the phrase *present to us*, Moten gestures towards meaning and interpretation, as well as their stability or instability, but also towards ‘seeing’, asking if poetry, in its contemporary postmodern plurality, can be *seen* (known, understood, or *present*).

I doubt, at the time of writing, Moten could have anticipated the degree to which his statement would come to represent the current economies of production, distribution, and reception for contemporary poetry, and even more specifically Spoken Word poetry. Spoken Word poems are print, they are slammed, they are read at open mics, are YouTube videos, cell phone videos, livestreams, video poems, albums on vinyl, are HBO shows, are albums on iTunes, are live performances at concert halls and pubs, are world champions, are are are are. If we contrast this to the ways that someone might have engaged with a Wordsworth poem in the early 1800s, it’s easy to see how the complexity



and *plurality*<sup>43</sup> of poetic manifestations has increased exponentially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and perhaps more so since the digital turn.

Despite advances in technology, academic research and classroom settings are limited in the ways they are able to engage with Spoken Word poetry, a mode often defined by liveness. Spoken Word resists being taught and read in some of the main university contexts (namely, the classroom, the conference paper, the research talk etc.) due to ephemerality and, until more recently, technological limitations (video in the classroom is a relatively recent development in the grand timeline of education). However, if we take Spoken Word poetry as a mediatized form, allowing its liveness not to be its defining attribute, then we might encounter it outside of the poetry reading. Other than class visits, talks, or readings (which make up a small amount of class or research time), those hoping to study Spoken Word poetry outside of the live performance can do so in three mediums: *audio*, *print*, and *video* (we might consider live the fourth medium). But each of these mediums contains within it readable elements—textuality—of sound, visuality, and language. In some ways, one could parse reading purely into the visual and the audile, or the verbal and the nonverbal. However, in Spoken Word poetry, I argue there is a trinity: the verbal, the vocal, and the visual—put in terms of text: the *printtext*, the words that make up a poem; the *audiotext*, which can include the voice (both verbal and nonverbal sounds), instruments or other inorganic sound, and environmental noise, such as white noise or crowd/venue noise; and the *visualtext*, that is,

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<sup>43</sup> I mobilize the term ‘plurality’ here in the postmodern sense to refer both to the many iterations of poetic existence (whether that is different mediums, editions, performances etc.) as well as to point towards the lack of fixed meaning. There are many opportunities for meaning based on a combination of variables, such as: the subjectivity (as well as plurality) of the reader(s); the geographic, social, cultural, and historical contexts; as well as one’s ‘reading’ strategy, to name a few.

the body, props, performance context, or any other visual elements. This textual trinity exists—though, the degree to which each text appears in a given medium will be discussed further below—and must be considered, each time we encounter a Spoken Word poem, whether the medium be live, video, audio, or in print. So, considering its multiplicity of media and textuality—that is, three prominent texts across three prominent mediums—how do we as critics and scholars take up the work of reading mediatized Spoken Word poetry?

As I have mentioned in the Introduction, there have been very few studies exploring formal and interpretive elements of Spoken Word poetry in its contemporary plurality. The studies that do exist on Spoken Word poetry focus largely on elements of craft or historical, genealogical, and sociocultural considerations rather than formalism.<sup>44</sup> However, there are works that focus on poetry in performance more generally. In recent years, literary sound studies and the study of poetry in performance have emerged as dominant fields in literary studies,<sup>45</sup> and ‘close listening’ has arisen as the primary method in this endeavor. There are also myriad texts that theorize sound and utterance,<sup>46</sup> a number of works that consider the literary reading as a sociocultural event,<sup>47</sup> and still

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<sup>44</sup> See for example Javon Johnson’s *Killing Poetry* (2017); Alix Olson’s *Word Warriors: 35 Woman Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution* (2007); or Joshua Bennett’s *Spoken Word: A Cultural History* (2023), among many many others.

<sup>45</sup> See studies from Charles Bernstein’s *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1999); Jason Camlot and Katherine McLeod (2019); Jason Camlot and Katherine McLeod’s *CanLit Across Media* (2019); Cole Mash and Deanna Fong’s *Resistant Practices in Communities of Sound* (2024); Chris Mustazza’s “Machine-Aided Close Listening: Prosthetic Synaesthesia and the 3D Phonotext” (2018) and many more.

<sup>46</sup> See for example JL Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words* (1955); Roland Barthes’ “Listening”; Jean Luc Nancy’s *Listening* (2002); Marit Macarthur’s “John Ashbery’s Reading Voice”; Tracie Morris’ *Who Do With Words* (2019) Jonathan Sterne’s *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012) and others.

<sup>47</sup> See Susan Gingell and Wendy Roy’s *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond: Interfaces of the Oral, Written, and Visual* (2012); Travis Mason et al’s *Public Poetics: Critical Issues in Canadian*

others that study the history and form of performed literature.<sup>48</sup> However, for the most part, literary sound studies' and the study of poetry in performance's object of focus is not Spoken Word or Spoken Word poetry, per say, but performance literature more broadly. Furthermore, despite a recent proliferation of video, thanks, in part, to the ubiquity of the smartphone and the digitization of older archival materials, the study of poetry in performance has remained largely tied to print and sound-based practices of close reading and close listening. More often than not, this means a focus on canonized writers or writers working in communities and traditions that align with the academy's pre-existing ideas of literary value. For example, if we scroll through the repositories on SpokenWeb and PennSound, they mostly collect print-based writers who have had traditional literary success (for example, John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, and Anne Boyer) or those who were considered Avant Garde or countercultural at the time of their writing, but have since become subsumed into the academy (for example Allen Ginsberg, Jackson Mac Low, and bp Nichol). Now, this is not to say that these writers did not have rich performance careers, nor is it to say that their poetics were necessarily mainstream. Nor is it, again, to get hung up on essentializing the binary of page poetry vs. stage poetry. But many research projects and works of literary sound and performance studies works focus largely on writers that we might call "print writers," that is, writers who may perform their work, but for whom performance is secondary to print. Further, these print writers

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*Poetry and Poetics* (2015); and Karis Shearer and Erin Moure's "The Public Reading: Call for a New Paradigm" (2015) and more.

<sup>48</sup> See Peter Middleton's *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (2005); Gregory Nagy *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (1996); Julia Novak's *Live Poetry* (2011); and Tyler Hoffman's *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (2010) among others.

tend to have literary capital that aligns with the value systems of the university. Finally, there are few texts that focus on the visual aspects of poetry in performance, let alone Spoken Word poetry. Despite a lack of focus on Spoken Word poetry, texts and research projects have been foundational in my research, and the sections that follow owe much to them.

Novak's *Live Poetry* (2011), Bearder's *Stage Invasion*, and English and McGowan's *Spoken Word in the UK* (2021) are the central works that approach the academic study and interpretation of Spoken Word poetry in its current form. English and McGowan's text is an edited collection of essays which covers a breadth of topics about the current state of Spoken Word in the United Kingdom, ranging from affect theory to geopoetics. However, with a few exceptions, the essays in this book still focus predominantly on the live, the historical, and the genealogical. Bearder's book has been important for me in thinking through contemporary Spoken Word poetry, especially as I have formulated the keyword in my introduction. However, it does not leave us with any kind of method or toolkit for studying Spoken Word poetry.

Novak's *Live Poetry* is the preeminent work done for the formal study of performed poetry. However, I depart from her work in three key ways: (1) Novak, as previously mentioned and as the title of her book suggests, is focussed on live poetry and does not differentiate between popular or literary forms of writing. My study has a narrower focus, exploring Spoken Word poetry specifically, and, rather than a focus on the live (a term I will trouble in following sections) as Novak does, my work instead focus on Spoken Word poetry as mediatized literature, a naturally easier form to be read by researchers and shared in the classroom (a space Novak is not as concerned with).

Novak does state that the “reflections and analytical categories introduced [in her book] can technically also be applied to studio-recorded ‘audio poetry’” (145). However, this is undermined throughout *Live Poetry* with Novak’s insistence on the primacy of the live exchange or “physical co-presence” of performer and audience in live poetry (145). So, though I will draw on Novak heavily in my study, her work does not adequately consider mediatized poetry. (2) Novak largely formulates her method for reading the visual elements of live poetry in relation to kinesics and embodiment, where I build upon her approach by incorporating film studies, media studies, visual culture studies, and critical race and decolonial theory into my method for reading the visual aspects of Spoken Word poetry. And finally, (3) My study also look at poems that appear plurally across mediums and performance, whereas Novak’s study focusses its readings on a singular, live iteration a poem. Despite these fundamental departures, ultimately, like Novak, I hope to “to bring live poetry into the mainstream of literary research and criticism” (14). Yet, in the thirteen years since the release of Novak’s text, it is debatable whether or not this has happened.

In the sections that follow, I begin by looking historically at what it means to ‘read’, first in literary studies and then in the context of Spoken Word poetry. Though, I do not believe it is necessary to retread further ground on how one reads a printed text, I am taking for granted the fact that the printtext, in regard to Spoken Word Poetry, is always present (whether in the print medium or across other mediums like video and audio). I theorize the chief considerations for reading contemporary, mediatized Spoken Word poetry in plurality, including: performance and performativity; form and medium; liveness, listening and the audiotext, the visualtext and looking/close viewing; contexts of

reception; and, finally, reading the body, persona and identity. In my exploration of persona and identity, I consider how the body and subject position of performers, audience, and readers complicate and augment theorizations of listening, looking, and reading, as they relate to literary analysis in terms of form, history, and greater sociocultural implications. I argue adding the auditory and the visual to our understanding of the poem in performance opens the researcher to new interpretive possibilities, which in turn will lead to a more diverse academic literary economy. However, I suggest that we must also tread carefully in reading the body and voice into poetic interpretation. Reading is not simply a formal consideration but also one of sociopolitical and sociocultural conditions of racialization, ableism, gender normativity, colonial history. A turn towards the visual and auditory then can either be a resistant act of decolonization, feminism, and class resistance or a reification of interlocking systems of global oppression.

For a given poem, we are able to read and interpret different iterations plurally across media. Therefore, my approach does not submit to a stable, primary version of a text, and rather dehierarchizes the relationship between mediums (print, video, audio) as well as the texts (printtext, visualtext, and audiotext) contained within those mediums as much as is possible; however, as a poem is still largely a printed genre, it is hard to divorce it from the primacy of this aspect. It is here that I employ Michel Chion's concept of audiovision, albeit adapting it from thinking about the ways in which audiotext and visualtext combine with printtext (though he does not use these terms) to make meaning in film. I will apply his theories to think about the different ways printtext, audiotext, and visualtext combine variously in Spoken Word poetry as well as inform one's plural

reading across media. Chapter 1 will end with a proposed method for ‘reading’ Spoken Word poetry in academic and classroom settings, with space to consider both individual poems, whether print, audio, or video, as well as the relational interpretive network created by Spoken Word texts that exist across all three.

### **Reading, historically**

‘Reading’ is a complex term in the humanities that is synonymous both with the literal practice of reading words, and more generally with the practice of literary interpretation. This section will focus on the latter. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, ‘reading’ was less about sociocultural and formalist interpretation as it was a descriptive or encyclopedic endeavor, whereupon students of literature spent their time gathering facts, knowledge, and surface level formal qualities about the texts on which they focussed in relation to other canonical texts. In her article, “What Was “Close Reading”? A Century of Method in Literary Studies” textual scholar Barbara Herrnstein Smith surveys reading practices in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, writing:

What one established as a scholar, imparted as a teacher, and learned as a student were commonly the names of historically important authors and some basic facts about their lives; the titles, publication dates, and sources—especially classical—of their major works; relations of influence among them; and the readily observable features that distinguished forms, styles, and genres (the medieval romance, the Petrarchan sonnet, the Jacobean drama, and so forth). (60)

With the advent of the New Critics in the 1930s, the new practice of close reading emerged to shift literary scholarship “from filling library shelves with scholarly editions

and literary histories to studying and describing how individual texts produced the effects that gave them historical importance or current interest” (Smith 60). Smith describes the many critical reading approaches that followed: “reader-response criticism, New Historicism, feminist criticism, deconstruction, cultural studies, ideology critique, and so forth, with many others in between” (57). For Smith, all of these critical approaches, even if they have different “texts,” “spirit,” and “discourse” (58), rely in some capacity on “reading texts closely” (57) if not directly on close reading itself as the New Critics outlined years earlier, a practice which persists today due in part to its usefulness in the classroom (59).

In the wake of poststructuralism and postmodernism, as well as the influence of Marxism and psychoanalysis, *symptomatic reading* emerged as a new way in which to approach texts (Best and Marcus 1). For symptomatic reading, the formalist aspects of the text are not the focus, nor is the overt content like we might see in close reading. Rather, symptomatic reading focusses on the unconscious of a text, taking for granted that in a text meaning is “hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter” (Best and Marcus 1). One can especially see the influence of psychoanalysis: like psychoanalysis, the surface of a person (or in this case text) is symptomatic of subconscious psychological issues (or in this case, of deeper hidden meanings). In “Surface Reading: An Introduction” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus suggest that symptomatic reading has lost relevance (2) and suggest a turn back towards what they term *surface reading*. For them surface reading is about discovering what is easily perceptible in a text, rather than the latent and unconscious. They take ‘surface’ to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither



hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through. (9)

Best and Marcus are skeptical of the potential for literary scholarship to allow us to “see fully beyond ideology” (16), and resist what “in some respects” is symptomatic reading’s “political agenda that determines in advance how we interpret texts” (16). They are aware that this may come off as “politically quietist” (16), however, they don’t see surface reading as apolitical as what has been called New Formalism, which seeks freedom from the political and the unconscious through a focus purely on “aesthetic objects and aesthetic play” (13). Evoking the work of Marjorie Levinson, Best and Marcus criticize New Formalism’s “view of the artwork’s sovereignty over itself, its autonomy from ideology” as it “largely ignores a materialist criticism that sees the artwork’s freedom more dialectically, as an expression of struggles with its historical conditions and limits” (13). For Best and Marcus (and they are not alone in this), New Formalism lacks considerations of the materiality and sociopolitical dimensions of the world a given text is born into and from. Instead, when surface reading, we approach texts with the contention that they “may conceal the structures that give rise to them” but ultimately also “wear [evidence of] them on their sleeves” (18). Which is to say, surface reading lies somewhere between the deep political unconscious of symptomatic reading and the apolitical fetishization of aesthetics of New Formalism, admitting that not all truths are hidden deep within a text, which for Best and Marcus is reducing text as “instrumental means to an” ideological or political “end” (16), but not forgoing political or ideological critique altogether either.

In the 2000s, Franco Moretti's seminal text *Distant Reading* emerged, finally, as an alternative to close reading (in which I include symptomatic and surface reading). For Moretti, and others like Matthew Wilkens after him, the problem of close reading alone is that one limits oneself to "an extremely small canon" (Moretti 48). Wilkens writes:

Even when we read diligently, we don't read very much. What little we do read is deeply nonrepresentative of the full field of literary and cultural production, as critics of our existing canons have rightly observed for decades. In the contemporary case, we read largely those few books that are actively promoted by the major publishing houses and in any case almost exclusively books that have been vetted through commercial publication. When we try to do better, to be more inclusive or representative in both form and content, we do so both with a deep set of ingrained cultural biases that are largely invisible to us and (because we've read so little) in ignorance of their alternatives. (Wilkens 251)

For Wilkens, close reading is not only an inadequate literary method, but also the chief reason for canonicity, a point, as I discussed in the Introduction, that Smith largely pushes back against.

Since the digital turn, and with the advent of the digital humanities, reading practices in the humanities have expanded. Literary studies now have the opportunities of traditional close reading and the myriad other methods of reading, including distant reading and the numerous other tools of the digital humanities. For example, Gentle and Drift<sup>49</sup> are digital tools that allow us to study the sonic qualities of video and sound

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<sup>49</sup> Gentle and Drift are tools for performative speech analysis in audio files. For more, see: <https://jacket2.org/commentary/introducing-simple-open-source-tools-performative-speech-analysis-gentle-and-drift>

recordings in order to interpret the vocal strategies of a given poet. More recently, there have also been shifts towards more collective practices of reading and interpretation.<sup>50</sup> But despite the changing practices of reading in the literary arts and considering the ubiquity of performance and digital recording technology as a mode of publication, I suggest our practices for reading and interpreting poetry as live or mediatized have not kept up.

Though the dominant method of reading in literary studies is ultimately still close reading, there are, naturally, elements of other modes approaches to interpretation in the propositional framework below, in particular, close listening and viewing, symptomatic reading, surface reading, reader-response criticism, and critical race studies, for example. In what follows, I do not strictly adhere to a formalist close reading practice in which I glean only what is within the text itself, nor is my method strictly reader-response criticism wherein I interpret in deeply subjective ways, nor am I advocating solely symptomatic, New Formalism, or surface reading in which I interpret texts purely from a sociocultural, ideological, or formalist standpoint. Rather, I am open to what interpretive opportunities present themselves in the act of reading, whether formal, personal, or cultural. Bearder quotes Gräbner, suggesting that poetry must be read “as cultural practice,” that Spoken Word

cannot be separated from other cultural markers, such as accent, background, and dress (or artefactual communication). All of these things and more come together in the body of the performer which makes spoken word... ‘an intersection of

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<sup>50</sup> See for example Multigraph Collective (2018) as well as the Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript.

social, political, and literary spheres. (76).

But, in order to get to the personal and cultural, I must begin first by outlining aspects of form. As I have noted above, there are myriad works that focus on the sociocultural, historical, and genealogical aspects of Spoken Word poetry. My focus then, in the sections that follow is on theorizing reading form in relation to the plurality of Spoken Word poetry; however, my method for reading Spoken Word poetry will naturally include the reading of both form and content. And though below I may approach the elements of Spoken Word poetry in a siloed manner (print, audio, visual) I do so in the interest of understanding how they relate to the form, knowing that none of these categories, or their associated texts, are mutually exclusive (something I will explore in the section entitled “Reading Audiovisually”).

### **Performance and Performativity**

Before moving on to describing the texts and mediums for hermeneutic consideration, I want to speak briefly to conceptions of performance and performativity. Performance as a keyword in literary studies, is often taken to mean the live reading or recitation of a poem. However, both language and identity can be performative: following work by philosophers, including JL Austin and Judith Butler, performance (as in “performativity”) refers to the way that the sociocultural constitution of the world is not an objective reality, rather it is continually constructed and determined, or ‘performed,’ through words and actions. In regard to the performativity of language, literary critic Tyler Hoffman notes the distinction that Austin and Jacques Derrida draw “between performative utterance and constative utterance”: “Austin contends that the former are not true or false

and actually perform the utterance to which they refer; thus, performative utterances perform the action they designate” (7). Therefore, speech acts are either performative (saying *I do* at a wedding), constative (describes the world, like saying *this wedding is beautiful*), or non-performative in Sarah Ahmed’s sense of the word (for example, saying you are ‘decolonizing’ while not actually acting or creating policy that does anything more than apologize).<sup>51</sup> Theories of performativity, in the context of language, have material implications. For example, ‘code switching’ (that is, the performance of different selves in different situations) can be a survival mechanism for the disenfranchised in order to negotiate potentially dangerous speech environments (Morris 117).

According to the poet and scholar Tracie Morris (and borrowing from Austin and Derrida) utterances have three types of effects in the world: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary, that is “words-phrases-actions that mean something, those that have a specific intention for being said, and those that have an effect on the person who receives them,” respectively (26). Morris uses the example of racist content in Edgar Allen Poe’s writing. Poe’s work, and subsequent readings of it, exemplify the locutionary effect of language: “Poe’s intended audience was [white Europeans] (illocutionary intention) but his writing positively affected [people with African heritage] (his perlocutionary effect)” (Morris 47). So, the words we speak (or in the case of this dissertation, poems) exist on a continuum of ontology, intended effect, and received effect. If we consider the work of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin here as well, we might also add that words themselves exist on a sociocultural continuum with the speaking subject and a succession of other utterances that have political, ideological, and historical connections greater than

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<sup>51</sup> See Ahmed’s “The Nonperformativity of Antiracism”.

simple iconography and signification. In “The Concept of Succession (Smena) in Bakhtin’s Late Philosophy,” Sergei Sandler sums up Bakhtin’s criticism of linguistic theories of utterance:

Bakhtin’s critique of various linguistic theories focuses on their refusal to take succession into account—be it the succession of speaking subjects that delimits the utterance, or the successions found within the utterance, its various dialogic relations with past and future utterances and its internal dialogic structure. By ignoring succession and attempting to reduce linguistic meaning to abstract objective signification, the linguistic theories Bakhtin criticizes fail to properly grasp their object of study. (58)

Which is to say, words are not just words that signify apolitically, rather they bound up in a greater socio-political spectrum of language spoken by a subject who is similarly historically, politically, culturally, and socially entangled. Each utterance is not singular, but as part of a sequence of other language spoken before it and future language to come after it. As such, the performance of language is not limited to meaning, intention, and received effect, but it is also socially, culturally, historically, and ideologically conditioned through dialogic exchange. But what do these theories of utterance mean for Spoken Word poetry?

Theories of utterance open the ways in which meaning is expressed by a performance poet. Poets literally perform, as in my initial sense of the word, but the words and communicative strategies they use are also performative in the secondary sense I introduce. Additionally, a Spoken Word poem does not simply present meaning, but also performs the identity and persona of the poet, as well as aspects of their

sociocultural context. Though, this is not always a conscious or strategic performance but rather an effect of speech itself. Further, identity, like the social constitution of the world itself is not fixed. Due to the instability of self as expressed by theories of performance and performativity, Hoffman questions the possibility of an authentic self in writing, using Walt Whitman as an example:

One question that Whitman's successive editions [of *Leaves of Grass*] and [therefore the] various performances of himself raises is whether there is indeed such a thing as an original, true, and authentic self, or whether, rather, identity is contingent, approximate, always a copy of a copy, a semblance of a self. (32)

Therefore, the self (including the poet and the audience member or reader) and the meaning of the poem in a given performance, rather than existing as stable (authentic) entities, are performed anew each time a poem is engaged with. I will build on the idea of identity and persona in Spoken Word poetry below when considering visibility.

As performativity is not the focus of this study, we cannot explore the full extent and complexity of performativity as theorized by Butler, Austin, Derrida and many others. I have scratched only the surface of the possibilities for theories of performativity in relation to Spoken Word poetry due to the scope of this dissertation. What is important here is that there are layers of performativity to consider in the performance of poetry. Each time a poet steps on stage they perform a new iteration of their poems, and a new iteration of themselves. Each time a member of an audience or public engages with a poem (whether print, live, or mediatised) is a new performance of that poem. Gregory sums this up nicely, suggesting that it

is not just oral poetry that is performative (and thus plural), but written work too...written poems are not finished products, static in space and time. Rather, they exist in many varied forms and are realized within a range of social interactions that construct the text differently. (Gregory 91).

In sum, each time a Spoken Word poem is presented it performs objective (locutionary), intended (illocutionary), received (perlocutionary) and sociocultural meaning through words and actions. Additionally, extralexical meaning is also expressed through non-linguistic elements of speech such as gesture, sound, and iconicity. Moreover, performative utterances are just one utterance in a grand succession of utterances with both words and speaking subjects who have entangled sociocultural and historical existence. These meanings are achieved through a totality of poetic variables, which I will expand on in sections that follow.

### **Form and Medium**

Form in poetry is a nebulous term and a “coherent definition is difficult” (“Form” 497). Form is deployed as an umbrella term in poetry that can refer specifically to something like a sonnet or be synonymous with genre (like fiction), or more generally to denote a less specific shape or context of poetry, for example performance poetry or page-poetry. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry* suggests that poetic form is that which is “not content or context; the shape rather than the substance: any element or event of [language] not translatable, paraphrasable, or reducible to information” (“Form” 497). In this dissertation, I am largely concerned with the genre or mode of Spoken Word poetry and its readable, formal elements, something (as outlined above) made complex both by



the nebulousness of it as a genre, the complexity of textuality, and its existence across different mediums.

In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Caroline Levine suggests that the contemporary relationship between scholar, text, literary analysis typically takes the form of a scholar reading a given work for both form and sociality “drawing from close reading methods to understand the literary forms, while using historical research methods to analyze sociopolitical experience” (1). For Levine, different forms have different “affordances,” a term she borrows from the design world, or opportunities for the creation of meaning, effect, or affect. She writes:

Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities. Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion. Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time. The sonnet, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or experience, “a moment’s monument,” while the triple-decker novel affords elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts. Forms are limiting and containing, yes, but in crucially different ways. Each form can only do so much. (6)

In *CanLit Across Media: Unarchiving the Literary Event* (2019), Jason Camlot and Katherine McLeod adapt Levine’s term “affordances” to thinking about medium. They write: “there are limits set by the material affordances of a particular technology or medium. For example, while one might try to capture the complexity of a three-volume novel on a three-minute wax phonograph cylinder, the medium will only afford, at best,

some very compressed and foreshortened manifestation of that fictional complexity” (2). In this example, the novel is a form, but the wax cylinder is a medium. Both different forms and different mediums have different affordances, or opportunities and limitations, that, as we will see in the next section, require different hermeneutic practices.

Helen Gregory notes that “the widespread use of new technologies has made the presence of multiple parallel versions of a text increasingly common” (91). Camlot and McLeod, similarly, refer to the way that contemporary poetry goes *across* mediums (6), that is has an existence in many different mediated and remediated forms. We see this in terms of multiple recordings of the same poem, or audio and video versions, or even different iterations of a print text. Medium is a more clear-cut organizing principle than form, though with its own nuances in terms of the materiality of different iterations of each medium (video on a phone vs. video on a TV, for example) and their relation to reality. But where is the line between the mediated and reality? Is the voice a medium? A microphone? Or is the mediatized that which is recorded, but not live? The opening lines of Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright’s *Practices of Looking* (2009) take this further to ask: “Is it possible in the early twenty-first century to distinguish between social realities and the media forms that represent them?” (1). Applying this question to the online transmission of Spoken Word poetry, I ask an altered version: *Is it possible in 2024 to distinguish between mediatized poetry and the medium that represents them?* Of course, it is. However, I think that too often we do this out of some fetishization of liveness. When we open ourselves to the fact that a poetry video is a poem, with textuality that is exclusive from live performance, audio recording, or print it leads to new interpretive opportunities for literary studies.

Philip Auslander prefers the term ‘mediatized,’ a term he borrows from Frederic Jameson, over mediated when referring to video and audio. He quotes Jameson’s usage of the term as “the process whereby the traditional fine arts...come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system” (5). Mediatized is preferred as a term over mediated as poetry is already mediated through the mind and body in a live performance. Mediatized, then, speaks specifically to the turning of that live artefact into recorded media. I will expand upon Auslander’s formulation of liveness and mediatization in the next section.

In performed poetry, aside from the live, there are three specific mediums that dominate: *print*, *video*, and *audio*, each with their own opportunities. Each is able to be performative/a performance, convey meaning, and be social. Each has particular affordances. First, print (books, codex, chapbooks, parchment, online digital publication etc.) can convey meaning both in their text but also in their material form (Levy xix). For example, open digital books might convey a sense of accessibility and inclusivity through a willingness to make that work available to a wider audience than just those who are privileged enough to go to university. Print readings allow us, in our hermeneutic attention, to slow down and focus most on the words, whereas audio and video typically do not have the words available beyond voice, and they are temporally conditioned or ‘time-based,’ if you will. Print, obviously, most adequately captures the linguistic sense of a poem, creating interpretive opportunities based on formal elements like lineation, spelling, punctuation, formatting etc. Like video, this is tied to the visual, but for different reasons. Audio most lends itself to the aural/oral qualities of poetry, both in terms of linguistics (rhyme or tone) and in terms of iconicity, which is “the ability of language to

present its meaning rather than to represent or designate it” (Bernstein 21). That is, in Bernstein’s usage of the term, the sounds of words themselves create an affect in the reader beyond the linguistic meaning codified in the words themselves. Video most adequately represents context, venue, body, and comes with the potential baggage of visual culture and looking.

CanLit scholar Deanna Fong, in her article “Othertalk: Conversational Events in the Roy Kiyooka Digital Audio Archive,” suggests that considerations of media are entangled, mirroring what she calls “the constitutive lack in the interwoven systems of cognition and social organization” which provides us as researchers a “material site to think through questions of eventness and being” (Fong 57). For Fong, form is dependent on and mirrors the social and semantic organization of the world (of which medium is a part) and provides a physical space to think through this relationality. The interactions and interrelation between different media have been called “intermediality” (Levy 102). This is the idea that “a medium’s existence and identity is necessarily conditioned by its coexistence with a range of other media” (Levy 102). Each medium discussed in this section does not exist as separate from the other mediums. The interactions of different media are what might be called a “media environment” (Levy 104), echoing ideas of intervisuality that I will expand upon later. For Spoken Word poetry, this means that one cannot study video recorded poetry without considering audio and print. Further, in the practice of artistic dissemination and aggregation (as in the archive or the blog) often these poems are remediated from one medium to another, thus creating another layer of dependence. Moreover, we must take Levy’s cue not to see media history as “a series of new technologies whose emergence made older ones outmoded” (102). This is known as

the “rhetoric of supersession,” and is a reductive stance to take, which risks at best discarding the opportunities afforded by “older” mediums, and at worst, a rhetorical form of colonialism, valuing only newer technologies (such as print) over older ones (such as the oral) (Levy 102). I will expand on the colonial potential of media value in a future section, but for my purposes now, this also means not studying only video when audio and print text are not mutually exclusive from it.

The mediums through which Spoken Word poems are performed have unique and textually entangled affordances. Caroline Levine has made the important distinction between aesthetic form and material or media format, noting that there are “different kinds of actions, thoughts, and feelings that are made possible or impossible due to the affordances of distinctive literary forms” (Camlot and McLeod 6). Thus, for example, print has the ability to play with language in acute ways, such as the use of homophones—cent and scent—which can elicit new and double meanings that might not be easily achieved in mediatized poetry. And mediatized poetry has qualities of material sound, body, and context that would be hard to capture in print format. It is important to note that Camlot and McLeod advocate that affordances “resonate relationally” across media “in a networked constellation of practice and meaning and need not be considered within a particular hierarchy or order” (3). Considering the array of form and medium, and the affordances of each, it would seem Spoken Word poetry is as hard to “delimit” (borrowing Novak’s term from the Introduction) as it’s print-based cousin. In the Introduction, I outlined many shared qualities of Spoken Word poetry and defined it without circumscribed formal boundaries. As I go forward, I continue to avoid homogenizing, simplifying, essentializing, and smoothing a genre that is inherently

heterogenous, complex, nebulous, and bumpy, instead, focusing on the affordances and opportunities for interpretation offered to us by the mode through its many possible iterations across mediums.

In sum, Spoken Word also tends to appear primarily in three mediums: print mediums (for example published in a book or journal), audio mediums (such as albums or on streaming sites like Spotify or Soundcloud); and visual mediums (such as video poems or poetry videos like those you find on YouTube, Vimeo, or Social Media, or we could even include live performance here) with three types of text: printtext, audiotext, and visualtext. Each of these mediums, and therefore each of these texts, have particular *affordances*. In sections below, I will outline the complex interactions inherent in the form of Spoken Word poetry of these three texts in relation to these three mediums. Form and medium themselves are inextricably linked if we consider mediatized Spoken Word poetry as a legitimate mode of publication rather than, as Novak would have it, simply a way of capturing the live for study.

### **Liveness**

Questions of medium are further complicated by questions of liveness when considering Spoken Word poetry. Mediatization is thought to merely *re-present* reality or the original event or artefact, but not to *be* reality—to be facsimile. But Fong suggests that media are not merely secondary to “what we call reality, but rather agents in establishing the possibility of its constitution” (64). So, I ask again, where does the live end and mediation begin? During the COVID-19 pandemic, this question has come to the fore of social engagement as well as artistic production. Are we not *together* when we are on

Zoom? Is a livestream of an open mic or a comedy show actually *live*?

The discourse over the question of liveness in performance is emblemized in the famous debate between Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan. In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Phelan posits a definition of performance that takes an unwavering position on the live vs. the mediated: “defined by its ephemeral nature, performance art cannot be documented (when it is, it turns into that document—a photograph, a stage design, a video tape—and ceases to be performance art)” (31). For Phelan, the key feature of performance and liveness is disappearance. Any documentation or mediatization of a live event renders that documentation no longer live—mediation as technology remains readily available to us for consumption. Hoffman suggests that “Phelan’s notion that performance’s only continued existence is in the spectator’s memory...valorizes the live event that she believes stands outside of the economy of reproduction and therefore possesses an ‘oppositional edge’” (28). That is, performance, in its fleeting nature can be a resistant practice: resisting commodification, resisting the dominance of the male gaze, resisting academic and public economies of interpretation. Fong nicely sums up the feminist project in Phelan’s work:

The invisibility or ‘unmarking’ of performance is given an emancipatory potential that aligns it with a feminist political project. By becoming itself through disappearance, performance disrupts the desire and appropriative incursions of the gaze—a gaze most often turned upon the female body in the visual media of photography and film. (58)

Though, Phelan’s book does a lot of complex work in terms of feminist psychoanalytical work on the gaze, ultimately her firm views on liveness are a rigid yet salient feature of

her argument, and one that has useful import for other discussions around circumscribing the boundaries of performance art, the live, and mediatization.

In *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999), Auslander posits a different ontology of liveness and performance. For Auslander, whose book responds directly to Phelan's somewhat dogmatic definition of liveness, the preciousness of ephemerality and liveness in the discursive formation of these concepts is part of a wider romanticization and evocation of "cliches and myths clichés and mystifications like 'the magic of live theatre,' the 'energy' that supposedly exists between performers and spectators in a live event, and the 'community' that live performance is often said to create among performers and spectators," which yields "a reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized" (2-3). He is skeptical about the binary between live and mediatized, or put another way, between the real and the facsimile. Auslander continues: "In other words, the common assumption is that the live event is 'real' and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real" (3). Auslander suggests that, in part, this anxiety around defining liveness and ephemerality (and therefore disappearance) as the stronghold of performance ontology is part of a greater "anxiety" within the performance community to maintain that live performance has a "worth that both transcends and resists market value. In this view, the value of live performance resides in its very resistance to the market and the media, the dominant culture they represent, and the regime of cultural production that supports them" (6). He is skeptical of performance as containing the "oppositional edge" that Phelan and others see in it, not because performance cannot be resistant and oppositional, but because he



sees Phelan's utopian ephemerality as part of a wider romanticism in performance theory. For Auslander, mediatized performance can be both oppositional and live in and of itself.

Auslander's argument explores new media technology's ability to also mimic/be live. For example, he claims that synchronous television broadcasts, though mediatized, are live (13), noting that broadcast television "was thought to make the home into a kind of theatre characterized, paradoxically, by both absolute intimacy and global reach" (16). He goes on to argue that TV dramas (even those not live-streamed) don't just replicate the "theatrical experience," and thus the live experience, but replace it (or at least equal its liveness). It isn't a stretch to see how this could easily be extrapolated to (and how Phelan could not have anticipated) social media (both things like Instagram live, but also 'not live' posts more generally), YouTube, as well as video and audio recordings of poetry in performance. Further, if performance and therefore creation of an artefact and its meaning happens in the mind of the beholder, the mediatized has a similar affect as the live. In a culture that is increasingly digitized, especially in the context of an ongoing (or perhaps not, depending from when you read) global pandemic, it is reductive to define the *live* as the *synchronous* and the *in-person*. As Fong suggests of Auslander's position, "liveness, like mediatization, is always already representative in nature" (59). Live performance is as constructed as mediatized performance. Auslander uses the example of the live TV event, which can be aired synchronously but typically contains an added layer of construction because "the programs are edited, however, the home audience does not see the same performance as the studio audience, but rather a performance that never took place" (22). For example, a TV viewer watching the Oscars or a streamed event. The same might be said of an in-person event: though considered immediate and ephemeral,

often live events are structured, managed, and in the case of something like a play or a Spoken Word poem, scripted. Additionally, describing a voice through a microphone, Auslander suggests that even the in-person and synchronous event “is a product of mediatization” (25). Peter Bearder evokes Derrida in explaining why: “According to Derrida, the idea of ‘pure present’ that belongs to an unadulterated ‘live’ is unstable, bordering on myth” (56). Even the live has been mediated by older technologies: body, brain, voice, form, craft, etc. Therefore, there is no pure, unmediated experience. It is here we can see Phelan’s purist view of liveness as flawed. For with liveness there is also a *Wizard-of-Oz* obfuscation that happens, we don’t see the editing, mediation, or construction due to the romanticization of the live moment.

The plurality of contemporary performance poetry sees the literary mode ultimately exist simultaneously as both live and mediated, with a folding and doubling effect of the edited performances that never took place and the new performance that takes place each time the mediatized version is viewed, heard, or read. No matter where a poem is shared it has seen some kind editorial intervention, and whether shared on social media, housed in an archive (or even a body) the snippet we receive is not fully what took place but rather the present version of the artefact which obscures this plurality. When a Spoken Word poem is synchronous and in-person, there is undoubtedly interpretive and experiential possibilities that we cannot access in a record (chiefly, the exchange between audience and performer, or audience and audience). Scholar Karen Simecek argues that “hearing a poem read aloud as part of a live performance can play a valuable role in a certain kind of emotional and moral activity that differs from what we can get from reading poetry alone off the page or even watching a recording of a performance,” though

unlike other aficionados of the live, she does admit that it is not that “these other modes of engagement aren’t valuable, [she] merely wants to highlight what is unique in the live poetry performance” (166). Something is always lost, as Phelan suggests, when an artefact is remediated, but in that mediatization or remediation, and in the reader/listener/viewer’s personal interpretation (and therefore performance) there is also always already perlocutionary meaning and effect gained. For McGowan, this effect is not enough, and “while watching a digital recording of a performance enables us to discreetly generate affective responses to stimuli, the element of live performance: of the body being present in the performance space, is absent” (112). While I do not share this valorization of the live, I agree that mediatization cannot capture everything; something is always lost, however, I suggest that something is not detrimental to the reading and understanding of a Spoken Word poem.

In “Poetry and Overturned Cars: Why Performance Poetry Can’t Be Studied (and Why We Should Study It Anyway)” Hugh Hodges argues that in order to learn about performance poetry, one must be immersed in the live event. He writes: “performance poetry can’t be studied by students if no one offers to make it available by actually immersing students in that reflexive relationship between performer and audience” (98). For Hodges (with Phelanian resonance) the ephemeral and the social are too crucial aspects of performed poetry to be gleaned by the mediatized. Each time I ‘read’ the Spoken Word poems I study in Chapter 2, it is both a live *and* mediatized performance, in which I am audience member, creator of new and iterative meaning, and therefore, one could argue, writer. If mediatized Spoken Word poetry is simultaneously live (a la Auslander) and not live (a la Phelan) then it can actually be studied, despite Hodges’

student conundrum. While I agree that there is a particular sociality and materiality to the textuality/totality of live performance that is in person, ultimately these are not available to students, teachers, and researchers in every context.

However, as Fong says, this unavailability is productive. She writes:

This is the critical point of every ontological situation: the instruments that we use to register reality—whether the faculties of our bodies (sight, hearing, touch, memory) or mechanized prostheses (writing, painting, photography, sound recording)—act as frames that bring certain elements of the pure multiplicity of the event into focus—and thus into being—at the expense of others. (63)

The plurality of performance (in its liveness, mediums, and forms) has many affordances, and recognizing them for the opportunities they present for hermeneutics will allow for a deeper analysis and understanding of a performed poem. Fong takes this one step further and calls for us to dispense with false

categorical opposition of materiality and immateriality—that is, performance and representation, liveness and mediatization, repertoire and archive [so that] we can refocus our attention on the specific losses that attend each medium...[and] in turn direct or script our engagements with these artifacts when we encounter them.

Dispensing with these binaries helps us understand how temporal-media artifacts make evental sites that open onto the void or gap that exists in every structured situation. (63-4)

The affordances of different forms and medium, the live and the mediatized, then create opportunities for meaning due to how the reader interact with them. Therefore, there are three ways I will push back against the live/mediatized binary, in favour of an approach

that sees the opportunities and limitations in each, or, put another way, sees the liveness of mediatization and the mediatization of liveness: (1) Liveness is a complicated formation that creates an unproductive binary between that which is in-person and synchronous and that which is mediated and asynchronous; (2) Despite this, the in-person and synchronous themselves have different affordances for performative interpretation than the asynchronous and mediatized; and (3) defining liveness is not the goal so much as interpreting the product of that liveness and its entanglements with form and medium.

For some, this is and will be inadequate for the study of Spoken Word poetry and performance more generally. McGowan states:

The sharing of recorded spoken word through platforms such as YouTube provides a site for engagement with a performance that is fixed, ticking the box as a ‘type’ for shared analysis. However, while we can and do experience affective intensities through viewing spoken word performances online, something is lost in the transition from an experience of live performance to digital consumption.

(112)

Novak’s view of liveness aligns with McGowan here as do many other writers of Spoken Word<sup>52</sup> and performance literature. She argues that in mediation there is a “problematic in view of what [a medium] cannot record, as their perspective is limited...the performance and its recording are never the same thing” (63). Her approach very much keeps in line with Phelan’s notion of performance as live and ephemeral—disappearance is key, and video doesn’t fully capture what wishes to disappear. Though, interestingly, she later notes that the best way to study the sonic and visual elements of live poetry is

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<sup>52</sup> Others like McNamara (156) and Simecek (166) similarly fetishize the liveness of Spoken Word poetry.

though audio and video recording (170); for Novak, these are merely ways to accompany the live study of poetry, and work against its ephemerality. The live is always the primary text one is hoping to study. And while I appreciate her championing of live poetry, her scope is ultimately to the detriment of her study, flattening the plurality of performance poetry and ignoring the interrelation of form and media—though in her defense, arguably the internet, and performance poetry’s use of digital modes of distribution, was not as robust in 2011 when this book came out. For Novak, like Phelan, liveness is “relatively simple,” defining it as a performance “given in front of an audience, rather than being recorded and then broadcast or show in a film” (49). Novak doesn’t really move to unpack this term. She takes it as self-evident. However, in a footnote, Novak also references Philip Auslander’s assertion that even live events are the product of mediation. For a book called *Live Poetry*, this is somewhat of an oversight. Why wouldn’t Novak more clearly define her stance in relation to the live? On one hand, it seems like she is referring to the live as something that is in person, or where the “audience...is physically present” (49). However, with the reference to Auslander, it feels like she is gesturing towards the fact that live poetry can be recorded and still be live. She doesn’t really say this though, or anything close to it, instead assuming her readers know what she means when she says live. Including the mediatized in the discourse of performance poetry is important because the “viral reach of poetry on YouTube seems likely to have surpassed physical footfall to spoken word events” (Bearder 14). Further, as someone who has produced, organized, hosted, or performed in more than 500 events in my life, I don’t disagree with McGowan and Novak that there are qualities unique to the live performance of poetry. And while I am inclined to agree with Auslander and Derrida’s

formulation of the live as mythological or another version of mediation, there is truth in the idea that liveness itself is an antecedent to an increasingly mediated, monitored, and controlled digital world. However, in this work I attempt to be pragmatic about not only the world we live in, but the world we teach and study in. This study has limited itself to that which we can more easily teach and study so that we might do that canonical work of reading Spoken Word texts. And while it would be lovely to bring in a Spoken Word artist every time we want to read, teach, or engage with the genre, this isn't possible. As teachers and readers in the daylight hours, all we are left with is the mediated. So, I approach my work embracing the digital rather than casting it aside. The live is one of mediums contemporary Spoken Word poetry appears in; each medium has unique affordances, all of which are worth considering. Liveness is certainly a crucial element of the study of Spoken Word poetry, even if my object of study is not the traditionally live (a la Phelan) but the mediatized live (a la Auslander).

### **Listening**

“Are you Listening, Kenzie?” A phrase I find myself asking my, at the time of writing the first draft of this section, 8-year-old daughter, Mackenzie, almost daily. She listens like an 8-year-old: rarely responding, annoyed when she does, eyes on her phone or *Full House* reruns (a favourite in our house). “Yes,” she replies, hand-gestures waving, demonstrably annoyed. “Are you?” I reply. My rhetorical tone has the resonance of my own mother here, that makes me feel uncomfortable. Though, we may look like this relative or that, don't we often end up sounding like our parents—even absent ones. I tell Mackenzie that it doesn't seem like she's listening. “You said after this episode I have to

clean my room,” she mocks the way I said it slightly. I get it—I hate anyone telling me what to do for any reason. Finally, I reply: “You *heard* me, but you aren’t *listening*. How do we show people we are listening?” This is something they are taught in school, so I try to bring it back to what she knows. After this she (more annoyed now) goes through the motions of how we show someone we are listening: *we turn towards them, we look at them instead of the TV, and we show them we are listening by responding.*<sup>53</sup>

Theorist Roland Barthes puts this distinction between hearing and listening another way: “Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act” (245). In short, listening is not the passive act of hearing with the ears, but rather an interpretive action which engages each participant physically and metaphysically. French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy makes a similar distinction between *hearing* and *understanding* with the sort of double meaning the French language allows through his usage of the word “entendre,” which means “both to hear and to understand” (xi). Thus, according to Nancy, hearing is an act done with the ear (aural) whereas listening is embodied; it requires the body’s attention to another body in space (echoes of relational aesthetics here). A speaking body is not simply speaking (text) but engaging in a number of other paralinguistic aspects of communication such as sound, gesture, and con(sub)text that in order to understand what that body is vocalizing, one must pay attention to. *Listening* is thus a form of *reading*.

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<sup>53</sup> Since initially writing this, Mackenzie has been diagnosed with Epilepsy and Autism. I have been more closely connected to the ways that listening, viewing, and reading are practices that are easily accessible for neurotypical and able-bodied people; however, I question how accessible or homogenous these practices are for neurodiverse and disabled people. In future iterations of this project, I think access might be a more prominent consideration. I think too that my expectations for how she should be listening, in the light of the clarity offered by her diagnosis, were ableist.



Since the sonic turn,<sup>54</sup> sound studies has reconceived theorizations of sound and listening in particular in order “to denaturalize hearing and reconceive listening practices as historically contingent, material, and social techniques” (McEnaney 84). Which is to say, prior to the sonic turn, the phenomena of sound and the act of listening were thought of as naturalized and unchanging, rather than shaped by historical, cultural, and social factors. Sound was simply heard or encountered, and not read. The voice communicated words, but the sound of the voice was nothing more than “a ‘surplus’ or a boundary against which signification was defined” (McEnaney 82). Jonathan Sterne reminds us that

Sounds are defined as that class of vibrations perceived—and, in a more exact sense, sympathetically produced—by the functioning ear when they travel through a medium that can convey changes in pressure (such as air)... We are thus presented with a choice in our definition: we can say either that sound is a class of vibration that might be heard or that it is a class of vibration that is heard, but, in either case, the hearing of the sound is what makes it. My point is that human beings reside at the center of any meaningful definition of sound... As part of a larger physical phenomenon of vibration, sound is a product of the human senses and not a thing in the world apart from humans. (11)

In Sterne’s denaturalized (albeit anthropocentric) formation, hearing is what creates sound. Sound exists as vibrations in the world, but without the human to perceive it, it

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<sup>54</sup> Refers to a shift around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century away from the dominance of visual culture and towards studying sound, not simply as adornment to language, but as its own material object. For more, see Jim Drobnick’s *Aural Cultures* (2004) and Tom McEnaney’s “The Sonic Turn” as well as foundational texts such as Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past* (2003).

does not exist. Sterne anticipates that this “read like an argument that falling trees in the forest make no sounds if there are no people there to hear them” but for him, whether it is a human or a squirrel or another tree, if another living creature does not perceive the vibrations created by the falling tree, it is outside of our definition of sound (12). There are also, as Sterne points out in *The Audible Past* (2003), sounds that we do not hear with our human ears (12). They exist and materially engage with us, though we cannot hear them. Of the sounds we do hear, it is in the act of listening that creates meaning in these sounds. If we played a poetry recording to a dog or a bird, for example, they may know it is a human voice (though they may not) but they would not have the social, cultural, and historical context nor the linguistic knowledge to make sense of the linguistic elements of sound (though maybe a scream may be recognized as more severe than a laugh). Sound has thus been formulated by scholars in a way that “acknowledges the performative character of culture without concealing the felt reality of material life” (McEnaney 84). That is, sound is created in the act of hearing, but the hearing subject experiences sound both literally and figuratively. This is important for my study: when considering the audiotext, we are not simply writing about the way that sound contributes to or complements the meaning of words—this would be an easy trope to fall into that reifies the dominance of the printed text in literary study—but rather we are also acknowledging the materiality of sound and iconicity of voiced words. In engaging with an audiotext, we are listening (reading) to both the words conveyed by the voice but also the meaning conveyed in the sounds of the voice or other potential producers of sound in a poem (whether of the body, like fingers snapping, environmental, or mechanical).

In his article “The Sonic Turn,” Tom McEnaney gestures towards the way that the study of sound, historically, was reduced to its function in speech as merely an adornment to words. McEnaney argues “if one wants to analyze sound and listening in printed texts, audiobooks, radio broadcast plays, tape-recorded poetry, or other objects, literary or not, simply calling those sounds the “grain,” “envelope,” and the other host of keywords doesn’t get one very far” (81). By “grain” or “envelope” he gestures toward Roland Barthes’ theorization of sound functioning as a complementary or supplementary to the words these sounds espouse. For McEnaney, material sound, in a literary context, does not take a back seat to the words of a given text. Sound is a material force in its own right, outside of its potential as a signifier. It is therefore important to treat listening not just as the naturalized term hearing, but both as a deeply political act of interpretation as well as a physical act in which affects are created in the body of the listener as it encounters sound’s vibrational material existence. McEnaney refers to Katherine Bergeron, who uses the example of the reading aloud of a Rimbaud poem. When the poem is sounded, it becomes clear that the reference towards singing in the poem also connects to the fly buzzing which also connects to the songlike way the poem is read. The content of the timbre of the voice produces “an audiovisual experience through the semantic content of printed words that draw attention to the meaningful sonorities of spoken speech” (83). In hearing the poem read aloud, we are both able to understand Rimbaud’s poem at “the level of content and embodied performance” but also, McEnaney suggests, it illuminates the sonic qualities’ of voice’s shift “from grain to timbre, or from the merely material to the material-symbolic property of sound” (83). In

poetry, then, the materiality of sound also has symbolic qualities. Interpretation is not a neutral act—hearing, then, was always already a political sense rather than a natural one.

The political nature and potential of sound, and its obfuscation by the historical naturalization of sound and listening, has been well theorized by scholars such as Brandon Labelle, Jennifer Lynn Stoever, Nina Sun Eidsheim, and Dylan Robinson among others. In her book, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (2016) Stoever writes: “[w]illful white mishearings and auditory imaginings of blackness— often state sanctioned— have long been a matter of life and death in the United States” (1) She goes on to elaborate, citing the sonically informed killings of Jordan Davis and Sandra Bland (2). In his book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (2020), xwélmexw scholar Dylan Robinson also implicates the historical violence of listening as part of greater structures of colonialism: “It is an understatement to say that this hunger for resources has not abated with time. xwelítém hunger may have begun with gold, but it quickly extended to forests, the water, and of course the land itself. In the twentieth century the hunger has grown for Indigenous artistic practice,” specifically, music and oral performance (49). The sounds of equity deserving peoples are a way they have been, and continue to be, controlled and subjugated by those in positions of power.

Historically, especially black and Indigenous bodies in the art and performance worlds have been censored, silenced, and appropriated through structural racism. This exists in overt ways in such traditions as Vaudeville, minstrelsy, ragtime, “black voice” (Stoever 9), but also in covert ways such as cultural appropriation, microaggressions, and systemic white privilege (for instance, the whiteness of university syllabi). For a literary

example, at a reading at Asilomar in 1964, the first question poet Amiri Baraka is asked following his performance is if he is influenced by Allen Ginsberg (“From a reading”). Not about his own practice, but about the practice of a Caucasian man. The implication is that because of “Howl,” Ginsberg is primary in the culture of oral poetry. But a question like this erases a centuries-long history of black orature and cultural production. Studies such as Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People* (1963) and Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003) and Tyler Hoffman’s *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (2011) among others, explore the complex cultural, political, aesthetic, and historical trajectories of poetry in performance, and reinscribe some of the silenced black experience and history back into those narratives. Many other studies have been done on the complex socio-political existence of literary communities of sound such as Susan B.A. Somers-Willett’s *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (2009), Urayoán Noel’s *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam* (2014), and Patricia Herrera’s *Nuyorican Feminist Performance: from the Café to Hip Hop Theater* (2020), including my previously mentioned co-edited collection with Dr. Deanna Fong *Resistant Practices in Communities of Sound* (2024). I will engage some of them here, but my study will not retread this ground.

Despite IBPOC people(s) and artists having been the leading cultural contributors in orature, in the western artistic world the ‘tyranny of the page’ has dominated post-enlightenment literary production and sanitized historical narratives around oral poetry as part of a wider system of power, colonialism, and genocide. Literary critic Michelle Levy notes the way that “a prejudice against cultures without written history that is still

very much with us” citing court documents from the famous *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* case in which the crown flatly claims that Wet’suwet’en people have no history, culture, “no written language, no horses or wheeled vehicle” (103). Levy suggests the way that narratives of technological progress like the one rehearsed in this court document is part of the aforementioned notion of technological “supersession” (102). Gender and women’s studies critic Susan Gingell explains that this has been a problem as long as colonization has been going on: “Most of the time, these anthropologists published the results in print form, sometimes—as in Franz Boas’s case—as edited or rewritten summaries, thereby creating a large archive of textualized orature” (25). The historical dominance of print culture and “the hegemony of [visual culture]” was and is bound up in the white western hegemony of looking and print culture (Sterne 7). Camlot and McLeod speak to the way that “structures of media and archivization” have “refused” or silenced voices historically based on “race, gender, sexuality, class, or mobility” (17). So, the historical dominance of print and subsequent erasure of marginalized voices from literary and cultural history and archives is part of the veiled white supremacy of which Tracie Morris writes (and I referenced in an earlier section).

Power inequity in literary studies has not stopped at print. Sound studies has arisen out of a discursive “turn away from the visual” (Gingell 28), which led to a focus on the aural/oral aspects of poetry in a literary context. The work of literary sound studies on performed, sounded, and archival poetry has been foundational in my own work. However, the turn towards literary audio, and therefore to the aural/oral, has perhaps been an example of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater.’ Despite the best

intentions, and much great work on oral and performance poetry, literary sound studies and audio archives like PennSound, SpokenWeb, and UBUWeb, still largely focus on and collect work from white, male, western poets, and poets who come from print and/or ‘literary’ traditions. Though, in the case the of the latter digital archives, the goal is to foreground poetry in performance rather than poetry in print—which is a radical endeavour in and of itself—they are also inadvertently reifying the dominant modes of production in two ways: (1) Through a focus largely on authors from literary and print traditions performing their work (again, often white and male); and (2) Through a focus on listening to performed work rather than also looking at the visual elements of performance, which might open these archives up to work, like Spoken Word poetry, for which the body is a constitutive site of meaning. Camlot, who is the PI on SpokenWeb, and McLeod ask: “Did new media broadcast the same voices as had already been captured on the page? In other words, did new media simply replicate the settler-colonial and hetero-patriarchal power structures that largely determined what was published as CanLit?” (17). In short, yes, they did, and yes, they still do, despite efforts to also foreground equity deserving voices. However, I do not believe Camlot and McLeod see a focus on print poets in performance by literary sound studies as part of this erasure, but rather a radical step in revaluing poetic orality. They are very carefully and consciously thinking through the ethical implications of listening, emphasizing that “all structures of listening, whether interpersonal, institutional or mediated are also configurations of power” (19) and therefore practices of listening, reading, and viewing too have power relationships that cannot be ignored. In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson similarly affirms the power inequity in Eurocentric listening practices, glossing Gustavus Stadler’s “On

Whiteness and Sound Studies,” in order to suggest there is a lack of diversity “in the emerging canon of sound studies” and, via Stadler, calls for scholarship to be more cognisant of the “underlying whiteness” of sound studies (9). In turn, I suggest this whiteness is apparent not only in the listening practices that constitute literary sound studies and are practiced by adjacent sound archives, but also in the types of poetry they study, collect, and instantiate. Or rather, those they do not (that is, Spoken Word poetry and similar vernacular oral forms). This is not to say Spoken Word poetry, or diverse bodies, are totally absent from literary sounds studies or adjacent archives. Camlot and McLeod’s *Canlit Across Media* has an early version of Nisga’a writer and performer Jordan Abel’s NISHGA and SpokenWeb has digitized the “Words and Music Show fonds” (a collection of recordings from the baby of the late and great Montreal Spoken Word poet Ian Ferrier, The Words and Music Show, which has long been a haven for Spoken Word poetry in Canada), the Hartmut Lutz Collection (a collection of readings by and interviews with Indigenous artists and writers), and recordings from diverse voices like Roy Kiyooka, Fred Wah, and Daphne Marlatt (“Collections”). Similarly, PennSound has the work of Spoken Word and sound poets like Tracie Morris and other diverse voices (“Authors”). However, the lion’s share of the work featured on these archives is that of ‘literary’ print poetry in performance rather than Spoken Word or other oral forms, and work by white, male writers. I know from my time at SpokenWeb as an RA that there is a push to foreground some of the more diverse voices in the archives than have been digitized thus far, which will continue to grow and enrich that project’s collection.

Listening, and who we choose to listen to (and in the case of Spoken Web and



Pennsound, who we make available for listening by others) are deeply political acts both inside and outside of literary studies. Stoever offers us a way of understanding how we are ideologically conditioned to listen. Her concepts of the *listening ear* the *embodied ear* expose how racialized sonic power relations still persist today, noting that “individuals’ listening practices are shaped by the totality of their experiences, historical context, and physicality, as well as intersecting subject positions and particular interactions with power” (15). Stoever gives the example of how a footstep outside a window is heard differently by a man, by a woman, by a black woman because of the whole of their experiences and the power dynamics they are embedded within (15). Sterne echoes Stoever’s exploration of the subjectivity and power dynamics at play in listening, suggesting that the same sound can be heard disparately by different people in a range of contexts (9). So, sound and our experiences of it in the world, as both makers and listeners of sound, are not only political but deeply dependent on our subject position. This is exemplified by Nina Sun Eidsheim’s exploration of the “acousmatic question” (3) in her book *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (2018). She notes that when a listener has no visual referent for a voice (for example on the phone or when listening to music) they inevitably ask the question, *who is speaking?* This question causes listeners to interpret voice based their own experiences in the world and preconceived notions about who someone is based on the particularities of the sounds they make. We might assume that someone is from a particular cultural background because of their accent or other sonic qualities of voice. Eidsheim states that

We ask the acousmatic question because it is not possible to know voice, vocal

identity, and meaning as such; we can know them only in their multidimensional, always unfolding processes and practices, indeed in their multiplicities. This fundamental instability is why we keep asking the acousmatic question. (3)

She suggests that although certain vocal qualities may seem natural, and therefore easy to associate with particular people or groups, they are actually socially produced. Interpreting literary sound, then, is a deeply political act, and one that must be approached with ethics and care as we carry within ourselves a set of biases and assumptions based on our subject position.

Unethical listening across uneven power dynamics can be a violent undertaking. Robinson's concept of *hungry listening* considers listening as an extractive, settler colonial act. But hungry listening is not merely "irreducible to racial identity" but rather is a settler colonial form of perception that can affect all who live under capitalism (3). So 'hungry Listening' is an extractive form of listening that results in the appropriation and oppression of marginalized cultures and their artistic production. It is a form of listening that does not consider people or artefacts on their own terms, only colonial terms (imbued within the individual listener) and seeks to consume indiscriminately. Robinson illustrates this masterfully with his opening gesture of having a section of his book's introduction, which, he says, only other Indigenous people are allowed to read. There is nothing stopping settler readers from reading it except his directions. The choice is then up to us as settlers to engage (extract) or to move past our colonial need to 'consume.' What he illustrates here is the colonial desire (by settlers) to still read this section, even though it has been said that it is not for us. Some things aren't to be read (and therefore listened to or viewed) by certain groups because those groups can only

listen, read, view from their own subject position, which is historically and culturally informed. Not *everything* belongs to *everyone*. Put differently, not every *sound* is for every *ear*.

Thus, when approaching listening to literary audio in regard to Spoken Word poetry, I do so with a sense of care. I do so with an admission of my positionality, and the always political nature of how I listen (as a white, male, hetero, cis, settler scholar) in relation to who I listen to. I will also return to the ideas introduced here when thinking about looking in the section: “The Subjective Body: Persona, Identity, and ‘Reading’ Response-ably.” Now that I have considered listening itself, what is the text that one listens to when reading Spoken Word poetry in plurality? In the section that follows, I will explore that which we listen to: the *audiotext*.

### **Close Listening and the Audiotext**

Our primary method for the interpretation of the audile aspects of Spoken Word poetry is, of course, literary close listening. This is the act of closely ‘reading’ literary or cultural audio, considering elements such as voice, sound, form, content, sociality, historicity, and more. Close listening occurs through an exchange between the author (reader, speaker), the text they perform, and the reader (listener), who, as an interpreter, creates the meaning of a text anew, within us, each time we read it. And as established above, this exchange is a political one: hearing is not natural; listening is always a social, and therefore politicized, act. But what is the audiotext? When reading the audiotext of a Spoken Word poem, what are we listening *to* and what are we listening *for*?

The audiotext in contemporary Spoken Word poetry appears prominently in many

formats and mediums. Most eminently, we have the Spoken Word album or studio-style audio recordings found on CD, cassette, mp3, vinyl, or streamed both from music streaming sites, like Apple Music or Spotify (or media platforms that have waned in popularity and usage such as Myspace), as well as personal websites, and alternative platforms such as Soundcloud. Video recordings also have an audiotext and can be found on sites and apps like YouTube, Button Poetry, TikTok, Instagram (Reels), as well as a handful of tv streaming apps.<sup>55</sup>

But the audiotext should not be conflated with the mediums it appear on. A record contains an audiotext, but it is not *the* audiotext. Just like a book contains a printtext, but it is not *the* printtext. The audiotext, the printtext, and the visualtext (the latter of which I theorize in the next section) are the linguistic, audile, and visual textures available for interpretation in a given poem in a given medium. Further, each of the main mediums that Spoken Word poetry can be found in (live, video, audio, print) have varying elements of printtext, audiotext, and visualtext. For example, a Spoken Word poem that is an audio track on a streaming service has an album cover, a visual image present during a reading of the mediatized text. Video has sonic and print-textual elements, whether that is feedback from the mic or a logo in the background of a performance. The same goes for the print medium, which often has a cover or an author photo (visualtext), and which in the words themselves will carry sonic elements of ‘voice’ such as dialect, syntax, and rhythm.

Like mediums themselves, each particular audio format will have slightly

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<sup>55</sup> For example, HBO’s *Def Jam Poetry* (which can be found on HBO Max) and Inspired Word Café’s Shaw TV Show that ran for 3 seasons in Kelowna (which is in syndication on Shaw Kelowna or can be found on YouTube), on which I was one of the hosts and producers.

different affordances. While Vinyl would have the highest fidelity, cassette, CD, Mp3, and audio streaming platforms would likely have a similar quality of sound but could be accessed from almost anywhere, whereas a record player is more stationary. Plausibly, the physical speakers through which we listen would also affect the qualities of sound (for example phone speakers vs. a home stereo system vs. headphones). Though, it is doubtful that one's listening experience would vary so greatly as to have a substantially different reading of the poem from speaker to speaker, a fact that may speak to the verbal primacy that still exists in Spoken Word poetry: the sonic fidelity of a small vocal cue is likely not as important to the meaning or affect of a poem as simply hearing the words spoken. However, on the other hand, likely listening to a studio recorded audio text on a 10-year-old, blown cell phone speaker on low volume vs. listening on professional speakers or high-quality headphones would certainly affect the clarity with which you could hear both the verbal and nonverbal sounds present.

The primary sounds available to us in the study of the audiotext in Spoken Word poetry are *voice*, *mechanical sound* (such as music), and *environmental sounds* (such as audience members talking or a car driving by a venue on the recording but also the environmental sounds in your reading context, like my son Cedar watching YouTube right now in the bedroom with me while I write).<sup>56</sup> In regard to voice, evoking Russell Thompson, Novak makes the important distinction between “*verbal* and *nonverbal* elements” of voice. Put differently, this refers to the linguistic aspects of voice (words, speech acts, verbally signifying sounds) and the paralinguistic or extralexical aspects of

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<sup>56</sup> While voice is a given when considering the audiotext of Spoken Word poetry, “mechanical sound” and “environmental sound” are terms outlined by Novak in *Live Poetry* in the section “Non-verbal Sounds” (82).

voice (pitch, timbre, volume, etc.). Bernstein does not distinguish between nonverbal sounds that are intentionally part of the poem and those which are simply a fact of the performing body (as a medium itself). He writes of the latter that they “may be highly artful [or] they may also fall into the body’s rhythms – gasps, stutters, hiccups, burps, coughs, slurs, microrepetitions, oscillations in volume, ‘incorrect’ pronunciations, and so on – that is, if you take these elements to be semantic features of the performed poem, as I propose, and not as extraneous interruption” (13-14).<sup>57</sup> There are rich studies being done with the paralinguistic aspects of voice in the digital humanities using digital tools. Most notably, Marit Macarthur’s work with the tools “Gentle” and “Drift,” which she uses to study the sonic qualities of video and sound recordings in order to interpret the vocal strategies of a given poet. Macarthur states that “[p]itch and pitch range, intonation patterns, volume/intensity, speaking rate/tempo, rhythm, stress/emphasis, vocal timbre — such paralinguistic features affect our experience and interpretation of a performed poem” (“Introducing Simple”). So, even though we don’t assess the importance of these elements to meaning and affect in the same way we might a story arc or a rhyme, we are taking in the nonverbal elements of voice, and these elements affect our perception and reading of a Spoken Word poem.

In addition to verbal and nonverbal sound, Charles Bernstein distinguishes between the *orality* and the *aurality* of the audiotext. He suggests that the “audiotext might be more usefully understood as aural—what the ear hears” as opposed to oral (what the mouth speaks). He goes on to say:

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<sup>57</sup> To this conversation of verbal and nonverbal sound, I would also add the material effects of sound, like a loud sound’s effect on the ear, though this may not be as important of an interpretive marker as say tone of voice and can be controlled by adjusting volume in a mediatized listening.

By aurality I mean to emphasize the sounding of the writing, and to make a sharp contrast with orality and its emphasis on breath, voice, and speech – an emphasis that tends to valorize speech over writing, voice over sound, listening over hearing, and indeed, orality over aurality...Aurality is connected to the body – what the mouth and tongue and vocal chords enact – not the presence of the poet...The poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet; it materializes the text not the author; it performs the work not the one who composed it. (12-13)

Bernstein treats the audiotext as that which is perceived by the ear, not something embodied by a performer; however, in noting that this not to “valorize the material ear over the metaphysical mouth, but to find a term that averts the identification of orality with speech” he gestures towards his interest in the listener as the site for the creation of meaning in an exchange purely with the poem, rather than the poet (13), which is, a la Barthes, a move away from authorial intent towards the reader (listener) as the site for the production of poetic meaning.

Due to Spoken Word poetry’s longstanding ties to other types of performance, mechanical sound, often in the form of musical accompaniment, is very common in live and recorded Spoken Word poetry. Music features heavily in Chapter 2 during my analysis of Spoken Word poets as case study, with my readings of Evanson and Tempest in particular. Music and other mechanical sounds (for example, synthesized sound, pre-recorded sound like a car or birds chirping, or vocal filters) augment, supplement, and complement the voice’s delivery of the words in a Spoken Word poem. Mechanical sound features prominently on audio and video recordings alike.

Environmental sound is less of an interpretive consideration when reading

mediatized Spoken Word poetry as we, as the reader/listener/viewer know that the car driving behind the poet was not an intentional part of their poem. The listener creates a hierarchy of meaning (and thus, as mentioned, writes the poem) whether intentionally or not. Though likely, this would affect a reading very little. In *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond* (2009), film studies scholar James Monaco writes:

Sound is omnipresent but also omnidirectional. Because it is so pervasive, we tend to discount it. Images can be manipulated in many different ways, and the manipulation is relatively obvious; with sound, even the limited manipulation that does occur is vague and tends to be ignored. (235)

This is to say that although there are many sonic variables across the mediums Spoken Word poetry inhabits (crowds hooting and hollering, blown speakers you listen to an album on, a record skipping) because of our relationship to sound, it is unlikely that these variations actually affect our readings. When interpreting the meaning of a poem, we aren't going to interpret the crackle in the audio of the Sound Cloud recording or the hoot in the poetry video in the same way that we interpret the audiotext of voiced lines of verse (though this might be different if the point of this study was a focus on the historical or the social contexts of the poems recording). The sounds made by the performer are going to be the chief sounds we are working with when reading a poem, though the contextual and paralinguistic sounds made by nonperformers or environment are also ripe for consideration. This will be the same for visual and print elements: we don't necessarily interpret the paratext in a book or the tile floor in a poetry video with the same weight as we do the words, the voice, or the body of the performer. But, if we consider my previous discussion of performative speech acts, we might also apply the



idea of perlocutionary sound to paralinguistic and environmental sounds—regardless of intent, sounds also have a meaningful aural effect on the listener when and if we read paralinguistic sounds as part of an audiotext. Despite this hierarchy, on a studio recording there won't likely be significant environmental sound, as these recordings are deliberate, edited, and mixed. Almost all the sound included will be intentional; whereas on a live recording, you are far more likely to have environmental sounds picked up. There is also another layer of environmental sound. Not that on the recording, but that of the listening context; however, again, we are unlikely to read a conversation beside us at a coffee shop into our close listening of a poem.

I have already noted that I am parsing the words of a poem into the printtext. But when voiced, these words are imbued with emotion and context. The same words can be voiced in a number of different ways to different meaning and affect. In performance, then, the three texts become difficult to parse from one another; they overlap to create an imbricated and relational meaning within a given mediatized iteration of a poem. Bernstein defines the audiotext beyond the sum of page-bound sonic elements, suggesting it is a more “semantically dense field of linguistic activity than can be charted by” traditional sonic elements of page poetry such as “meter, assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and the like” (13). For the purposes of my project, I consider these elements to be linguistic elements of printtext; however, textual compartmentalization is not always so easy. Rhyme might be part of the printtext, but the sound of the rhyme voiced by a particular poet may be readable as audiotext. Fingers snapping may be part of the body and therefore visualtext, but the sound of the snaps contain elements of audiotext. The three texts entangle, imbricate, and aggregate in the creation of poetic meaning. In *How*

to *Read a Film*, Monaco outlines the terms *synchronous* and *asynchronous* to describe sound the way that the sound is either working in alignment with the meaning making intentions of the visual elements of film or not (238). This is largely discussed in relation to video, something I will engage below more fully. But in relation to audiotext and visualtext, it can also be used to describe the audiotext's relationship to the visualtext, the printtext's relationship to the visualtext, or the relationship of all three. Each text might be synchronous, that is, working together to express a common meaning, or asynchronous, that is working disparately and creating meaning through juxtaposition. In the context of audio from a live event, this relationality is further complicated as sounds that are incongruent to the text of the poem (a hoot at a sad line) is congruent to the context of the event (we know this is a live event and audience participation is part that). But, as mentioned, there is a hierarchy with which we engage with different elements of printtext, audiotext, and visualtext. Just because a sound is there doesn't mean we interpret it as essential to the meaning of the poem.

To summarize, reading the audiotext means considering voice, mechanical, and environmental sound. Voice has both verbal and nonverbal qualities. Mechanical sound (chiefly music) is often a part of the gesture of Spoken Word poetry, and therefore an important interpretive element. Environmental sound can be considered the sound that is captured in a recording as well as the sound in the listening context. However, ultimately, the verbal elements of voice are the primary sonic force of a Spoken Word poem. The various mediums that sound can come in, as well as the various hardware that sound is listened to on, can lead to variation in reading/listening experience, however, these variations are slight and their effect on the meaning of the poem is debatable. As I will

build upon below, ultimately, we are never just reading sound on its own.

### **Looking and the Visualex**

In Rona during the pandemic, the cashier said something to me behind a mask, but I didn't hear it correctly. *Was I standing in the wrong place? Was I not supposed to come forward yet?* She pulled her mask down to reveal a smile. "Merry Christmas," she repeated—and I said it back. We then exchanged personal stories about the difficulty of hearing others in masks. I noted how hard it is to read facial expression under them and she agreed, adding that she doesn't hear well and relies on lip reading a lot to communicate with costumers, so that's been hard for her.

Body language is important to the way we communicate—we do not simply exchange vocal or verbal language, especially when we consider those with diverse hearing abilities, rather communication happens at the nexus of verbal language, body language (including facial expression) and touch, paralinguistic and environmental sound, and socio-cultural context. Nonverbal language, a phenomenon studied especially since the 1960s and explored in great detail in Albert Mehrabian's *Nonverbal Communication* (1972), makes up a great deal of the meaning making potential in linguistic exchange. In Spoken Word poetry (whether live or mediatized), nonverbal communication (which includes body language, gesture, as well as sonic paralinguistics—what we might refer to as verbal, vocal, and visual communication) happens largely in the body, and is important to the meaning expressed by a poem. The poet Federico García Lorca identifies the necessity of the body in poetry not just in the performance of poetry but in its reception: it is an art that requires "a living body to

interpret” it (Hoffman 5). Tyler Hoffman explores this sentiment further, writing that “bodies bring poems into being—that is, they enact poems—through a dramatic entertainment; and bodies bring subjectivity into being” (5). Just as bodies bring poems into being, both as performer and audience, so too do bodies bring the subjectivity and identity (again, of both poets and audience) into being. When considering the visualtext in a Spoken Word poem, it is not just the performer and their body then, but also contexts of performance and reception. In a live performance, the context is obvious: the venue, the crowd, the stage, the mic, the ambiance etc. However, in mediatized work, this context is not just whatever is captured in the video, but also the ‘intervisuality’ of the context in which you ‘read’ a given video, incurred by the likely internet-based context of the video. “Intervisuality,” a term coined by Nicholas Mirzoeff, refers to the interlocking visual contexts in which visual artefacts are encountered by an audience and how that affects the meaning the audience receives (Sturken and Cartwright 55).

The sonic turn in literary studies, and its dominance of the study of performed poetry, has underrepresented the importance of the visualtext. There are studies on viewing performed poetry, but arguably it is the most under theorized of the three texts in the discourse of poetry. The method for reading the visualtext of poetry in performance has been referred to as “close viewing” (Novak 47). But what is the visualtext in Spoken Word poetry? *Isn't print also Visual?* you might ask. Yes, it is. However, due to a historical focus on the printtext in poetry, there are methods, as well as long sociocultural histories and discourses surrounding the reading of printtext that I have already parsed above. Therefore, like printtext’s separation from the audiotext, I have also separated the printtext from the rest of the visual considerations.

The visualtext then includes four readable elements in mediatized Spoken Word poetry: (1) the body of the performer (including persona); (2) that which is not the body of the performer but context, including venue, crowd, equipment like microphones, staging, and props; (3) the intervisuality of the context of the video on a website or your computer; and (4) visual media elements, like cinematography, logos and other graphic design, visual art, and animation. Again, there is a hierarchy of importance that is hard to avoid: the body of the performer is the chief interpretive object. We are not considering the microphone or a watermark logo in the same way we are considering the actions of the performing body (*hey, is that an SM58? What does that mean in relation to this poem about gender?*).

In the following sections, I will explore the base elements for hermeneutic consideration of the visualtext in Spoken Word poetry. I ask, how do practices of looking, media and intervisuality, and visual nonverbal communication alter or supplement how we read Spoken Word poetry? Further, how is the reading of subjective bodies, whether as poetic persona or authentic self, also a political question? How do considerations of racialization, ableism, gender normativity, colonial history complicate questions of looking? In what follows, I parse these questions and develop a framework to study the visual both as an aesthetic object in poetry, but, considering the body is one of those visual, readable elements, to do so in ethical, and socially and culturally conscious ways.

### **Visuality, Production, and Reception**

Before moving onto the body, I would like to briefly consider discourse around the

practice of looking, visual meaning, and visual culture more generally. In some ways, the natural place to look for aid in studying the visual elements of Spoken Word poetry might have been theatre studies. Novak claims that theatre studies “hold little in terms of practicable guidelines” for studying the body (and therefore visual elements) in poetry because “theatre studies have, in fact, developed in opposition to literary studies and its traditional treatment of theatre as textual artefact” (17). That is, theatre studies do not study theatre as a product of text (despite the primacy of scripts) and rather focus on the live performance elements. I am no expert in theatre studies, but to me this seems like quite a broad stroke to paint, especially considering Novak does not then survey works from theatre studies.<sup>58</sup> However, *Words Go Past There* is novel in its focus on video and other mediated forms of Spoken Word in terms of ‘reading’ and formalism, which is the direct result of a consideration of practical research and pedagogical context. Therefore, despite my skepticism that theatre studies has little to offer, I feel it is more important to draw on film studies and visual culture—rather than theatre—in this section, supplementing what the current discourse of performed poetry lacks in its theorization of the visualtext.

Visual Culture has much to offer the study of Spoken Word poetry, especially in relation to interpretation of the visualtext and the simple act of looking. From a Visual Culture perspective, according to Maria Sturken and Lisa Cartwright in *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (2009) there are three elements “beside the image itself and its producer” that dictate the way visual meaning occurs: (1) “the codes

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<sup>58</sup> I believe that an expanded version of this book might take up this charge to read broadly in theatre studies, testing Novak’s assertion about its lack of application to the study of live poetry (or for myself, Spoken Word poetry). However, this is not within the scope of this book.

and conventions that structure the image and that cannot be separated from the content of the image”; (2) “the viewers and how they interpret or experience the image”; and (3) “the contexts in which an image is exhibited and viewed” (Sturken and Cartwright 49). Which is to say that meaning is produced by the image, its creator, the reader, as well as the physical and sociocultural contexts of production and reception. Sturken and Cartwright expand this interpretive field further, adding that “images have what we call dominant or primary meanings, they are interpreted and used by viewers in ways that do not strictly conform to these meanings” (49). So, visual media has ways that it can communicate meaning, and it also understands that meaning is not received in the same way it is communicated. As most of us view video content of Spoken Word poetry on a computer or a phone, typically YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok but not always, it is important to think about the ways that visual context affects a given reading. Like advertisements in old comic books, YouTube as a platform has much more than just the video you are watching. The meaning we take from a visualtext is affected by the entanglement of certain texts in different visual contexts. If we consider Auslander’s formation of liveness as a form of mediation, we might also extrapolate this logic of intervisuality to think about the context of a venue in a video. For example, how does the beer advertisement on the wall of the pub affect a poet’s reading about their alcoholic father? Further, video hardware itself has socio-culturally coded meaning associated with it. For example, a poem viewed on an old TV, hooked up through an HDMI chord, may read differently than a poem viewed on a sleek, modern iPad. Intervisuality takes for granted that looking is entangled with other forms of looking. Sturken and Cartwright write:

when we have an experience with a particular visual medium, we draw on associations with other media and other areas of our lives informed by visual images. For example, when we watch a television show, the meanings and pleasure we derive from it might be drawn, consciously or unconsciously, from associations with things we have seen in movies, works of art, or advertisements.

(2)

So, our visual experiences of the world do not happen in a silo—they are inherently connected to one another, not only through the physical copresence (to borrow Novak’s term) of artefact, medium, and hardware but also through the network of meaning and relations unique to a particular reader in a particular place with a lifetime of personally and culturally coded visual experiences and memories, the latter of which itself is complex.

Roland Barthes wrote about the complexity of visual meaning, using the terms “Denotative” and “Connotative” to refer to the signifying possibilities of imagery in photographs. Denotative refers to the way an “[i]mage can denote certain apparent truths, providing documentary evidence of objective circumstances.” Connotative refers to the way that “meanings are informed by the cultural and historical contexts of the image and its viewers’ lived, felt knowledge of those circumstances—all that the images means to them personally and socially” (Sturken and Cartwright 20). Now Barthes was talking about photographs, but I think his distinction might be salient when thinking about visuality in Spoken Word poetry. The body of the Spoken Word poet might denote direct information about their subjectivity, such as height and hair color, and to some extent, markers of class, race, age, and gender (aspects of looking I will trouble below as perfect



markers of truth or subjectivity), while, simultaneously, their body gestures connote meaning in conjunction with the printtext of the poem—meaning that we as viewers must interpret through our own personal, social, and communicative knowledge. Sturken and Cartwright suggest that both types of meaning can “change with changes in social context and over time” and that it may be suggested that all meaning, whether denotative or connotative is socially, historically, and culturally informed (20), but that ultimately these distinctions are helpful in parsing the visual expression of objective and subjective meaning. In relation to Spoken Word poetry, denotative meaning might signify elements of persona and is not intentional on the poets behalf so much an element of their identity, whereas connotative meaning is somewhat intentional on the part of the poet, though, is still highly dependent on the audiences reception of their gesturing body.

The complexity of intention and reception in performed poetry is interesting to consider in light of Barthes’ famous essay “The Death of the Author.”<sup>59</sup> Can an author be ‘dead’ (that is, their intention for a text’s meaning in a poem is stripped of its power) when we see them in front of us reading? How can we not interpret an author’s intent more powerfully into their text when their physical body is part of the visualtext, and when their body is not simply the origin of words on the page or voice on a recording, but a corporeal, agentive aspect of the poem itself? “The Death of the Author” opens the door for the reader to be constitutive in the act of meaning making of a text, as opposed to passive, but does not necessarily mean that we ignore the author totally. Rather, we might

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<sup>59</sup> Roland Barthes’ famous 1968 essay “The Death of The Author” is an important work in establishing both poststructuralist thought, but also in challenging the centrality or authorial intent to the production of meaning in a literary work. Barthes suggests that a text does not contain a single “theological meaning” (146) and instead the text’s meaning “lies not in its origin but in its destination” (148). This is to say, that readers are an important site of creation; a text only gains its meaning through the interpretation by a reader. Therefore, each time a text is encountered by a new reader, it is written, or performed, anew.

read Barthes' as creating a site for a reciprocal relationship between author and reader, or, in the case of Spoken Word poetry, performer and audience. That is, the performer has an intention for their work, and their oral and corporeal body is as much a part of this as its print text. The audience, then, in digital or "physical co-presence" (again to evoke Novak) with the performer, becomes an important site of meaning and exchange, taking in the body, voice, printtext, and, to some degree, the perceived authorial intent of an author while simultaneously interpreting their own thoughts, ideas, experiences into the meaning of the poem as part of the process of reception. A reading like this of Barthes also seems more in keeping with the sociality of Spoken Word, the importance of the exchange of author and reader that is constitutive of my definition of Spoken Word poetry in particular, than say a reading of Barthes in which the author's intent and the reader's interpretation are mutually exclusive.

Visual meaning is produced, not just in the exchange of the performer and viewer, but within a more complex artistic economy. James Monaco defines the relationships between *Artist*, *Work*, and *Observer* (in Spoken Word poetry we might call these *Poet*, *Poem*, and *Audience*, respectively). In his formulation, the relationship of the artist and a work is defined as production, and the relationship between the work and the observer is defined as consumption (34). Throughout this study I will typically refer to consumption as reception, via Stuart Hall, emphasizing that reception happens within "the totality formed by the social relations of the communications process as a whole" (Hall 509). Reading, as an act, exists not within the realm of production, but within the realm of reception, which is therefore the focus of this book. But whether production or consumption, Monaco states that: "there is a set of determinants that gives a particular

shape to experience” (34-35). That is, an audience does not merely passively receive a pure piece of art with a pure meaning, rather, the meaning and effect of a given piece of art is filtered through a set of *determinants* or interpretive factors. The determinants are (1) the “sociopolitical”, which “defines the relationship between the work of art and the society that nurtures it”; (2) the “psychological”, which focusses less on the world around a given work and more on “the connections between the work and the artist, and the work and the observer”; (3) the “technical”, which of course refers to the particulars of a given technology (or medium) in which a work of art appears, such as “the qualities of oil paint” or the way the printing press shaped the development of the modern novel; and finally (4) the “economic,” which refers to the way that artefacts are “economic products” that must inevitably be discussed in “economic terms” (Monaco 34-35). These four determinants shape the creation of art and its reception. When we consider the practice of reading, the psychological determinant becomes especially important as reading is a subjective element of reception. This project speaks specifically to outline the considerations for reading Spoken Word poetry, but also the determinants of that reading. However, this is complicated by the fact that in Spoken Word poetry the poet themselves is physically part of their performance. So, aspects of production are of course a consideration as they are happening simultaneously with reception (at least during the live) even though reading at its heart actually has far more to do with reception than production.

Later in *How to Read a Film*, Monaco narrows his focus to the reading of images, noting that we interpret images in three key ways (ways reminiscent of the determinants above): “physiologically, ethnographically, and psychologically” (174). That is, we

experience images in our body, we experience images in our brain, and experience images in their greater socio-cultural contexts. I have discussed how we read the visual, but ultimately, as has been well established, when we are thinking about reading the visual in poetry, we are thinking about three things: the printed text, the body and context of the poet, and the medium (video) and therefore the intervisuality associated with the reading context of that medium. As I have separated the printtext, and we have already spoken to intervisuality, largely what we are then reading is the poet's body and to a lesser extent the context of the reading. In the sections that follow, I will explore the context of reception, and the reading of the body.

### **Context of Reception**

I once bought a used copy of *William Faulkner's Collected Works* from a bookstore in Bellingham. When I opened it, a neatly folded, tiny letter in a tiny envelope fell out. It was addressed to someone to whom the book was mailed as a gift. There was no year, and no names. It simply inquired about how they were, their family and their health—I can't remember the specifics. There was a bit of marginalia in the book as well, though it is unknown if it was created by the giver or receiver of the literary gift. Whenever I would read the book (and in my early twenties, despite being Canadian, I wanted to write the great American novel, so there was a fair amount of Faulkner being read), I would pause to reread the marginalia and think of this ambiguous letter. Who sent it? Who received it? These questions and pencilled words have little to do with the stories inside that collection, but the meaning of those pieces was always somewhat intruded upon by their existence, for me.

The Spoken Word equivalent to marginalia might be words muttered by the audience, or, in the context of mediatized Spoken Word poetry, the comments section below a video or audio poem. Maybe as you are viewing a poem, you scroll down and read how moved people were by it. As a poem is being read live, maybe someone beside you mutters to their mother, *I went to high school with her*. Suddenly, though the poem said nothing of high school, the image that the poem being performed in your brain is altered by this audience aside. Or maybe the brick aesthetic behind the stage makes you think of Chicago, or the mic reminds you of bands you have seen. Any number of personally or culturally coded meanings can be derived from context. When the Spoken Word poem takes the form of a video, the intervisuality of the reading experience is then a combination of whatever was captured on video, the context of the video itself (website, likely), and the context of your viewing (your bedroom vs. the bus).<sup>60</sup>

Looking is important when thinking about contexts of reception, and our ability to see, and the intervisuality at play, is very different when viewing a live performance vs. a video. Monaco speaks to the difference in consumption (reception) between film and staged drama, writing: “The most salient difference between staged drama and filmed

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<sup>60</sup> It is here that I think it may be important to unpack two terms I have previously mentioned, which are the *poetry video* and the *video poem*. I have written public scholarship about the difference between the two, which can be found [here](#) as part of Inspired Word Café’s Video Poetry Module. Essentially, there are two main types of Spoken Word poems we might encounter on the internet: the poetry video, which is often a live recording of a poet reading their poem on stage, and the video poem, which is something more akin to film, in which there are elements of scripted performance, creative cinematography, mechanical sound, editing of sound and visuals, digital art and graphics, and much more. As part of IWC’s Video Poetry module, there are examples of each. Why I bring this up is because what we consider context is different in these two types of videos. In the poetry video, the recorded context is similar to that of a live performance, just mediatized. In the video poem, however, the context is collapsed into the content, where curated video is shot and combined with other elements of the poem such as lyrics or graphics, which combine together to constitute the poem itself. The latter are more like short films. In the former, a person walking by the camera is not part of the poem itself; however, in the context of ‘reading’ as laid out in this project, this person walking by may still be open for interpretation. For example, their hairstyle or clothing may signal a particular historical time period, giving that historical context then to the content of the poem.

drama...is point of view” (Monaco 58). He is referring to agency in how, where, and what we train our gaze on as audience members. In a live performance, we can look almost anywhere we want. But when viewing a mediatized performance (whether film or poetry) we can only see what the shot allows us to see. We can pause video, but we cannot look around the room to see context.<sup>61</sup> We cannot look at the poet’s shoes if they are filmed waist up. However, he goes on to say that as a result of point of view we can actually see more in film than we can in a play. In a play, we only see the most “broad gestures” by the actors, hence the exaggerated acting of the stage to play to the back of the room, whereas in film, the camera allows us to see the smallest, more subtle facial movements and gestures, and sound editing and dubbing allows us simultaneously to hear the even the gentlest and most minute elements of sound (58). However, for Monaco, despite what film can accomplish due to being shot “discontinuously” he points out that “people who perform in film are...not in communion with their audience” (59), something that separates film or mediatized Spoken Word poetry from their live counterparts, something I have ultimately troubled in previous sections.

Novak and Bearder have each written about the ways in which the space or context of a performance should be read into one’s interpretation of Spoken Word poetry. It is also worth noting that here I am referring to physical context as part of the socio-cultural context, even though the latter is more difficult to read or see in its complexity from most single camera video shots. Novak notes that

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<sup>61</sup> I recently learned of an exception to this, which is the VR video. My kids and I were watching YouTube videos about The Rainbow Friends, a group of mascot horror characters from an online game. In one of the videos, using the controller the kids were able to move the camera view of the video around 360 degrees to view an entire room containing the rainbow friends.

[w]hether space is strategically integrated in a live poetry performance or merely ‘borrowed’ without seeming to play a decisive role in the poet’s activities, it sets a physical limit to the performance and influences the flow of the spectator-performer communication...Consequently, an analysis of live poetry performance should also give some thought to the ways in which space impacts the performance. (208)

Clearly Novak does not consider performance context to be a chief consideration for analyzing live poetry, but she makes an interesting distinction between space that is actively part of a performance and space that is not. For Novak, the key considerations for context are (1) “spatial arrangement,” by which she means the layout of a venue, its stage, the space between audience and performer, etc; (2) light, by which she means the lighting and how that might affect our visual perception of a performer; and (3) “soundscape” by which she means the auditory contexts such as road noise outside or audience noise inside (214). Novak goes on to add the “‘place of performance,’ which designates the location of an event in its ‘wider civic or other environment’” which can also contribute to how we interpret a poem (214). By this she means the literal, geographic location within a city or area. Is the reading in Yaletown or East Vancouver, for example? How do our social, economic, and cultural perceptions of those places affect our experience of the poem? This is interesting if we consider the internet view of a given video text. For example, a video taking place in a famous world city like New York may lend it an elevated, cosmopolitan feel, while a video taking place in Cochrane, Alberta might evoke pastoral connotations, not present in the text of the poem itself. These places also might be personally coded for audience members who may read their

own memories and experiences of a work into it. Further, a video may be placeless, or take place somewhere a person reading the videotext may not know anything about—and there is a higher chance of this with the internet as videos uploaded can be from any number of places, whereas if one goes to a particular venue live, they have chosen to be there so presumably they know something about its geographic or civic context, and they experience that venue more fully than they would in video.

To Novak's list of contextual determinants of meaning in *Live Poetry*, Peter Bearder adds the "MC" or host of a show who can have a big impact in the "affective rhythms of the crowd" (215). The crowd's perception of a given piece can affect how people generally receive a poem. Bearder notes that when we become part of a crowd, our experience of a poem is altered by our absorption into "its rhythms of affect, movement, and noise" (214). Literary scholar Steve Larkin writes:

The reach of the online media now vastly outweighs that of the usual UK live poetry promoter. Neil Hilborn's OCD poem on Button Poetry has been viewed over 15 million times. The obvious difference with performances on screens is the lack of a live interactive audience. If a piece has value in part because of the laughter it creates in the context of its performance then this value is likely lost in translation to a screen. The pieces that retain their value will therefore proliferate. It's a straight- forward numbers game. (35)

In this way, context actually dictate the success of a given mediatized Spoken Word poem, not just how its meaning is received.

Ultimately, for the practices of reading, the context (whether venue or video streaming site) is not the dominant element of consideration for most video texts.



Arguably, when watching a video, space is limited to one shot of a stage (or perhaps other scenic or environmental shots if considering a video poem) and is therefore not as important of a consideration as it might be in the live. Perhaps it would be important to consider the room you are engaging with the video in, though this likely would contribute little to the reading.<sup>62</sup> But like my consideration of environmental sound and speakers above, largely contextual intervisuality does not greatly affect how we interpret poetic meaning. The body, on the other hand, is the chief element of study in the visualtext, though practices of looking complicate corporeal reading in ways that printed text does not invite.

### **Reading the Body**

Of Spoken Word poetry, Pete Bearder writes: “Poets do not *have* bodies, they *are* bodies” (208). Here, Bearder gestures towards how integral the body is to the making of meaning and affective experience of a Spoken Word poem. For Bearder, “the body is the material, the media through which the poetry is published. In entering it, poetry becomes a product of that body; from its muscles, gut, and cardiovascular rhythms, though to its larynx, eyes, and facial expressions” (190). Spoken Word poetry is embodied; the body is the primary medium of live poetry, but in mediatized poetry the body is somewhat relegated to the chief readable element of the visualtext. Reading the body is therefore crucial to reading a Spoken Word poem.

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<sup>62</sup> For more on space in relation to performed poetry, see Julia Novak’s chapter 6.3.2 Performative Space in Live Poetry (2011).

The foremost, and perhaps only, comprehensive academic study on how to read the body in contemporary poetry in performance is a subsection in Julia Novak's *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* (2011) entitled "Body Communication." Though, Bearder's *Stage Invasion* also has a strong chapter on the "Path of the Poem Through the Body." While other contemporary texts have smaller sections on the body in Spoken Word and performance poetry, many of these books do not contribute to formal reading, instead exploring craft, poetics, proprioception and embodiment.<sup>63</sup> Work on nonverbal communication, body language, disability studies, embodiment, and affect theory<sup>64</sup> might supplement what literary and performance studies lack to read the body in Spoken Word poetry; however, these large fields and conceptual movements were outside my more narrow scope in this dissertation, especially considering *Words Go Past There* already engages a wide range of different fields, discourses, and theoretical approaches. While future iterations of this project might see me engage these other fields of study, this current work primarily builds upon, and departs from, the foundational work of Bearder and Novak.

Novak explains that body communication in poetry in performance can:

express emotions and attitudes towards an implied addressee or the topic of

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<sup>63</sup> For example, see Phanel Antwi's "Dub Poetry as a Black Atlantic Body-Archive," an article which focuses on Dub in particular; Charles Olson's "Projective Verse," a manifesto for proprioceptive writing and breath-based poetics; as well as Marc Smith's *The Spoken Word Revolution* (2003) and Sheri D. Wilson's *The Spoken Word Workbook* (2011), which explore the craft and creation of Spoken Word. There are also, no doubt, work by hundreds of other performance poets in workshops and classrooms across the world that are not ossified into book form, but exist, nonetheless.

<sup>64</sup> Work in Affect Theory in relation to spoken word has already been begun by both Peter Bearder in *Stage Invasion* and Jack McGowan in his article, "The spoken word experience" in *Spoken Word in the UK*. He writes: "This paucity of terminology; a toolbox or common language for discussing the emotional dimensions of a performance, is a key area of interest in the growing field of contemporary spoken word studies" (109).

speech; it can serve to regulate interpersonal interactions between performer and audience; it contributes to performer characterisation or helps to characterise a persona, and it reveals interpersonal attitudes and relationships. On the whole, it does not only replace or accompany speech; it can actually modify its meaning.

(157)

So, the body has social, aesthetic, and subjective contributions to the overall meaning of performed poetry. Similarly, Bearder refers to the body movements of a given Spoken Word poem as “poem-dances” that “deliver characters and feelings that are literally beyond words” (196). This is an important point to note: that not every aspect of poetic performance can be captured or described by the audience with words (whether in this dissertation or in the classroom discussion) just like the performance itself expresses both verbal and beyond verbal meaning.

But for Novak, we don't read the body in performance using literary technique, but instead with a socio-cultural understanding of nonverbal, body-based communication, which she adds is “culturally conditioned” (145). Drawing on the work on the work of Erika Fischer-Lichte, she argues that the “signs” signified by the performing body

stem from a range of different cultural systems such as speech, gesture, or music and that their meaning in theatre can be understood only with recourse to these primary cultural systems. Our ability to ‘read’ the gestures of a performer speaking on stage thus depends on our knowledge of body communication off stage, rather than on some specific code of live poetry moves. (145)

Novak then builds her argument out of an engagement with “more general studies on body behaviour,” specifically in the field of “kinesics” (the study of the way body

positions and gestures communicate nonverbally), rather than performance or literary studies, which she sees as inadequate (146). However, importantly she notes that trying to parse stable meanings from the context-specific, embodied, emplaced coded meaning of “body language”<sup>65</sup> is “indeed futile” (146). This is because communication of any kind is interpretive; returning to Barthes, the way that a reader or listener experiences communication, whether interpersonal or poetic, is subjective. Hoffman notes how difficult reading the body can be:

While cultural norms and conventions provide a rough framework for certain aspects of body communication (for instance how extensively we are expected to move which body parts during speech) and verbal ‘translations’ for a restricted set of symbolic gestures (such as the V sign for ‘victory’), many movements are not easily explicable in terms of a fixed ‘code.’ Rather, they open up a meaning potential, which ‘will be narrowed down and coloured in the given context.’ (10)

So, due to our own subjectivity as readers, reading a poet’s body actions as a stable conduit of meaning within a poem is very difficult, and needs to be viewed as opening up a multiplicity of reading potentialities rather than containing one fixed meaning. I carry forward this approach into my own work on the body: rather than focussing too hard on an illocutionary meaning, I turn to the perlocutionary: I acknowledge that I will only be able to understand the body performing a poem from my own subject position as a white, able-bodied, hetero, cis man in a particular historical moment (2024) and a particular place (Kelowna, BC, Canada). However, as I will discuss in the following section, this

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<sup>65</sup> A term she avoids for its inherent implication that perhaps there is a grammar or vocabulary of body language that might easily be decoded.

approach is not good enough, and may perpetuate structural violence. It demands that in my acknowledgement, I attempt to see *beyond* my own position. But what are the readable elements of the performing body?

First, Novak breaks the aesthetic body's interpretive instances into what she calls *body action* and *body set*: "body set denotes physical peculiarities such as age, sex, body build, or state of health" (147), while body action refers to movements, postures, and gestures that carry semantic meaning (whether illocutionary or perlocutionary). Next, Novak considers the elements of body communication, namely *posture* and *gesture*, *facial communication*, and *artefactual communication*. Posture and gesture are distinguished from one another: the latter is "a movement of only a limited area of the body" as opposed to the former "which is a more static form of body communication involving the whole body" (158). Further, she suggests that postures have "two basic dimensions of immediacy (forward lean, more energised and energising) or relaxation (sideways or backwards lean, asymmetrical). They are not only indicative of the speaker's bodily (and mental) state but may also induce this state in the audience" (158). She then outlines different types of gestures:

[g]estures can be described in terms of the basic qualifiers of range, direction, intensity, speed, and duration" and distinguish between "symbolic gestures (conventionalised movements with a direct verbal translation), deictic gestures (pointing towards persons, objects, directions or locations), motor gestures (rhythmic movements that accent particular words or phrases), and illustrators, i.e. movements that illustrate the verbal text, providing information on spatial

relations (spatial gestures), depicting bodily action (kinetographs), or drawing a picture of their referent (pictographs). (163-64)

Next, Novak summarizes “artefactual” communication as meaning that can be gleaned from “objects such as microphones, books, clothes and make-up” as well as more generally, a “poet’s external appearance” such as “clothes and make-up,” (165). Finally, she suggests the face and facial expression are key to kinesics and “thought to play the most significant part in the communication of the body due to its high expressive potential.” She also notes that facial expressions can be explicit about the associated emotion or ambiguous (a smile doesn’t always mean happy) and that “the performer’s face can communicate a wide variety of emotions and attitudes in live poetry, in accordance with the text” (165). This harkens back to James Monaco’s formulation of the synchronicity/asynchronicity of audio and visuals in film. In Spoken Word poetry, the printtext, audiotext, and visualtext of a given poem are not always synchronous. Rather, they can also be both synchronous and asynchronous, producing a number of congruent and incongruent affects, nuanced but perhaps contradictory meanings, and irony in the disparate meanings of the different texts. For example, in Sabrina Benaim’s 2014 National Poetry Slam performance of “Explaining My Depression to My Mother,”<sup>66</sup> Benaim delivers the poem in a frantic, anxious state: her voice is quick and high pitched, gaining speed over the course of each line; her body is tense, and her face looks stressed and frightened. This is largely synchronous with the words of the poem, which actually deals more with anxiety than depression. However, at times, when voicing the mother, her delivery of the words (body and voice) are asynchronous to the words. For example,

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<sup>66</sup> This poem can be viewed online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqu4ezLQEUA>

when she speaks the line “Mom says try counting sheep,” (“Sabrina Benaim” 1:43-45) this is an earnest suggestion from her mother but is still voiced through the anxious delivery of the speaker of the poem. The incongruence here creates a comic irony—we know from the way she delivers the line this is an absurd suggestion within the logic of the poem. The distinction between body set and body action, as well as Novak’s description of the distinct types of gestures are crucial to how I describe the body in my case study in Chapter 2.

In order to discover and interpret the corporeal aspects of performed work, Novak advocates for the use of descriptions in “natural language” as opposed to “overloading analyses with a bulk of kinesic terminology and an elaborate system of graphic symbols to represent individual body parts and their various movements” as some theatrical studies do (170). So, in keeping with Novak, I will use “natural language” (a term she borrows from Elizabeth Fine, meaning, in this context, clear, simple, and accessible) to describe the body in a given poem “due to its flexibility and accessibility” (141).

Additionally, in my case study I will read for the subset of her terms I outline above:

*body set* and *body action*, as well as *posture* and *gesture*, *facial communication*, and *artefactual communication*, as well as consider the implications and “functions” of these qualities. However, the reading of the body as an element of a poem is not simple.

Bearder argues that aspects of bodily communication are not always pure aesthetic choices, so much as evidence of our cultural conditioning (199). This hearkens back to the above-mentioned notion of Charles Bernstein that certain vocal tics are not aesthetic choices, despite him considering them as readable creative elements. Everything we might read in a performing body may not always be a conscious aesthetic choice so much

as an unconscious, culturally-conditioned, idiosyncratic movement. This also returns me to the idea of hierarchical reading—not every gesture a poet makes is to be interpreted with the same weight as other gestures, or important lines or sonic elements for that matter. It may simply be an element of their persona, or an insignificant choice made in the moment. For example, if a poet switches the hand they hold the mic with, this may simply be because their arm was tired, and not be a symbolic gesture of left and right; however, with that said, a reader or viewer may also choose to interpret a seemingly insignificant action like the mic switching hands with increased importance. In the case studies in Chapter 2, even if I do not personally view these actions as important, like Bernstein, I will certainly hermeneutically consider them.

In addition to Novak's bodily affordances, there are other considerations in my own study due to the different affordances of media and the live and the different approaches to liveness by Novak and myself. For example, often in video we get shots from the waist up or a poor view of face etc., so the way we can study the body in a live context is different than how we can study it in a mediatized context. I would then posit that the visualtext of mediatized Spoken Word poetry affords a different balance of expressive power between body, context, and intervisuality than live poetry, despite the interpretive elements remaining somewhat the same. Further, I feel that the concept of subjectivity, as well as the political implications of subjectivity, poetic persona, and reading the bodies of others are underexamined in Novak. I will address this in the following section.

### **The Subjective Body: Persona, Identity, and 'Reading' Response-ably**



Bearder writes: “Unlike the relatively anonymous transaction of the page, the existence of [bodies] comes with baggage” (199). For Bearder, sociocultural elements, such as class, imprint themselves upon us to be potentially read by others through our “gait, stance, and even gesture” (199). He adds that bodies can also perform elements of “gender, age, and race” (199). Poet-scholar Clint Burnham puts this another way, proposing that “the aural and the visual are intertwined not only in cultural objects, but in the constitution of the subject” (243). So, we might extrapolate this to say that we can read aspects of personality and subject position by looking and listening to Spoken Word poets. However, this is a slippery slope of essentialism and stereotype—literally judging a book by its cover. Thinking back to Nina Sun Eidsheim’s acousmatic question, it is hard not to also think about the act of looking; to paraphrase Eidsheim: *who are we seeing?* Or, put another way, *what can we really glean about a person or poet from looking at them?* Bearder similarly troubles the notion of seeing a pure subject, using the example of the way that people’s class, and therefore the presentation of their class in their body and in their poetry, can change throughout one’s life (199), to which I would add also that how one presents their body can change in given contexts. For example, I have already mentioned the idea of ‘code switching,’ that is, the performance of different selves in different situations, which is especially relevant to IBPOC people and performers. Spoken Word poets may present/perform different versions of themselves in different contexts, whether on stage or off, in their hometown or a foreign city, or with a white crowd vs. a more diverse crowd. Whatever version of themselves a poet presents, are identity markers like gender, age, race, and class things we can easily glean from close viewing? And of the visual elements of subjectivity that can be gleaned, which are

authentic or factual and which are performed or invented (that is, interpreted by us as readers)?

When reading work in a workshop-based creative writing course, it is common practice to refer not to the poet who wrote a poem, but rather to the ‘speaker’ of the poem. That is, the voice, who is perhaps fictional, autobiographical or an in-between space of both, who is ‘speaking’ the poem on the page, rather than the author. This aligns with literary notions of authorial intent, Barthes’ ‘death of the author,’ and historical reading practices that decentre the author in the meaning making of a given work of art. However, in Spoken Word poetry, the presence of the body complicates ideas of authorial intent, authenticity, and the lines between nonfiction and fiction. As a reader/audience member, the body is hard not to code as authentic, even if the poet is enacting a persona, unless we are told to do so by the context. For example, when we go to a theatre show, we know the actors are playing fictional roles; however, when we go see a Spoken Word poet perform, there is not the same hard and fast social contract. The lines between poem/poet, person/poetic voice, fact/fiction are not as clearly drawn. But just because there is a physical person, with clothes and keys and a name, does not mean that the relationships between author and audience, authenticity and poetic voice, and fact and fiction, as well as the meaning produced by the poem, are any less murky. The person that is presented to us on stage, whether authentic and true or performed fiction, is what we might call a *persona*: a crafted version of oneself presented to and performed for the world, often shaped for a particular context though not always consciously. Novak writes: “although Charles Bernstein argues that ‘the poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet; it materializes the text not the author,’ my strong sense is that what is performed

at a poetry reading is necessarily both the poet and the poem” (7). In Spoken Word poetry performance, the poet is performing the poem, but also a stage persona. This aligns with my earlier theorizations of performance and performativity in which humans more generally, not just poets, perform different selves in differing social contexts.

The place of the body in poetic interpretation of Spoken Word poetry is especially significant when we consider writers (for example trans-storyteller Ivan Coyote) whose bodies are bound up in their identity, whose identity is important to their writing, and who, in the case of trans writers for example, may in fact be purposely blurring identity categories or resisting the readability of their bodies. As Hoffman suggests, authors are complex and plural, and their subjective existence is, in fact, no more stable even than that of a poem (10). Similarly, literary critic Katie Ailes writes of authenticity in Spoken Word poetry:

authenticity’ is not an innate, essential quality of a poem (nor a poet) but is rather highly subjective, performative, and culturally contingent. What one audience member considers a deeply emotionally authentic and moving performance another may perceive as the poet fake-crying to manipulate the audience.

Additionally, the focus on how ‘authentic’ a poem is ultimately constitutes a focus on the life of the artist (in order to determine whether a poem is true, one must investigate the poet’s life) rather than on the craft of the work. (143)

For Ailes, authenticity does not simply refer to the contract of truth between poem and performer/writer, rather authenticity is also a performative aspect of poetic content and thus inflected with all of the complexities of reception. This is perhaps exacerbated when we are removed another step in the watching of video. This is complicated further when

trying to parse the layers of subjectivity

(person/poet/performer/persona>>>reader/audience/person/persona) in a given performance interaction. Additionally, it may get murkier still when considering mediatized Spoken Word poetry's links to internet culture and social media. On the internet, the way persona is performed as part of social and cultural capital, as well as (in the case of influencers) actual capital.

But Novak suggests that

unlike in theatre live poetry audiences cannot usually draw on a conventionalised distinction between a real-life actor and an easily identifiable character whose name can be listed in the programme...in live poetry the poet-performer presents him or herself rather than representing a fictitious character, the other one is the identity of author and performer. What does it mean, though, to 'present oneself,' and what is the significance of the author's self-presentation in relation to a poem's fictive speaker? (186)

She parses this complicated relationship to a similar end as Hoffman: subjectivity, persona, reality etc. has a complicated and inseparable relationship. Often a poet is enacting a particular character or persona in their poem, which may be themselves or a version of themselves, or it may be totally fictional (something we cannot necessarily tell).

Ideas of identity, persona, and truth are especially complicated in relation to reading the body because some aspects of outward physical appearance can be strategically altered and performed to particular effect (hair, outfit, body language etc.) while others are relatively fixed (skin color, physical ability, age etc.). But these more

‘fixed’ markers are not always stable signifiers of subject position either. For example, it is not necessarily possible to distinguish someone’s gender, age, or race from just looking at them. Further, such essentialist practices of looking are historically bound up in systems of oppression. This is exemplified in the idea of ‘white passing,’ which refers to the ability of light-skinned IBPOC to pass as white in order to blend into a white dominated society. This is often a survival tactic under white supremacy. Looking, like listening (or rather looking as a facet of Nancy’s *entendre*), is not free from the power relations which Sterne, Robinson, and Stoeber mention, and I gesture towards, in the previous section. Looking and listening, as well as what we look and listen for (for example, identity, physical appearance, and persona), have a complex interrelation in the visualtext and audiotext of Spoken Word poetry because the interpretive space in performance poetry is a complex socio-cultural exchange between two subjective bodies, especially in the context of racialization, ableism, gender normativity, and colonial history. Ultimately the plural subjectivity of both the poet and the reader/listener/viewer make any ‘true’ interpretation of a performance of a poem near impossible. Moreover, I ask, is it possible to read a poet’s body without essentializing them?

Reading the body in essential ways becomes complicated and potentially violent when we consider racism, classism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia. For example, reading the body for race can lead to racial profiling, which in many countries is a life-or-death situation. But essentialization also leads to the flattening of complex identities. For instance, it is common for the unique identities of the peoples of particular Indigenous nations to be flattened into the general label of ‘Indigenous.’ During my undergrad, Cree artist and writer Paul Seesequasis came to speak in Kelowna at UBCO. He told a story of

being asked to come speak about the Haida people at a conference in BC. He said something along the lines of: *Why? I am Plains Cree. I am no more similar to the Haida than I am to a German or a Russian.* Additionally, when we consider disability studies ‘medical vs. social model’ of disability (the former denoting obvious physical disability, the latter allowing for a spectrum of disability) it could be easy to read able-bodiedness into the body of a disabled poet. But there are ways to be more ethical in our literary looking and listening. Gingell writes:

As readers of textualized orature, we will therefore produce the best readings when we understand the culturally specific parameters of listening to specific forms of orature. One instance of such a parameter is ‘responseability,’ a concept that Anishinaabe poetscholaranthologist Kimberly Blaeser argues is part of North American Native oral and written storytelling...[and] implies a form of active listening that entails not only attending to sounds, words, and phrases, but also trying to ‘perceive the context, meaning, and purpose’ (10)

Therefore, when we listen, read, view or interpret cross-culturally, we must try to do so with as much knowledge about the sociocultural aspects of that poet, and try to interpret not just their words but also the greater contexts, paradigms, and intentions the words have come out of. Others have written about ways to listen ethically and responsibly interculturally (see Sterne 21), but Gingell has written about this specifically in relation to orature, urging us towards “listening in detail” which she borrows from Alexandra Vazquez, which “enables contemporary scholars to engage with the sonics of black cultural production on a more granular level” (16). Robinson builds on this in his own way, adding reflexive positionality for listeners to the goal of detailed listening: “[a]s part

of our listening positionality, we each carry listening privilege, listening biases, and listening ability that are never wholly positive or negative; by becoming aware of normative listening habits and abilities, we are better able to listen otherwise” (10). He suggests a move towards critical listening and positionality will help us as academics to be “better attuned to the particular filters of race, class, gender, and ability” (11).

Therefore, we must listen critically, with detailed ‘responseability,’ acknowledging our own subject positionality as listeners. It is easy to see how the concepts of listening critically, responseably, and in detail can be extrapolated to the myriad power relations within the complex interactions of literary production and reception and reading all three of Spoken Word poetry’s texts. Specifically, in this section I adapt them to intersectional reading practices in relation to the visualtext, and the politics of looking and reading the bodies of others as formal and aesthetic components of a Spoken Word poem.

In developing my method for reading Spoken Word poetry, it is important to make apparent the systems of oppression current reading practices take part in. Especially considering my own subject position. Dylan Robinson articulates that taking on the work of exposing colonial interpretive practices as white, settler scholars counteracts the problem of Indigenous peoples shouldering “the burden of decolonization and instead allow[s] [them] to focus [their] energies toward resurgence with and for Indigenous communities” (254). However, Robinson worries that the inclusion of settlers in this work of deconstructing structures of (hetero)normativity, ableism, colonialism, and racism might lead to “recentring whiteness and privilege through a focus on settler colonial perception, or becoming a mode of positionality ‘confession’?” (254). By positionality confession, he refers to the ways in which settler positionality statements and admission of

ignorance “can take up the space of moving towards substantive commitment and action. While making one’s self vulnerable is often hard affective work, that labour of vulnerability itself does not articulate accountability and action” (286). Therefore, it is not enough to simply acknowledge my settler lens in reading if I am not meaningfully working towards decolonial literary practices. While I think that by virtue of decentring print-based modes of understanding literature, I am beginning this work of moving beyond white, western scholarly normativity, I don’t believe this is enough.

Contemporary Indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith suggest that settler scholars must approach Indigenous cultural belongings and knowledge within and Indigenous epistemic frame (and not to force it into a western frame, even as an act of ‘positive’ recognition) and the necessity for settler academics, researchers, students, and amateurs to work in and against their own systems of knowledge to allow the proper space for Indigenous knowledges and epistemes (and therefore IBPOC epistemes more generally). For example, Smith writes:

From an Indigenous perspective Western research...brings to bear, on any study of Indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power...theories about research are underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of time and space, by conceptions of gender and race. Ideas about these things help determine what counts as real. (50-51)



It is a responsibility of a settler not to put a Western/settler frame onto Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges: that is, one must first recognize that ‘limitations’ in understanding or ‘reading’ is structural rather than personal. While my new methods for reading mediated Spoken Word poetry are deconstructing white, colonial literary practices, I am still building my new method on concepts like close reading that are historically and discursively linked to white, settler literary structures. Rauna Kuokkanen, in *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemologies, and the Logic of the Gift* (2007), argues of institutional decolonization: “the academy will move forward only by committing itself to responsibility and thus, responsiveness. And it will only be able to do this if it extends the dominant, Western intellectual conventions beyond their normative means” (101). Similar to my argument around updating the practices of literary study to meet Spoken Word poetry not submitting Spoken Word poetry to the practices of literary study, Kuokkanen argues that the institution cannot simply include Indigenous knowledge in existing western epistemologies, and rather must allow Indigenous epistemologies to reshape institutional constructions of knowledge.

In working against white, settler epistemologies in the consideration of Spoken Word poets, it is important to not “prehear” their words based solely on their subject position (Robinson 250). In the conclusion of Robinson’s *Hungry Listening*, as a way of ending the book and exploring the ideas Robinson has thus far presented, a transcribed conversation between settler-scholar Ellen Watterman, Robinson, and scholar Deborah Wong is presented. In this conversation, Waterman states:

Listening and sounding responsively (responsibly) are coterminous processes. If we’re doing both well, we are constantly being pulled off center and then

recentering to a new position, which entails being open to exploring new ideas.

The problems occur when we think we can prehear the outcome; and I think that applies as much to listening in the audience as it does to composition or performance. (250)

Her point here is that we must remain open in our listening (and therefore viewing and reading more generally) to avoid both predetermining value of a work based on our settler artistic frameworks, but also, in the context of looking and listening cross-culturally, we might also interpret her statement to be a warning against essentialization. In Chapter 2, I do not study Indigenous poets specifically; however, as noted, I do study IBPOC poets, a disabled poet, and a trans poet. Further, the poetry that I am studying exists outside normative constructions of poetic form. Therefore, even though I am not doing purely decolonial work here, the lessons of decolonial studies can be extrapolated to critical, responseable reading practices, especially in reading the bodies of IBPOC poets as aesthetic contributors to the meaning of a poem.

Reading responseably, critically, and in detail has direct implications when considering the case study in Chapter 2. There, I am confronted with reading a poem that is entrenched in a complex identity: a black woman writing about her experiences with Islamic religious practices and Sufism. When reading her body as part of this process, I am conscious of my own subject position as aestheticizing the body of a black woman. And while I enter that practice with the best of intentions, this context of positionality is always present. The printtext of the poem, entitled “Temple Exercises,” invites us to consider these cultural elements and spiritual practices through narrative and thematic gestures. One might assume that this happens with other poems in the case study (for

example with Mojgani as a black-Iranian man, Tempest as a non-binary person, and Bertolutti as a disabled poet); however, none of their poems contain content tied directly to their subject position. Therefore, they do not invite the same kind of culturally inflected reading. We must be careful not to read the bodies of equity deserving poets only by their cultural markers or marginalization. A disabled poet doing a poem about a bird won't always require this person's disability read into it. Hermeneutic considerations must include cultural background, gender, and ability, but seek not to essentialize a poet/poem in that process. By engaging in more ethical reading practices, we can seek to avoid further abuse of power through critical, responseable, detailed, and empathetic analysis of a work of literature, on its own terms. As such, when reading Evanson, I do my best to read responseably, critically, and in detail: I acknowledge my own subjectivity as a white, agnostic with relatively little knowledge of her true subjectivity and paradigm. I try to interpret only what the poem presents to me, doing further research about that which I don't understand, and attempting not to assume elements of her subject position. However, this is not perfect. In many ways, it is a struggle to read beyond my subject position or outside of western literary epistemologies. I attempt not to subject her poem to my own episteme, but ultimately, in utilizing a method that builds upon western, literary reading practices, this is in some ways, structurally impossible. I hope the practices I outline here offer opportunities to shift literary studies away from historically white, western violent literary practices and towards the critical, responseable ones outlined by IBPOC scholars above; however, a part of this important scholarly work must be to name and acknowledge when we, especially as white, settler scholars, falter in these intentions. And we will falter. But the only way to avoid this faltering is to not try.

And to not try would be far worse.

My intent with *Words Go Past There* is to develop practices that will lead to oral and performance literatures that have been historically excluded to enter contemporary literary canons as their exclusion has been predicated upon white, western, print-based cultural dominance; however, the point is not simply to subject them to traditional methods and approaches of white, western print-based literary studies. Instead, the goal is to rethink the methods by which we approach these diverse, multimodal, multisensory, multimedia texts. We cannot simply think of it as a formal endeavor, but also a political one. Listening, looking, stereotyping and codifying people by their bodies and presentation, is a dangerous and historic practice by white and Eurocentric people and cultures as a way of minoritizing and controlling the minoritized. If white, western print-dominant education is to shift to include more diverse people, epistemes, and texts, it must also account for the ways in which reading practices and value systems are part interlocking systems of power and oppression, and allow the diverse epistemes to shift dominant, normative epistemologies

As such, I will proceed with my reading methods in three ways: (1) acknowledging my positionality in reading (listening, viewing), as a white, male, cis-gendered, hetero, able-bodied man; that any act of listening, looking, and reading in which I participate, as the dominant western subject position (in every way but class) is an act with power relations and a history of oppression that I need to resist in my own scholarly work, yet name when I inevitably falter; and (2) I acknowledge that this “confession,” in Robinson’s terms, without meaningful action is not enough (nonperformative, in Ahmed’s sense). To make this confession meaningful, I have

attempted to create and enact an open, responsive and responseable reading method that seeks to work against traditional, white/western literary practices both through radical revaluing of vernacular oral and performance literatures and through a critical, self-reflexive detailed reading method that acknowledge the personal and structural limitations of my reading practices as a white, settler scholar. There are limitations in my ability to ethically read and interpret the poetry, bodies, and lives of diverse cultural practitioners. There are elements of a poem that I will misread due to my own world view and paradigm and the structures of western literary studies I still participate in. There are aspects of sociality and culture that I do not have access to. There is knowledge that is not for me. (3) There is a complexity with which I, as a white, settler scholar (or male or able bodied or other dominant power positions), must approach the work of IBPOC Spoken Word poets. On one hand, via Blaeser and Tuhiwai Smith, I must actively consider IBPOC Spoken Word poets as not necessarily working within the same creative frameworks as white, settler Spoken Word poets and be careful of subjecting these poets to settler practices of interpretation; however, I must also be careful not to essentialize them and their work in this process. And (4) ethical reading means not just remaining open to works that are oppositional to norms of gender, race, class, meaning construction, and more, but also in seeing the beauty and potential for us as settlers to learn from the challenges to normativity alternative epistemes present.

Incorporating these equitable and inclusive considerations into my method is a complex endeavor, but especially important with Spoken Word poetry, considering its IBPOC origins. While I am limited, both personally and structurally, in my ability to

work outside white, western epistemologies, I feel that the work here is a strong base for my future work, and the future work of other white, settler scholars.

### **Reading Audiovisually**

When I teach close reading in first year English or Creative Writing courses, I use Billy Collins' ["Introduction to Poetry,"](#) a poem I was introduced to in my undergrad by Dr. Paul Milton at UBC Okanagan. As a class, we read through the playful, surreal imagery and I ask them to distinguish between the literal the figurative and, somewhat ironically, ask them that question that (as Collins' poem makes an argument) can be so damaging to the study of poetry: what does he mean? Is he actually informing us to "drop a mouse into a poem" or waterski over a poem? As a class, we often arrive at the conclusion that what he is asking us to do is experience a poem, feel a poem, rather than over analyze it, what he calls tying "the poem to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it" (Collins). With any act of reading, it is smart to proceed with caution: reading is not a method for producing a stable, singular meaning of a poem. Rather, it is about teasing out the opportunities for meanings, based on the poem but also the context of its reading and its readers. Poems have plural existences with many hermeneutic considerations. It is never a static material entity unchanged by time, but rather a text in perpetual beta, changed each time it is (re)read, revised, remediated, and performed/performative (and therefore listened to and watched).

Reading itself is complicated by the media-specific plurality of contemporary Spoken Word poetry: a single mediatized Spoken Word poem may have five or more videos, as well as audio on SoundCloud, audio on studio or live albums, as well as print

iterations (both in a published print text, or as liner notes or lyrics on YouTube or other streaming platforms). How do we prioritize which iterations to read? What is the hierarchy of reading, that is, which textual elements are primary in which media? Should we read as many iterations as we can for each given poem? Should we treat a poem that appears across many different mediums as a distinct object in each medium in which it appears? Here, I will consider how readings of the printtext, the audiotext, and the visualtext are entangled both in a specific mediatized iteration and across the plural existence of a poem, which may exist as a number of performances, videos, print publications, or audio. In doing so, I am not comparing which approach is best. Further, I am not suggesting that one needs to study or teach Spoken Word poetry only if it has access to a given poem in each medium, nor that the meaning of a poem can only be derived from studying all three. Rather, the three main texts and the three main mediums I engage represent major opportunities for interpretation, both in plurality and in singularity. In studying how these texts and mediums might be interpreted and interact with one another in a hermeneutic field of a given poem, I hope to model new ways of studying and interpreting contemporary mediatized Spoken Word poetry. Before moving on, it is worth noting that the irony (and colonial act) of writing about plurality and multiplicity, and then essentializing the mode of Spoken Word into three textual and three media categories is not lost on me. In the preceding sections, for the purposes of developing new methods for the literary analysis and pedagogy of Spoken Word, I have focussed on the many interpretive elements of Spoken Word poetry separately as a way of clearly outlining their nuance and complexity. So, how, in the practice of reading, do we recombine those elements?

In *Audiovision: Sound on Screen* (1994), Michel Chion suggests that sound and image do not work separately in multimedia endeavors, rather that they combine and enrich one another. They give each other “added value” by which he means “the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create a definite impression in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it” (6). That is, audio and video (nor print) are not separate components that each carry their own separate meaning (in the way that two unconnected poems collected in a book might), rather they augment one another, creating new meaning through their combination that was not present in singularity. Chion’s formulation is in regard to film; however, I adapt it here for the purposes of mediatized Spoken Word poetry for obvious reasons. Novak echoes Chion’s reading of visual and sonic elements together: “kinesic and paralinguistic features are best discussed in relation to each other and to the context of the performance rather than in isolation” (17). Novak refers here to the way that the body and other extralinguistic elements of performed poetry should be examined always relationally to one another and to the performance one is studying. Extrapolating Chion and Novak’s formulations to Spoken Word poetry, I suggest that the printtext, audiotext, visualtext in a mediatized Spoken Word poem combine to create a meaning not solely there in any isolated iteration of that poem as a particular text or medium, and, therefore by considering the full interpretive field of a poem we can learn how the three texts work together towards meaning and affective experience across mediums. Novak considers the inability of a particular text in performed poetry to stand alone, specifically in relation to a reading of the body in poetry. She writes:

In contrast to verbal language (in its sense of an abstract complex communication



system) the moving body does not generally bring forth denotative meanings by itself. Seeing a poetry performance on video without the sound will reveal very little about the contents of a poem: body communication is meaningful in live poetry only in its verbal and paralinguistic context. However, body behaviour can modify the meaning suggested by the verbal text, as previous analyses have demonstrated: the body's contribution in a live poetry performance is not simply a redundant add-on to the verbal. Rather, we should conceive of 'a triple and inseparable body, language-paralanguage-kinesics.' (147)

The body alone does not meaningfully denote, rather it connotes in a greater relational, audiovisual gesture with the words of a poem and the voice of the performer. But when combined with words and sound, there can be a fuller range of connotative and denotative meaning to be interpreted.

Despite his work's focus on film, Chion does not solely discuss audio and video, rather he also addresses the way that printtext (though he does not use this term for it) adds value to the audiovisual, writing that printtext, when combined with sound or image, structures our reading. For Chion, film is a *verbocentric* genre, that is, despite sound and imagery being primary to how film creates its effect, ultimately it relies heavily on dialogue (spoken and written words) in tandem with nonverbal imagery and sound. He writes: "When there is speech, our tendency to render the meaning of words the 'center' of attention ('center' not meaning 'exclusive object')" (213). Despite film's heavy reliance on audio and visual imagery, for Chion, when printtext is present this is what we as readers and interpreters tend to centre. He importantly notes that we centre it as

opposed to taking it as the “exclusive object” of engagement so as not to discount the importance of the other two elements.

Importantly, in our reading considerations, Spoken Word poetry is similarly verbocentric. When we are watching or listening to a recording of a performance or reading its text, there are environmental sounds, physical attributes, intervisual contexts, and medium specific affordances that affect our reading; however, the primary (though not exclusive) element is still the printtext (though often spoken rather than written), which interacts with, and is enriched by, visual and audile elements. In some ways, as a written art, this verbocentrism even more true of Spoken Word poetry than of film. Verbocentrism is at the heart of how audiences engage with Spoken Word poetry: the body, the audio, the context may not always be secondary to the words in every moment of a performance, but certainly the words are the centre of our reception, if only by virtue of us engaging with it *as a poem*.

Despite verbocentrism, we are also always reading all three texts. Monaco writes: “[w]e ‘read’ images by directing our attention; we do not read sound, at least not in the same conscious way” (235). But when we think of close listening, we are of course choosing to treat sound as a readable object and to do just that. And further, the privileging of the visual over the audile is part of what Jonathan Sterne has referred to as audiovisual litany, or a list of presumptions about sound and sight, or hearing and looking. For Sterne, the “audiovisual litany...idealizes hearing (and, by extension, speech) as manifesting a kind of pure interiority. It alternately denigrates and elevates vision: as a fallen sense, vision takes us out of the world. But it also bathes us in the clear light of reason” (15). The assumption here is in the old idiom: *seeing is believing*.

However, in the act of interpreting poetry Novak has suggested the “the audiotext is the undeniable focus of live poetry” (75). And although I also advocate for the visuality of Spoken Word poetry, it is hard to argue with Novak’s formation, when considering what interpretive elements drive our reading of a given poem. A poetry video on mute would be much harder to read than a poetry video on a dark screen, as long as we could hear. However, in my formulation of the three texts, the words of a poem are part of the printtext being voiced, not the audiotext.

But in Chion’s formulation, the primacy of words does not preclude the audiotext and the visualtext from contributing to and augmenting that print textual meaning. On the contrary, for mediatized Spoken Word poetry, we hear the words as filtered through a body, a voice, a medium as well as through our own body and context of reception. Each of these layers affects how we understand a poem, sometimes before we have even heard a word uttered. For example, we read the body of a poet before we read their words (we see them before we hear a poem read as they walk up to the stage, adjust the mic etc.). The visualtext and the nonverbal audiotext project tone and context, among other readable elements, onto the language (and in the case of gestures and utterances are a form of language themselves) and those readable elements affect how we interpret the words. We are never experiencing visualtext, printtext, or audiotext separately when we read a Spoken Word poem. For Chion “in the audiovisual combination, one mode of perception influences the other and transforms it. You do not see the same thing when you hear, and you do not hear the same thing when you see.” This answers the ever-present question of hierarchy: in the reading of Spoken Word poetry, we are centring the printtext, but the audiotext and the visualtext are always already present and entangled.

Further, if returning to the effect of affordances, we also see that different mediated iterations of a poem will have different ways that the audiotext, printtext, and visualtext transform one another, containing different combinations of power and centrality for interpretation. For example, when we read an audio file of a Spoken Word poem, the voiced printtext may still be the central interpretive text, but it will also be most heavily augmented by audiotextual elements (music, tone, fidelity etc); whereas, in the mediums of video, the text that most strongly augment the printtext of a poem will be visualtext. Voice delivers the printtext whereas the gesturing, nonvocal body accompanies it. Interestingly, the print medium has the least robust example of the audiovisual interaction of Spoken Word poetry as the defining elements of the genre are absent. When considering reading in plurality and singularity, the print medium is the most difficult for Spoken Word poetry to be read in singularity. Without the body or the voice, the poem as printed medium could be argued to simply be a page poem by a Spoken Word poet. This, in many ways, is exactly why the Spoken Word poem does not feature prominently in the classroom / academic study, and precisely what I am attempting to correct in this dissertation. But if we experience each text simultaneously, what order do we interpret them in? Chion says to first describe then interpret (174). He writes: “There is probably no ideal order in which to observe an audiovisual sequence. But discovering the sonic elements and the visual elements separately, before putting them back together again, will dispose us most favorably to keep our listening and looking fresh, open to the surprises of audiovisual encounters” (177). So, when reading a Spoken Word poem in its plurality, we too should recognize that each reading takes all of the elements of the Spoken word poem into account, yet these elements can be analyzed and interpreted separately without being

removed from the whole construct of the poem.

Despite the visualtext, audiotext, and printtext being present across different mediums, they do not always work congruently towards a unified meaning in the way one might come to expect from a crafted poem on the page. In fact, Novak notes the way that elements of a live performance can complement or contradict the printed text (66). Rather, the interplay between these elements may be synchronous or asynchronous (to borrow terms from Monaco outlined in the previous section), which may, similarly to the example of Sabrina Benaim's delivery in a previous section, create any number of sincere or ironic effects. For example, how might the meaning of a poem about serious yet static time period like the pandemic be augmented by asynchronous sound and visuals, delivered perhaps with erratic, and silly body gestures and cartoon music playing behind the words? Further, for Bernstein, different reading strategies and a different medium too can "contradict" other readings in a different medium or with a different strategy (4). It is not just the different texts or different plural iterations of a poem that might contradict the meaning in one another, but the strategies that we employ in our readings. As Somers-Willett suggests in the quotation I engaged in Chapter 1, reading Spoken Word poetry, in plurality or in singularity, in one medium or across mediums, is a more complex task than literary studies alone are equipped for. Literary critic Peter Middleton argues that close reading practices make the reading of a poem seem deceptively easy. Something akin to "the translation of a text from a foreign language with the help of a dictionary" (*Distant Reading* xii). However, Middleton suggests that reading "contemporary poetry" in all its plurality, is anything but easy. In fact, like this dissertation, he suggests current models of reading such as close reading don't "work so well for the study of contemporary poetry.

These poems produce their meanings across networks of readers, performance, intertexts, and visual representation” and further that their meanings are “not usually locatable in a singular, solitary encounter between one printed manifestation of the text and one sensitive reader” (*Distant Reading* xii). Obviously, this is especially true for mediatized Spoken Word poetry. For example, as explored above, the metaphysical copresence of subjectivity of both poet and reader is important to the audiovisual reading of mediatized Spoken Word poetry, yet its complexity and instability is directly linked to its appearance across text and medium. Mcnamara writes of the Spoken Word poet Dizraeli:

There are particular rhythms of embodied language that are tied to the performer in the performance. He uses his Bristol accent to bring out the song-like quality of the sound of his voice. He plays with and exaggerates the rhythms and texture of his own voice until those moments where it breaks into song. These patterns of voice could not be achieved in another accent, but also patterns that are tied to his unique articulation of words (i.e. his individual, as opposed to regional, accent). The voice is not carried just in the sounds articulated by the mouth but by the wholly embodied performance. For instance, the way in which Dizraeli uses his body to carry the rhythm and the difference in intensity as he moves towards the audience (or the camera in this case) and away, the tilt of the head and the raising and lowering of the chin. (169)

The persona of the performer is part of the audiovisual experience, and unique to that poem, as constructed through printtext, audiotext, and visualtext, but it’s difficulty as a readable element results from the complex interplay of text, medium, literary practice, context, and subjectivity.

As with print poetry, the reader is important to the interpretation of a poem. The mediums of poetry (audio, live poetry, video, and print text) are inextricably linked to the senses with which one engages them (video/sight; sound/hearing, print/sight/touch). Each reader is as different as each poet. Therefore, we might say that a reader themselves has different affordances (or biases, as explored in the previous section). The way that reader feels on a given day, their knowledge and skillset, the reading context they find themselves in, and the poem, medium, and text with which they engage might all augment the reading of a particular poem. How we read, in Spoken Word but also texts more generally, is also inevitably a question of how we feel. In his theorization of affect transmission in contemporary performance poetry, Jack McGowan writes about intangibles of performance poetry and how we interpret individual emotional responses to performance. Still, this focusses perhaps too heavily on liveness. And though the scope of this paper is outside tackling contemporary affect theory in relation to poetry, McGowan, as well as Bearder, have begun this work. So, I think it's important to not just consider the formal aspects (both the text and the social context) both in a close reading and in a reader response sort of way, but also the ineffable of what we feel. Sometimes in a slam we as audience members can't say what the difference between an effective poem and an ineffective poem but we can *feel* it. Monaco describes what he phrases as "[t]he new ecology of art," that is, "the potential power of the observer to multiply the value of artistic experience" (Monaco 40-41). This is not mere reader-response criticism. Students and teachers can find intent, they can contextualize (person and history) as well as interrogate the text itself (that is body, video, audio, and print texts). This might all be part of the reading process. Or it might not. Maybe there is not access to all of these

things. Students can only interpret what they can access. Monaco states: “The word ‘consumer,’ then, is misleading, for the observers are no longer passive but active. They participate fully in the process of art.” (41). Now none of these ideas of necessarily new. However, they are important when considering the process of reading. Not only are we as consumers creating art as we interpret, but, circling back to our earlier discussion of canons, we are also choosing which art gets created each time we read, each time we make a syllabus, each time we click play. As discussed previously, each reading itself is the creation of a new text. In their article “Audience as Coauthor” in *Spoken Word in the UK* Lauren Mcnamara writes:

The audience and the performer together will mould something unique each performance. The audience’s knowledge of the subject matter, or how they feel in the moment of the experience will all alter their interpretation and depending on their reactions perhaps even the interpretation of those around them...[m]eaning cannot exist in a vacuum. The performer will change it and they themselves will change for each performance. The addressee will change too. Both sides will bring themselves into the meaning of the piece. As will the method of communication. Interpretation cannot be definitive. Everything can change in both written and spoken performance. Performance simply has even more opportunities for variation. (157)

Poetic interpretation is therefore unstable because the identity of readers, like the identity of poets, is unstable. Chion writes: “The kind of audiovisual analysis I propose is also an exercise in humility with respect to the film, television, or video sequences we audio-view. “What do I see?” and “What do I hear?” are serious questions, and in asking them



we renew our relation to the world. Such basic questions aid the first step, description, and lead us through a process of stripping away old layers that have clouded our perceptions” (172). Reading poetry then, is also a self-reflexive act of reading ourselves, an idea that echoes the ethical reading considerations outlined in the previous section.

In sum, the printtext, the audiotext, and the videotext are not independent of each other, and, in fact, quite reliant upon one another whether in plurality or singularity. Spoken Word poetry has a hierarchy of meaning—each interpretive element is not as important as the next; however, it is also verbocentric, and therefore the meaning of the words is always, to a certain extent, going to be the centre of our interpretation, with the visualtext and the audiotext, whether synchronously or asynchronously, augmenting that experience. In a given recording or in the full plural existence of a poem there is an audiovisual effect at play, and each text present is associated with a different mechanism for reading, though I would argue this is not exclusive. If we think of folks with different abilities, the printtext can be read with touch or ears rather than the eyes, audiotext can be close captioned or felt with vibrations on lips, and the visual text can be described or even heard if we think of something like footsteps. From a postmodern perspective, all works contain a plurality. They have multiple iterations and exist in multiplicity both in the performance by a poet and interpretation by the reader. The plurality and entanglement of production (performance) and ontology (medium, form, liveness) also leads to plurality and entanglement of reception (reading, listening, viewing). Specifically, as scholars, critics, or public audience members, contemporary poetry in performance is either viewed, listened to, read, or a combination of these reading tactics—there is no right or wrong way, necessarily. There is no fixed meaning of a text,

rather there are an infinite number of possible meanings, due to the complexity of the three texts and three mediums of a poem, the persona and subjectivity of the poet, and the complexity and subjectivity of the reader as well. But according to Chion, this is good. This means that, within reason, we can interpret a text differently at different times, in different contexts, and with different people and no one interpretation is more correct than the other. Further, these acts of interpretation allow us to renew our relation to the world and to ourselves. This is the approach to poetic interpretation Billy Collins championed in “Introduction to Poetry”: interpreting and experiencing while knowing that this experience is not singular. This is the horizon of poetic interpretation—meaning is approached, but never arrived at fully. The poems that I explore in my case study in the following chapter will inevitably be interpreted by me at a given moment in a given context. These interpretations will not be definitive, nor will any of the interpretations that follow my method for reading Spoken Word. But my method will give potential teachers, students, researchers, and readers of poetry the tools to explore Spoken Word poetry across a range of academic and pedagogical contexts.

But now that I have outlined the practices, considerations for, and elements of reading Spoken Word poetry, what is our method? When we read a Spoken Word poem, whether at home during our research or in the classroom, how do we do it? Do we read a poetry video separate from its print text or together? Do we consider each iteration separately? Further, when we are looking at only one iteration, a video poem for example, how do we parse the relationship between text, sound, and visuality? Ultimately, in the section that follows, I combine elements of close reading, close listening, and close viewing with considerations of medium and their affordances with

the interpretive elements of Spoken Word poetry as I have theorized them into a basic method for reading mediatized Spoken Word poetry critically, responseably, and with detailed plurality in research and pedagogical contexts.

### **Method for Reading Spoken Word poetry**

**1. Decide on a poem to read.** What poem are you going to interpret? Hopefully a fun question. Choose a poem that is appropriate to the class you are teaching or research you are completing. Browse around to see what versions of this poem might be available: is there a print version, an audio version, and a video version?

**2. Decide if you will read this work in plurality or in singularity.** Likely, if reading in plurality, you will need to start in singularity, then draw connections between the poem in different mediums. With a given Spoken Word text, you will often have print, video, audio, and maybe, if you are lucky, a live performance available to you for reading. You may also have multiple iterations of the poem in each medium available to you, none of which are necessarily the primary, authoritative text. Therefore, you need to circumscribe the approach to your reading. Which medium(s) will you read the poem in? How many iterations of each medium? This is something that may change as your reading progresses. For example, maybe you start out reading a number of videos of your chosen poem but are most interested by a particular reading. Additionally, different reading contexts and goals, whether pedagogical, epistemological, or personal, will likely require different combination of texts considered for different reasons.

**3. Do initial reading of the chosen poem in all three mediums (or just one medium if reading in singularity): print, audio, and video.** Read the poem and jot down what you notice. Take note of any patterns, or notable moments in the poem. Do not pause if listening or watching digital media. Before moving too firmly on to meaning, start with how did the poem feel? What was the affective experience of reading the poem? What things did you like? What didn't you like?<sup>67</sup>

**4.0 Read the three texts in each chosen medium.** In Steps 4.0-4.4 you will build off of your initial reading from Step 3 but exploring the work with more depth and complexity. If reading in singularity, simply choose the sections of Step 4 that apply to the medium with which you are engaging (For example, if engaging with video just undertake 4.3).

I have laid it out here as though you are engaging with print first, then audio, then video. Of course, you may interact in a different order or with only one medium. I feel that it is hard to unsee and unhear the voice and body of the performer if beginning with video or audio and then going to print, but I am also torn as that would mean willfully continuing the dominance of print.<sup>68</sup> Further, keep in mind that for each medium you engage with (print, audio, video) you will be reading all three texts for that medium (printtext,

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<sup>67</sup> Though “like” is not a critical category of interpretation, I think this is an important step in order to avoid, in Billy Collins’ sense, tying the poem up and beating a confession out of it as though it were a math problem to be solved.

<sup>68</sup> In Chapter 2, I try many different points of entry to a given poem in plurality. I explore the effects of this in analysis that follows the case study.

audiotext, visualtext) and these texts are entangled with one another as opposed to separate. Additionally, some texts will be limited or nonexistent depending on which medium you are engaging with. For example, the printtext in a video may be limited to a title and a YouTube description or the visualtext in a print poem may be limited to the book's cover and an author photo. Despite this limitation, it is still important to consider these elements in your discussion and analysis, even if you will not weigh their impact on the overall meaning and affective experience of the poem as heavily as the words, the voice, or the body. Largely, when reading poetry in any medium, it will be difficult not to begin with the printtext, though there is an argument to be made for beginning with the other texts first; however, each medium will have different opportunities for reading based on the medium in which you are reading. Therefore, as you complete these initial readings, consider the medium you are engaging with, what affordances there are for that medium and what reading strategy and order is appropriate.

Don't forget to do an audiovisual reading. For each medium you engage with, you must also speak to the way that the three texts inform, alter, complement, or supplement the meaning each other presents. How do the sonic elements intertwine with the visual elements? How do print elements combine with visual elements? How do sonic elements combine with print elements? Are the three texts synchronous or asynchronous and what is the effect of that? How does this synchronicity complement or contradict the meaning of the poem? As a verbocentric genre, how does the visualtext and the audiotext expand the printtext? What sonic, visual, or textual elements resonate with greater social, cultural, or historical contexts?

Finally, throughout this process you may want to supplement what does not appear solely in the text with extratextual reading. What can you find on the internet? The poet's website or Wikipedia? Are their reviews, publisher descriptions, or blurbs from other authors? We are not simply close reading and limiting ourselves purely to what is in the text—reading widely for historical and authorial context, as is very common in literary studies, can help illuminate the text further. This is especially important in the act of reading critically, responseably, and in detail as a knowledge of the poet's subject position may important to how you approach the poem.

**4.1 Do a print reading.** With the print medium, read for form, content, and meaning. What form does the poem take? How is the form and content of the poem connected? Consider the concrete and abstract details. What are the dominant themes or images? What is the style? Consider poetic devices including but not limited to rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration, line breaks etc. How do these devices serve the poem? Begin to think about what the poem means. Parse the literal and the figurative as you begin to approach meaning: what literally happened in the poem? What figurative language and meaning was put forth? What sociopolitical, psychological, and technical meaning is present? What denotative and connotative meaning occurs, and do instances of irony occur where the text does both? What about the context this text was written or published in? How does this work relate or speak to greater social, cultural, or historical contexts? What is your response to the work? What is the unconscious of the text? What does the text not say overtly, but may be implied or inferred consistently throughout? What

elements visualtext or audiotext are present in the print version? For example, is there a paratext, author photo, or cover? Is the print poem dominated by voice or other sonic elements? How do the visual and audio elements, if at all, affect your print reading?

**4.2 Do a reading of the audio.** Do your assertions about the meaning of the poem in print hold up when encountering it as audio? If no, how has it changed and why? Turn to the audile elements. Ask: what are the affordances of the medium and platform? How is the quality of the recording or the fidelity? How does the reader read? What is the pace? What is the tone? What is the author's voice like? What kinds of sounds are there? Are there paralinguistic sounds? Are there mechanical sounds such as music? What is the soundscape like for the reading—are there environmental sounds? Do the environmental and mechanical sounds seem important to the poem? What aspects of persona can you hear in their voice? Is the sound synchronous or asynchronous to the printtext? What elements of printtext or visualtext are present? Is there an album cover, liner notes, or a description? Are you listening on Sound Cloud or Apple Music or Vinyl—how does that affect your perception of the artist and the work? Return to step 4.1 and think about the printtext for the audio version as well.

**4.3 Do a reading of the video.** Do your assertions about the meaning of the poem hold up when encountering it as video? If no, how has it changed and why? Turn to the visual elements. Ask: What is the poet's body set, that is, what does the poet look like? How is their posture? What are their body actions like throughout the poem? What gestures do they use and how do those gestures speak? What are their facial expressions like? What

do we know about the writer? What aspects of persona can you see? Is there artefactual communication, that is, what clothes, props, or equipment do they have and do those things augment how you read the poem? How does the visual context of the video affect your reading of the poem? What is the place of performance? What is the spatial arrangement of the video like (venue, stage, or audience)? Does the space the performance take place in directly affect the meaning or is it constitutive of the poem in any way? How is the intervisuality of your reading context affecting the visual experience of the poem? Is there an MC or paraperformance (that is, an introduction or other elements of performance aside from the poem itself)? What printtext or audiotext are present? Does the video have a title or a description on YouTube? Return to Step 4.1 and 4.2 and think of the audiotext and printtext for this video as well.

**4.4 Read in plurality.** Compare and contrast the poem across mediums. How is a poet's reading of the text different than how it appears on the page? How was seeing the poet reading different than listening to them? How is it different than how you pictured them in print? What are the affordances of each medium and how do those affordances affect how we receive the poem? Is there intermediality occurring between the three mediums? How did reading the poem in one medium inform, alter, complement or supplement your reading of the poem in a different medium? How, for example, is the Vancouver Poetry Slam video different than the Throw Slam video? How is the album recording different than seeing it live?



**5. Consider yourself as an active agent in the creation of meaning in your reading of these texts.** Ask: What are your own reading biases? What is your subject position and how is that different from that of the reader? How might the intervisuality of your own visual relations seep into your reading of the poem? What might you have read into the text based on your subject position? How were your likes and dislikes from earlier bound up in your subjective experience and reading context?

Here, I would also stop to consider what aspects you cannot see, hear, or infer from looking, listening, and reading, as well as consider the power dynamic at play. Do not read apolitically, because you can't. Instead, read intersectionally. Who are you? Who is the poet? What ways do your identities intersect or diverge? What is their worldview or epistemology and how it different from your own? How are the practices of literary studies structurally colonial and racist? Read critically, responseably, and in detail to counteract, where possible, problematic power relations and violence. If the poem does not invite you to consider certain elements of ethnicity, culture, ability, sexuality, gender then is that something that you should be reading into the poem at all? Or are you essentializing the poet based on your knowledge of their positionality?

**6. You might consider doing specific types of readings.** The reading strategies outlines above might be too complex or too simple for your goals, skill/knowledge level, or students. Or, perhaps the reason for your reading and analysis is less about form and meaning and more about a particular a discursive or sociopolitical context. Perhaps you read specifically from a feminist perspective for example. Then maybe you review all of

the points from above but consider them from a feminist perspective. For example, how does the audience treat the poet? Does it seem different because she is a woman? Did the MC call her poems beautiful rather than powerful?

**7. You may want to do subsequent readings** to focus in on particular aspects. For example, maybe you do a reading just for paralinguistic sounds or just for hand motions. Isolating these aspects from general readings, and the text especially, may lead to interpretations previously hidden by verbocentricity. These subsequent readings may be spurred by a particular moment of interest from your initial readings.

**8. Once you have done a reading, check your work.** Do another reading in light of your conclusions. Do they hold up on second reading? Further, What about if you wait a few days. This is a new reading, a new performance, a new poem. The text is not different, but you are, and the audiovisual context you are engaging with it in is different. Do your interpretations still hold up? If not, how have they changed? What interpretive elements have yielded different meanings upon subsequent readings?

**9. Modify this method based on your reading goals and context.** This is a longform version of this method. However, if you are going to study a Spoken Word poem in a high school classroom, and you only have 1 hr, maybe you just want to look at one video version of a poem. You can pick and choose what elements from this method you might then use. Likely, it will still be fruitful to think about the print and audio elements, but your focus will be largely on the video and therefore the visualtext. A method of this

nature cannot hope to capture every topic or element of a poem scholars and teachers might be focussing on. But whatever your reading goals are, engaging the three texts of a Spoken Word poem will be a crucial first step, before you then augment this method to your own needs.

**10. Do not attempt to decide on a final meaning.** Allow these poems to be plural not just in their many iterations of existence, but in their many meanings. What are the opportunities for meaning and affective experience created by the myriad interactions between the poem and its many past, present, and future readers?

## Chapter 2.

### ‘Physiology Flutter’: Case Study and Findings

*“The words, several, & for each, several  
senses.*

*‘It is very difficult to sum up  
briefly...’*

*It always was.”*

- Robert Creeley, “Hart Crane”

Four years ago, I had the pleasure of interviewing Antiguan-Canadian Spoken Word poet Tawhida Tanya Evanson for *Resistant Practices in Communities of Sound* (2024). In the interview, I asked Evanson about her creative process for the publication of her then-new book *Nouveau Griot* (2018), which collects print versions of poems that lived in performance for many years prior to publication. I wondered what her process was in translating these performances onto the page, hoping that maybe Evanson would pull back the curtain and reveal, as a master of the craft, a secret relationship between print and performance that my work was just beginning to interrogate. Anticlimactically, she calmly told me that it was easy—the poems *started* as written texts. The print versions of her poems collected in *Nouveau Griot* were not created to represent the performances; rather, the texts were where the performances began all those years ago, and she simply went back to them (Evanson et al. 184).

As mentioned in the Introduction, this dissertation project was initially conceived using the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI): I thought I could create a digital edition of a

case study of Spoken Word poems and mark them up using the TEI tags for performance to mark up the print versions of Spoken Word poems, thus illuminating the concealed relationship between the two. I wanted specifically to see if—and if so, how—the performance of a Spoken Word poem was represented by the page. In the end, I concluded that a print book is different from a live or mediatized performance. One is not the same as the other. However, in this explication of Evanson’s creative process, it became clear that the relationship between page and stage (or audio or video, for that matter) is not as disparate as my TEI failures suggested. For Evanson, the print was where the performances began. Presumably, she would then practice, develop, and perform the poems, honing them. Next, she likely recorded them onto one of her albums, performing more along the way. Some became video poems, some were put to music, and others do not have a video or audio record at all. Then, after all the performing, and honing, and collaboration, and remediation, she published the print poems that started the process. The page is not, perhaps, a score of the live performance, but after talking to Evanson it became clear there is certainly some kind of oblique connectivity and interrelation that necessitated further exploration, a line of inquiry that led to *Words Go Past There* as a project focused on formal reading.

In the previous Chapter, I outlined the need for more formal work on Spoken Word poetry, arguing that in order for the genre to enter more fully into the economies of the classroom and other research and pedagogical contexts a new method for interpreting mediatized Spoken Word poetry as a contemporary form is needed. Further, I argued that due to the plural existence of Spoken Word poetry as print, audio, and video (sometimes with many iterations of each available), the genre presents a unique opportunity to study

poetry across different mediated forms. I then explored the reading considerations of mediatized Spoken Word in three mediums (print, audio, and video), suggesting that within a given poem in a given medium, three texts dictate the hermeneutic possibilities for reading: the **printtext** (a ‘text’ or textuality pertaining to written language such as words on the page, titles, or even comments on a *YouTube* video); the **audiotext** (a ‘text’ or textuality relating not just to the orality of voiced poetry but also any other sonic elements, and the aurality of the listening audience member); and finally, the **visualltext** (a ‘text’ or textuality associated with nonverbal visual elements of a Spoken Word poem, whether that is at the body performing or the reading context of the poem, such as a venue or even a website). In this formulation, a poem in any given medium has elements of each of these three texts. I ended Chapter 1 by outlining a proposed method to read mediatized Spoken Word poetry, both as individual objects of hermeneutic study as well as a plural field of related works existing as different media with different elements of textuality.

In the chapter that follows, I implement my proposed method from Chapter 1 to generate a case study through the analysis of one poem each by four poets (Tawhida Tanya Evanson, Kae Tempest, Anis Mojgani, and Mark Bertolutti) in print, audio, and video. I synthesize the results of this case study further in this chapter’s conclusion. This case study illustrates the complex relationship between printtext, audiotext, and visualltext within a particular poem, as well as the crossover and entanglement of poems that go across mediums, ultimately demonstrating how the framework introduced in Chapter 1 can be used in a complex scholarly analysis of mediatized Spoken Word poetry in both research and pedagogical contexts.

## Case Study and Method

In the case study that follows, I study work by three prominent performance poets from different national traditions important to Spoken Word poetry today: Tawhida Tanya Evanson (Canada), Anis Mojgani (the United States), and Kae Tempest (the United Kingdom); as well as one local (that is, local to Kelowna where I also live) amateur poet: Mark Bertolutti. My case study has been constructed with considerations of diversity of gender, ability, cultural background, content, and formal approach as well as to include poets whose work exists in print, as audio, and on video in order to trial my reading method for mediatized Spoken Word poetry. Further, I have included an amateur poet as a way of radically valuing amateur artistic praxis as key to formulations of Spoken Word poetry, as well as a way for my case study, too, to embody the spirit of Social Practice. Spoken Word has always been tied to social formation, resistance, and amateurism.<sup>69</sup>

Here, I classify each poet chosen for the case study as a Spoken Word poet. However, as explored in the previous section, what defines a Spoken Word poet, exactly, can be hard to pin down. Genre-based labels are not always productive and certainly are not absolute; a Spoken Word poet can write a novel and a novelist can write a Spoken

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<sup>69</sup> I use amateur here in Jim Jarmusch's sense of the word, which is to describe not someone who is unskilled, but someone who does not get paid to do something. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he says he considers himself an amateur "[b]ecause the root of the word amateur contains the word love. So, it's like for the love of doing something, not a lack of skill necessarily, whereas professionalism is: I do this to make money. I'm interested in imperfection because I've learned that mistakes are sometimes very valuable, even very beautiful. I think perfection is imperfect but imperfection is perfect". Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/apr/22/jim-jarmusch-squrl-carter-logan-film-music-interview>. In feedback to an earlier draft of this book, my co-supervisor, Jeff Derksen, writes: my favorite author on being an amateur is the rogue geographer, Andy Merrifield. In *The Amateur*, he writes "To feel more alive is to reclaim the spirit of amateurism, in its different forms, and to counter the ideologically driven world of professionals" (xv). This feels very topical for and affirmative of my inclusion of Bertolutti in this study.

Word poem.<sup>70</sup> However, as is well established above, studying poets and poems that fall under the purview of Spoken Word poetry is an important step in centering the mode within the academy. I classify the works I focus on in the case study as Spoken Word poetry with the acknowledgement that these labels are not hard and fast. For this classification, harkening to Bearder and others, I embrace the slammy, the hip hop, the community-based, and the amateur. I classify these poets as Spoken Word poets due to a “[h]eighted recognition of the audience’s role in the reception, ritual, and community of performance” (82), work for which the audiotext and visualtext are crucial in the process of meaning making, work that is rooted in identity and authenticity, work where everyday speech and political themes are dominant, work coming out of slam, Spoken Word, or grassroots communities, work with innovative relationships to new technologies, and work by poets who determine their status as Spoken Word poet through a previously explored dialogic of reception and identification. Again, invoking Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblance (via Muller-Zettelmann via Novak) not every poet or poem checks the boxes of each of these categories; however, these qualities are “overlapping features” that are not “necessarily common to all” (Novak 51). To this end, I feel comfortable labelling these poets and their poems as Spoken Word poetry, with the understanding that some find this term useless to their practice at best, or, at worst, detrimental.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Tawhida Tanya Evanson, one my chosen poets below, has a recent novel entitled *Book of Wings* (Véhicule 2021). Her status as a Spoken Word poet does not make this novel Spoken Word.

<sup>71</sup> I have mentioned earlier that Evanson embraces the term Spoken Word. Bertolutti is not quoted anywhere as embracing or rejecting the term, nor is Tempest; however, Tempest is regularly labelled a Spoken Word poet, whether on their Wikipedia or iTunes (“Kae Tempest”). Despite regularly being labelled as a Spoken Word poet (“Anis Mojgani” [Wikipedia]) Mojgani notes that he resists the general label of spoken word because he prefers the “naming of a medium to the labelling of an instrumentation” and that this would be similar to a banjo player saying that he makes music for “the banjo rather than



There is a range of identities and forms important to contemporary expressions of Spoken Word poetry my case study could not hope to capture with the time and space offered by a dissertation. While my case study does not include all identities, positions, or types of poetic practices within Spoken Word poetry, it has been constructed with difference and diversity in mind. As evidenced below, I have a wide range of poets from different subject positions, cultural backgrounds, abilities, and genders as well as artistic communities, geographic locations, and poetic methodologies and practices. This said, I also think it is worth troubling the idea of a representative sample. Being placed in this case study, these poets are, in some ways, structurally being asked to represent Spoken Word poetry as well as the various communities and formal conventions within Spoken Word poetry. In some ways, this flattens their subjectivity. Bertolutti does not represent white poets, disabled poets, or amateur poets any more than Evanson represents black poets or Sufi poets. Ultimately, I contend that including a wide range of identities is important for representing the sociality and diversity of contemporary Spoken Word; however, I acknowledge that ways in which this foregrounds the identities of these poets. No case study can perfectly represent that which it hopes to describe, but I feel strongly that this case study captures a wide range of the styles, identities, and content we see in

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simply saying he makes music” (*Songs From 17*). For Mojgani, then, he feels he is simply a poet. In this same piece of writing, he also talks about his origins in slam and characterizes his early work like “Shake the Dust” as aligning with the type of “poetry performed within slams” (*Songs From 17*). While Mojgani has gently and respectfully rejected the label, I respectfully apply for two reasons: (1) The specific and novel way I have constructed my definition of Spoken Word poetry, as opposed to the more general term spoken word that Mojgani resists is very much in alignment with his practice as a poet; and (2) the poem I am studying of Mojgani’s is “Shake the Dust” a poem that he regularly performed at slams, which I argue are one of the key sites of dissemination for Spoken Word poetry. My interpretation of Mojgani as a Spoken Word poet is part of the institutional practice of naming and compartmentalizing, and I mean no disrespect to Mojgani or his resistance to labelling. Rather, I hope that interpreting his work as Spoken Word poetry will bring attention to a genre that Mojgani has been instrumental in creating a global following of.

contemporary mediatized Spoken Word poetry and will be a strong group of poets on which to build a foundation of study for Spoken Word poetry by future scholars.

Additionally, the poems for each poet have been chosen to capture a range of styles and forms common to Spoken Word poetry (from the list poem to work verging on hip hop) but also due to the more pragmatic consideration of which poems were available in all three mediums this study concerns itself with. In the case study below, I analyze a number of different mediatized formats. Here, I do not refer to poetic form in the traditional sense of this word (sonnet, villanelle, etc.) but rather to the different forms in mediatized poetry, such as poetry videos, songs on albums and poetry recordings on SoundCloud, recorded live performances and recorded studio performances, and other such variations. Along with the range of styles, poetic forms, and identities represented here, this array of mediatized formats has led to a strong case study for the study of Spoken Word.

I would also like to note the process by which I have implemented the method from Chapter 1. I will not study each poem step-by-step according to the method I have outlined above. The method is meant to be inclusive of myriad different poems we might encounter and the many possible ways we might try to read them. I don't seek to prescribe quintessential readings of the poems in my case study, but rather to test my method for approaching them. I am not trying to find *the* interpretation of a poem but identify its many opportunities for interpretation through an exploration of how its three texts and three mediums interact in plurality. The many steps of the method are exhaustive but open, leaving room for certain steps to be done or not depending on the reading, research, or teaching context, as well as what poem has been chosen, and how

many iterations of that poem are available across mediums. If every granular opportunity provided by the method were to be explored for every single poem below, this Chapter might be 400 pages. Therefore, I focus my readings on Steps 1, 3, 4, 5 and 8.<sup>72</sup>

Additionally, it is worth noting that I do not read ‘extratextually’ or do an immense amount of outside research on each poet as I suggest in Step 4.0. I provide a short bio for each, but in the interpretations themselves, I largely stick to what is available in poems across the three mediums.

In Chapter 1, I engaged with the idea of reading a work in singularity and in plurality; that is, reading a particular poem in just one medium (print, for example) or reading a particular poem across the many mediums in which it may appear (in the studies below, these are print, audio, and video). In order to read poetry in plurality, it is necessary to first read the poem in singularity in each given medium on which I focus. I can then draw plural connections between the singular readings. Moreover, in studying the same poem across different mediums, the order I study each medium in affects the readings produced. For example, if I study print first, then video, and then audio, by the time I arrive at audio, there is not much left to say over and above purely audile qualities. I will expand on the notion of reading order in the conclusion for this Chapter, but for

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<sup>72</sup> Step 2 will be skipped because (as noted in the next paragraph) I will read first in singularity, then in plurality. Steps 6 and 7 give opportunities for an abundance of types of readings and leave room for the idea that ‘reading’ as interpretation is inherently an individual, and therefore biased, act, but also an act that can have a lens—one might read with a critical race or feminist lens, for example. However, here, I skip these steps as I am reading specifically with the lens of learning about the form, alongside my practices of reading critically and responseably. Step 9 will be skipped for the same reason as 6 and 7, as I have already narrowed my reading goals. Finally, I skip Step 10 because I believe I have carried its ethos all the way through my readings. First, by admitting that this interpretation is, and cannot be, a final interpretation undertaken in a particular place in a particular time by a particular person with a particular subject position. And second, because the method itself makes space for many iterations to exist in the same way it makes space for many interpretations to exist.

now I want to note that I would be remiss if I undertook the interpretation of each poem in exactly the same order. In order to both test the method itself and explore how the order of interpretation may affect the method, I change the order of medium in which I approach each poem. For example, I begin with print, then audio, then video for Evanson's "Temple Exercises" but I take different points of entry in each subsequent poem I read.

### **Tawhida Tanya Evanson’s “Temple Exercises”<sup>73</sup>**

Antiguan-Canadian Tawhida Tanya Evanson is a poet, performer, producer, and ashik.<sup>74</sup> She has two books of poetry, six artist books, and her debut novel *Book of Wings* (2021) was the winner of the 2022 CAM/Blue Metropolis New Contribution Literary Prize. She has released four studio albums, a number of video poems, and toured nationally and internationally across three decades. Additionally, she “moonlights as a whirling dervish” (“About”). Evanson is the director of the Banff Centre Spoken Word program, president of the Quebec Writers' Federation, and creates produces “interarts” projects with her production company MOTHER TONGUE MEDIA (“About”).

Evanson brings a unique stylistic and formal approach to the case study. She frequently creates music as part of her Spoken Word poetry. When she performs, her work is almost always memorized, and often accompanied by live or mediatized music, an ambient score, or sound collage. In live performance, Evanson uses props, incorporates major components of body movement and dance, and prominently features elements of her Turkish and Antiguan heritage. On the page, the poem studied for this project take the form of terse, left-margin aligned, lineated verse, which is unique in this case study as many poets often use prose or other less common poetic forms. She works with occasional rhyme, but it does not dominate her work like, for example, Kai Tempest’s. Evanson has a colloquial yet narrative way of speaking, which blends in interesting ways with the philosophical and didactic nature of the message her poetry

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<sup>73</sup> For information on the method’s steps, refer to it as outlined in Chapter 1. Below I will only reference it in truncated ways.

<sup>74</sup> A travelling bard from Turkic culture. For further reading, see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashik>

explicates.

For my case study, I focus on one poem by Evanson, “Temple Exercises,” which deals with themes of spirituality and culture. For your reference, the video and audio can be found here<sup>75</sup> and the print version can be found in Evanson’s *Nouveau Griot*.

### *Step 1*

“Temple Exercises” has been chosen both due to the availability of the poem in a variety of forms and its aesthetic elements. The poem is available in print as part of Evanson’s collection *Nouveau Griot* (2018). There is a studio recorded version of the poem that appears on Evanson’s Spoken Word album *ZENSHIP* (Lossless 2016) that I engage with via Apple Music. Both the print and audio versions are, to my knowledge, the only print and audio versions available. There are a number of videos of Evanson reading this poem available online. I have decided to work with the video of “Temple Exercises” being performed at the Banff Centre from April 21, 2017 (available on Evanson’s Vimeo account) as, in terms of fidelity and production value, it has the best quality out of the videos of this poem that are available, as well as a wide camera shot that provides a full view of Evanson’s visual performance. With the goal of choosing formally different types of poems to study for each poet, I picked “Temple Exercises” for its narrative qualities, both on the page and in Evanson’s audiovisual delivery where she tonally

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<sup>75</sup> The audio version can be found on Apple Music, with a subscription, or here on Evanson’s Bandcamp: <https://tanyaevanson.bandcamp.com/track/temple-exercises-perceiving-the-bull>. However, please note that if listening on Bandcamp, you will not be able to engage some of the features I speak to below, which are exclusive to Apple Music. The video version is available via Evanson’s Vimeo site: <https://vimeo.com/mothertonguemedia> as “Temple Exercises (perceiving the bull).”

enacts a storyteller's register.

### *Step 3*

*Nouveau Griot*'s cover has a green and yellow palette that is playful but also obviously culturally coded for an Afro-Caribbean poet whose book title refers to the African Griot tradition. "Temple Exercises" is a two-page poem that pulses its way back and forth across the page, engaging ideas of family, spirituality, and mortality. It begins with two lines of corporeal, lyric language: "Physiology flutter. Atrial fibrillation. Brother" ("Temple" 64); however, the poem quickly shifts into a familial narrative by line three: "I seen my father's heart green on a black ultrasound screen" ("Temple" 64). This back and forth between narrative and lyricism continues throughout the piece. There is a non-metred rhythm that carries the poem, which I will unpack further below, that showcases Evanson's musicality. The lines "Physiology flutter. Atrial fibrillation. Brother. / Repetition rhythms. Extra beats we all have it" become a repeated chorus as the poem progresses through its story, ending with a tour of world temples and spiritual sites, like the Pyramids of Kush ("Temple" 65).

On a personal level, the poem's narrative of her father in the hospital makes me think of my own father, who died when I was a teenager. The spiritual elements are a hopeful balance to the narrative of a sick family member. As someone who was raised religiously but abandoned the church years ago, I do not feel spiritual; however, I enjoy writing that explores spirituality without evangelical dogma.

The audio version from *ZENSHIP* begins with an audio-clip of NASA radio chatter speaking those classic lines, "Houston, we have a problem" (0:06). I hear the

words “Standby 13,” (0:14-16) which leads me to believe it is a clip from the Apollo 13, a mission famous for failing to land on the moon. The audio is sombre, Evanson’s voice less joyful than when I have heard her read this poem elsewhere. She snaps throughout the poem. Because I am hearing it in audio, the snaps are very loud—different than in videos. In comparison to her live shows, Evanson’s voice is almost whispered, perhaps due to the quiet studio recording context and the sensitive nature of studio microphones where there is less of a need to project the voice (affordances again). Despite the more reserved delivery, there is still the playfulness and hopefulness we find in print: “I say no—it’s a vagina yo! He say no” (2:01-03). There is such a joyful, melodic nature to Evanson’s voice that I find myself listening to the poem sonically rather than searching for meaning.

The video begins with an ad for Vrbo. I have to click past it, as I do not have YouTube Premium. In subsequent readings, there are different ads. The video is quiet to start. No one in the crowd speaks or mumbles or hoots. Evanson begins on her knees, an uncommon body action for poets. There is no microphone on the stage, but her voice is clearly mic’d so it must be on her person. In video, we get a much more dramatized version of the work. She is swaying, dancing, and performative in her body actions. The vocal performance is much faster and louder than in the audio version, words are stretched and bellowed to play to the back, but the snaps are quieter. For example, in the line, “stiff knee swollen broke” (0:34-36) the words “swollen” and “broke” have additional emphasis that we do not notice in the audio version, nor in print. Generally, Evanson’s demeanor is more playful. There is no Apollo 13 audio clip to start, as on the album.



#### *Step 4*

In terms of the content of the printtext, “Temple Exercises” is a personal narrative, told in the lyric-I, about Evanson’s father’s trip to the hospital perhaps first for a knee injury and seemingly a subsequent heart episode: “Stiff knee swollen broke but it was the Heart / That needed attention” (“Temple” 64). As the poem progresses, Evanson explores a global spirituality, taking readers/listeners/viewers on a tour from her own heart to sacred religious sites across the globe (such as The Wailing Wall) to brushes with deities and back, finally, to “the most sacred point”: the heart (65). These transitory final sections gesture towards the individual, as well as the collective, as we go from her father’s heart (the granularity of the heartbeat) and the “stem cells in a petri dish” (“Temple” 65), to the global metaphor of describing her own heart in terms of religious temples across the world.

Along this journey, Evanson explores greater ideas of rituality, spirituality, and corporeality. The rituality of “dervish duties” and prayer are linked to the procedural nature of the hospital (“clean it, cook it, move it, doctor, pray, wash, sweep. Repeat”) (“Temple” 64) and the mechanical nature of both the heart and the medical machines her father is hooked up to. She thematically links the narrative of her father’s heart episode to her own religious practice, both as a child (“as the oldest in the family / dervish duties began in the temple”) (“Temple 64) and through the above-mentioned gestures towards worldwide religious sites (“The Wailing Wall says Lean in and Kiss me”; “The Ganges says get naked and swim”) (“Temple” 65). In the latter third of the poem, the narrative returns to Evanson flying to Montreal with her father’s heart “medicine in a box”

(“Temple” 65). There is a meditation on the plural meaning of health here, both in terms of physiological health as she delivers his medicine, but also moral and spiritual health as she urges a visit to “Ma’at the mother of truth,” an Egyptian Goddess known for bringing order and justice, where his heart will be weighed “against a feather” (“Temple” 65). It is here that Evanson’s purposeful repetition in the poem is extended beyond its sonic parallel to heartbeats and heart monitors: “Atrial Fibrillation” is an irregular heartbeat—something that breaks with the rituals of the body (lub-dub). “Extra beats we all have it,” (“Temple” 64) then, might refer to physical, mental, and spiritual irregularities that connect us all. We could read this as complicating the order and predictability (whether as moral discipline or muscular metronome) of the temple (as both body and building) as a site and arbiter of existential meaning: ‘God’ is within us all. The poem ends with the notion that the heart is the most “sacred point” (“Temple” 65). Therefore, what makes us sacred, special, or holy, then, is not prayer or discipline, but what figuratively lies within our hearts.

The poem does not hug the left margin, instead sprawling across the page in a pseudo-Olsonian fashion, using blank space generously to mark pauses and breaks. There are no stanza breaks—the poem exists in one large stanza, but many of the lines are quite long and/or reach the right margin of the page, which almost makes the verse look like prose. I would argue that this is a feature common of Spoken Word and performance poets in print (somewhat similar to Anis Mojgani’s “Shake the Dust” or even Ginsberg’s “Howl”).

The language of the poem similarly exists liminally between poetry and prose, or rather lyric and narrative. For every line directly stating elements of story (“That day my

father lay on his left side, shirtless”) (“Temple” 64) there is a lyric line containing play with sound, language, and syntax to express emotion. For example, there is a clear (though unmetred) rhythm and sonic play with lines like: “Physiology flutter. Atrial fibrillation. Brother” (“Temple” 64) and “Crossed the Quebec Hospital Sistine system and still sick of it” (“Temple” 64). The former is a staccato sequence of incomplete sentences, that do not connect meaningfully until we get more narrative about her father’s heart episode. The latter is a typical prose line telling of the Quebec hospital’s pseudo-religious system (presumably it is a church-based hospital like St. Paul’s in Vancouver). But the line has a number of trochaic feet and spondees as well as stressed syllables more generally (as in, SIS-tine, SYS-tem, and STILL SICK of IT) containing alliteration and assonance. As we move on with the poem and learn about its focus on the heart, we can see that trochaic feet could be read to resemble the heartbeat (DUH-duh, DUH-duh). Though this rhythm does not map perfectly (both as scansion from page to concept of trochee, but also from trochee to heartbeat) the poem contains a meta, albeit perhaps unintentional, justification for this with the repeated line “extra beats we all have it” (“Temple” 64-5).

The audiotext and visualtext are limited in the printed version of the poem. Evanson puts words together with musicality, so there is rhythm and rhyme that betray the poem was designed to be voiced. The cover of the book, as mentioned, is culturally coded with the pan-African colors green and yellow. The colors are obviously connected to the book’s title, *Nouveau Griot*, which combines Evanson’s Montreal home’s official language (Nouveau or new) with the African formation of the griot, an African storyteller and musician, to situate her poetry as a modernized and emplaced cultural practice: new

griot.<sup>76</sup> There is a picture of Evanson in back of the book that is a standard author photo. The visual materiality of the book is otherwise ordinary, other than the French flaps, which give a sophisticated material flare. However, the pages containing “Temple Exercises” have a concrete element to their visuality: if you turn the page sideways, the lines are delineated like a heartbeat/rhythm on a heart monitor.

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On the audio version of “Temple,” a track on her spoken word album *ZENSHIP* (2016), the poem comes to life through Evanson’s skilled vocal delivery, the presence of music and audio collage, and the polished production value. The audiotext is robust and prominent. The fidelity is high, and the rhythm that was so apparent on the page is even stronger here. The content of the poem is animated through nonverbal sounds *synchronous*<sup>77</sup> to the meaning. There are no mechanical or environmental sounds save for the aforementioned Apollo 13 soundbite, but Evanson snaps her fingers, and makes nonverbal machine-like sounds with her voice throughout the poem. This, combined with the staccato rhythm to the way she speaks, aggregate to mimic heart machines hooked up to her father, her father’s heart beating, and the figurative spiritual heartbeat of the whole world. Additionally, there is a musicality to the way Evanson delivers her lines: “Heart cells beat on and on and on” (*ZENSHIP* 2:49-52), many other lines are sung, and she

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<sup>76</sup> Evanson speaks to the tradition of the Griot: “I think that goes back also to the griot tradition where the griot has like fifty different job titles: you’re the poet, the storyteller, the dancer, the ceremony participant, the village librarian, the genealogist. You have all these titles. I think spoken word is just perhaps a more modern version of the griot” (Evanson et al. 181).

<sup>77</sup> I outline this term in Chapter 1, terms I have borrowed from James Monaco, to describe the way that the content of audiotext, visualtext, and printtext are congruent or parallel with one another in order to create the same meaning or affect (synchronous), or they are disparate or incongruent with one another in order to create meaning or affect through juxtaposition, metaphor, or irony.

repeats the lines “Physiology flutter. Atrial fibrillation. Brother” (*ZENSHIP* 0:21-22) throughout the poem like a chorus.

Evanson uses tone and pace shifts throughout the poem. For example, at the line “My heart is the mud mosque at Djenné” (*ZENSHIP* 3:02-03), the tone gets a little more serious for a moment, and the pace slows. Interestingly, she also stops snapping on this line for the first time in the poem, which synchronizes with this tonal shift. When she returns to the narrative of her father, the snaps begin again (*ZENSHIP* 3:39). We get another shift in tone and pace at the line “Out of all my temples on earth, visit my grave at Giza” (*ZENSHIP* 3:10-11). The tone gets gentler, and the pace slows. These shifts in tone and pace serve to highlight thematic elements, create a rise and fall in the narrative experience of the poem, and create dynamic oscillation between the lyric and narrative modes the poem is working with.

The visualtext and the printtext are limited in their appearance on the audio file. There is a grey, gradient album cover with the album title and Evanson’s name. I listen on iTunes, so there is the intervisuality of that platform, but it does not particularly affect how I read the audio version, other than to draw my attention to my own playlists or other music, occasionally. There is no description of Evanson, or the album featured on Apple Music (like there is for a more prominent artist like Tempest), so the printtext is limited to the vocal performance in the poem and the liner notes of the record, again, neither of which create much of an audiovisual experience.

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In video, the visualtext of “Temple” is rich. Evanson’s body actions add interpretive movement, dance, sounds (largely in the form of finger snaps), and body/hand gestures.

For example, she dances rhythmically as she speaks the line “repetition rhythm. Extra beats we all have it” (“Banff Centre” 1:10-14). Some of these actions are synchronous to the printtext and others are not. The instances where Evanson’s body actions are synchronous with the content of the poetry serve to enhance, express, or clarify the words spoken from the printtext. For example, when she says “Left side separate from right” she snaps on the left then the right, with each word (“Banff Centre” 2:15-17). Another example is the way that Evanson begins the poem on her knees in a silent prayer position (“Banff Centre” 0:01). Her posture is upright and firm, which keeps with the rigour of religion and ritualistic prayer that the poem goes on to explore. Her synchronous body animates the printtext of the poem in ways that words on a page, or even a voice on a recording, both of which are inherently verbocentric, cannot.

In other instances, her body actions are asynchronous or even static. For example, when she speaks the line “That day my father” she points at the audience in a *deictic gesture*<sup>78</sup> (“Banff Centre” 1:15). This gesture is not synchronous; it is not a gesture of a father or a day, but rather a conversational gesture towards the audience. These kinds of gestures are very common to Spoken Word poetry in performance. Though it may not necessarily add interpretive meaning like a symbolic gesture, one might argue that it is part of the conversational conceit of many Spoken Word poems. Like breaking the fourth wall in poetry, it is a gesture that connects audience and performer through rehearsed conversation (albeit perhaps one-sided). The musical metaphor at play in the poem, comparing heart beats to musical beats, becomes more apparent through both her vocal

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<sup>78</sup> A type of gesture Novak terms as “pointing towards persons, objects, directions or locations” (163-64). For a refresh on gestures, visit the section in Chapter 1 titled “Reading the Body.”

delivery and the dancing that occurs at a number of instances. There are also moments of unknowability and ambiguity throughout the poem as anticipated by my methods. She makes gestures with her body and arms that I do not see as connecting to the words or offering any distinct meaning of their own. We might consider these *motor gestures*.<sup>79</sup> This harkens back to Novak's idea that the body's action and set cannot always be easily read as a "code" as it is a "highly context-dependent form of communication." Therefore, we can only read the body for "*meaning potential*" (emphasis Novak's) (148). That is, the body's meaning in a poem is highly interpretive, rather than fixed. Thus, like its printed cousin, simple or fixed meanings cannot be easily extracted from audiovisual readings of mediatized Spoken Word poetry.

Evanson's poem invites us to read it in culturally specific ways due to the content. The particularities of Evanson's heritage are not made explicit by the poem, but they are not divorced from it, either, due to the spiritual and religious themes of "Temple" and specific cultural references. For example, the speaker, presumably a textualized version of Evanson, recalls "As oldest child in the family / I was given dervish duties in the temple" ("Banff Centre" 0:38-41). I know from reading about Evanson that she identifies as Antiguan-Canadian and also as a Sufi Muslim, but the particularities of Evanson's cultural heritage cannot be seen explicitly in her *body set* or *artefactual communication*. She wears a long black dress that goes all the way down to her ankles and has full sleeves, with a head covering. Immediately, she might be read by as coded religiously in a non-Western way, likely, due to the references to dervish duties, Muslim; however, I

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<sup>79</sup> A type of gesture Novak terms as "rhythmic movements that accent particular words or phrases" (163-64).

may be reading this into the work due to the content of the poem and my own limited knowledge of Evanson's culture; these may also just be the clothes that she feels most comfortable in and have nothing to do with her culture. Additionally, we might also read her body actions as culturally signifying. For example, when she speaks the line "Like a dark fist getting things done" she reaches up her hand into the *symbolic gesture*<sup>80</sup> of the black power symbol ("Banff Centre" 2:29). At the end of the performance, she bows to pray, kisses the ground, then picks up a staff (that I did not notice was there until she picked it up) from the ground and kisses it ("Banff Centre" 4:14-17). This staff, like her clothes, has *artefactual* meaning, furthering the spiritual themes (a staff as an Islamic religious object, which I will explore further below).

It is here that my positionality as a white, western, agnostic man should be acknowledged. I want to read responsibly, critically, and in detail. I want to consider Evanson's poem on her own cultural terms, but doing so might require more knowledge of Evanson and of her cultural heritage than the poem or further research can give me access to. However, I also want to acknowledge and name my limitations here. The cultural noticing and wondering as part of my reading of this poem may be particular to me as a white person (or someone who is not a part of Evanson's cultural and religious practices). A different reader sharing Evanson's cultural background may not feel like these elements stand out, in the same way I do not notice Bertolutti or Tempest's whiteness (though, again, their poem's content is not culturally inflected like Evanson's). My own subject position as a white, agnostic is important to acknowledge as I engage

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<sup>80</sup> A type of gesture Novak terms as "conventionalized movements with a direct verbal translation" (163-64).



with the cultural content of Evanson's poem and read her body and subject position as aesthetic components of this. And further, naming the ways in which my reading may fall short of my responseable, critical, and detailed methodology I outline in Chapter 1.

Other than her body, the other elements of the visualtext do not greatly impact the meaning of the poem here. The space has the atmosphere of a blackbox theatre, with not much more than curtains, a stage, and the Banff Centre logo. The camera shot is very far back, so we cannot see Evanson's face very well (which is why I do not speak to it above). The crowd is very quiet and engages very little for a Spoken Word performance; however, the Banff Centre is a CanLit institution that, even with a seasoned performer on stage, falls prey to the kind of rigid institutional expectations around poetry readings and performances bound up in conservative practices of artistic decorum rather than dialogic spaces in which interaction from the crowd is accepted, and even cultivated, like we might find at a poetry slam.

The audiotext of the video is robust. For example, differentiation between her persona and others, such as the doctor character within the poem, was easier to comprehend in her vocal performance here than in print (which she deepens for the doctor in both the video and the audio versions). Her voice often provides either rhythmic and musical elements or synchronously performs the content of the poem. For example, when she speaks the line "she will weigh your heart against a feather" ("Banff Centre" 3:48-49) she says the word feather very lightly. In the video, environmental sound and mechanical sound is fairly minimal. There is a small amount of clapping and snapping from the audience, but little is picked up other than Evanson's words.

The printtext, like in the audio version, differs very little from the print version of

the poem. Other than the vocal performance of the printtext, the printtextual elements of the video version are quite minor. There is a Banff Centre logo on the video, as well as a brief one-sentence description underneath the video. This video is on Vimeo, which, as opposed to YouTube, has a less intrusive intervisuality: there are no ads, no other videos in the margins, and no one commenting below. Despite the lack of any significant print elements, in the video version we get a much clearer sense of the three texts working together than in the other mediums in that there are robust audiotexts and visualtexts in what we see and hear (with the printtext appearing as vocal performance).

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After reading each mediatized version of the poem in singularity, I can now speak to the relationality of the versions in plurality. The most notable findings stem directly from the affordances of each medium, though there are also slight variations in each performance. For example, the sound quality is much clearer in the audio version on *ZENSHIP* than in the video of Evanson's Banff Centre performance. She speaks much quicker in the video and her snaps seem louder or more abrasive than on the audio. The recording equipment in a studio is going to pick up much lighter snapping than in a performance. Obviously her hands are not mic'd, so she needs to snap in such a way that the folks in the whole space can hear. On the audio version, her voice is also generally softer and slower. There are words, lines, and stanzas that I perceive more clearly on video or audio than read in print. For example, when she speaks the line "meditating on knees for days" on *ZENSHIP* (0:56-57), her voice takes on a husky, drawn out tone, which emotes the tiresome duty of religious discipline; however, when I encountered this line in print, I largely 'read over it.' That is, it did not stand out as significant or create a memorable affect in my reading

experience.

There are also more overt differences between the print and the audio iterations of “Temple Exercises.” For example, there is mechanical sound (an audio clip) that does not appear in the video or print that is a recording of an astronaut saying, “Houston we have a problem” (*ZENSHIP* 0:06). But as we listen to the poem and understand its gesture towards both the individual and the universal, the relationship between the problems of space (an astronaut seeing the whole world and saying, ‘Houston we have a problem’) and the problems of her father’s heart episode, is a scaled parallel of the experiences and struggles of the many and the few. There are also minor differences in how lines appear in print versus how they appear in video and audio. For example, the line in print reads: “Clean it, cook it, move it, doctor, pray, wash, sweep. Repeat” (“Temple” 64). However, in the audio version, it is read differently (*ZENSHIP*). If we wrote it the way that she read it in this instance, it would read like: “Clean it, cook it, move it, doctor. / Pray, wash, sweep, repeat.” In the audio, there is a pause after ‘doctor’ that a period or line-break might denote, but no pause before ‘repeat’ as the period in the print version denotes. The differences in the printtext’s across audio and print mediums are so minor they are often hard to notice and affect our interpretation little.

Originally, I had planned on looking at more than one poem by each poet, but it was outside the scope of the dissertation as a form. However, in studying another poem by Evanson entitled “Act of Creation,” I came across another video version of “Temple Exercises” performed at The Centre for the Creative Arts (CCA) at the University of Kwazulu-Natal. During this performance, Evanson describes the poem as “dedicated to anyone who has ever taken care of a parent” (“Day 4” 17:15-16). She goes on to add that

you are lucky if your parents looked after you and if you got to look after your parents (“Day 4” 17:17-18). The implication is that this is an autobiographical poem, describing Evanson’s experience with a sick parent. As a result of this, we might extrapolate the autobiographical nature of the poem to the other cultural content of the poem. We might assume that Evanson was raised in an Islamic household of some kind, signalled by the “dervish duties in the temple.” Dervish is a Sufi Muslim religious order with particular duties, practices, and relations to God. My research about Evanson tells me she identifies as a whirling dervish (which I have noted above), which is a particular kind of dance coming out of this culture. As such, reading in plurality, here, has led to a much greater understanding of the poem, not only due to a different performance of the text itself, but due to the paratext (or paraperformance) the video of Evanson reading at University of Kwazulu-Natal contained.

### *Step 5*

I feel that perhaps I cannot engage with this poem with new eyes, because I have read it so many times before. When I read it in print, I hear Evanson’s voice in my head. I can see her on the stage of Banff, or just laughing in my few other interactions with her as poet, scholar, or event producer.

My interpretation of “Temple Exercises” above illuminates clearly how the study of the body as a research method can spur the reader/researcher to seek out new information and understanding of cultures presented in a given poem that may be outside of their own lived experience or subject position. For example, after watching the video I began reading about Islam, whirling dervish, as well as Afro-Caribbean history and

culture. I learned that in Islam, a walking stick or staff is a cultural object and part of the practice of walking and that Muslim people are encouraged to carry one (“Walking Stick”). So, the artefactual communication of the prop of the staff is another way the spiritual exploration enacted in the poem is reflected in the visual text. In this way, my responsible reading practice led to a wider understanding of not just a poem, but of a poet’s culture. However, it also made explicit the ways in which we must remain self-reflexive in our cross-cultural reading of poet’s bodies and subjectivity. While I remain open to the possibilities for interpretation in Evanson’s work, with active and critical consideration of her cultural context, I am also careful not to essentialize her and her poem into representing her culture. For example, I want to read her clothing as connecting to her Islamic culture as well, however, this may not be the case. And though I would love to consider this poem from Evanson’s cultural episteme, I am not sure that is possible. There is information about her and her cultural background I am not granted access to by this poem. I do not think internet research could help me fully understand her cultural paradigms. As I listen, view, and read I am doing so from my personal subject position and within a white, western, colonial history and framework, despite my best efforts to draw on decolonial, anti-racist frameworks and nonnormative genre (Spoken Word poetry), mediums, and textuality throughout the dissertation. When I interpret and notice the cultural and religious contexts of Evanson’s work, I am inevitably ‘white-western reading,’ something that feels important to acknowledge but now, in the act of interpretation, hard to act outside of. I have tried to acknowledge when my practice of reading falls short of my theoretical goals.

*Step 8*

My interpretations largely hold up on subsequent readings. Though, each time I read, listen, or watch I see something new to write about and add. For example, recently, on probably the 100<sup>th</sup> time I listened to Evanson's audio version of "Temple Exercises," I noticed the way she stops snapping as she tours global spiritual sites, then returns to snapping when the narrative of her father's hospital visit returns. What is clear is that each poem, upon subsequent readings, holds more interpretive opportunities than this dissertation could ever explore. Additionally, it was interesting, when teaching this poem as part of Spoken Word 384 at UBC Okanagan in Winter 2023, to hear my students' widely different interpretations of the poem, ranging from it being a critique of religion, to being about fear and morality, to being about travel. There is something to be said for individual interpretation versus collective interpretation (though, this is outside the scope of this dissertation). Additionally, the way that personal research contexts are somewhat different from examining a poem in a classroom might also be explored in the future.

### **Kae Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos***

Kae Tempest is a non-binary poet, playwright, novelist, and rapper from London, England. They have published six books, four plays, four studio albums, as well as a novel and a book of non-fiction. They won the 2013 Ted Hughes Award for their work *Brand New Ancients* (2013) and were named a 'Next Generation Poet' by the Poetry Book Society. Their debut novel "*The Bricks That Built the Houses* was a Sunday Times best-seller and won the 2017 Books Are My Bag Readers Award for Breakthrough Author," and they have been nominated for a number of other awards including twice a Mercury Music Prize and a Costa Book of the Year award, and Best Female Solo Performer at the 2018 Brit Awards ("Kae Tempest" [Wikipedia]).

As with the other performers that make up my case study, Tempest's primary mode of publication in their career has been the stage, or mediatized performance. They have an innovative relationship with audio and live performance, often toeing the line between a hip hop concert/album and Spoken Word performance/album. Stylistically, more so than the other poets in this case study, their work is strongly aligned with rap and hip hop; at times it is hard to tell whether you might classify their work as poetry at all. On the page, their poetry ranges from prose poetry to lineated verse, employing rhyme and rhythm heavily. Their work often sprawls across the page rather than hugging the left margin, and frequently uses white space, allowing the words to 'breathe'. They employ an attention to language and a play with the opportunities of sound (like you might find both in hip hop and English literary verse) while also working with character, voice, and narrative (in ways we might see more of in fiction or theatre). The content of their work

is often political or narrative in nature, dealing with themes of gender, religion, class and poverty.

I have chosen to study the first two sections of Tempest's long poem *Let them Eat Chaos*. For your reference, the video and audio can be found here,<sup>81</sup> and the print version can be found at the end of this chapter in Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos*. I would also like to note that certain links to Tempest's work are to recordings that took place prior to their transition and use their dead name. In linking to them, I mean no harm or disrespect to Tempest. Further, I will address how I have excluded the use of Tempest's deadname in a footnote below.

### *Step 1*

Here, I study the first two sections Kae Tempest's most celebrated work, *Let them Eat Chaos*. I say 'sections' here, rather than poems, because there are no clear delineations between poems: there are no titles, numbers, or new poems starting on new pages.

Rather, the poem appears to take the form of a long poem in print; however, as I will explore when reading in plurality across the mediums the work appears in, we see that the term 'long poem' does not hold up in each iteration of the work. My print selection spans the first eight pages of the book, published in 2016 by Bloomsbury. By looking at the lyrics and liner notes on the album, I can tell I end my reading at the end of the section that, on the album, is titled "Lionmouth Doorknocker." The album can be found on Apple Music and other streaming services, as well as a vinyl LP, from Lossless Records in

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<sup>81</sup> The audio version can be found on Apple Music, with a subscription. The video version I analyze can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDt3OunosTQ>



2016. The video I engage with was uploaded on February 7, 2017 to YouTube by English Dane, though not much other information is given about when or where, or who recorded the video. It captures a live performance, though the venue and location are unclear.

### *Step 3*

The video version is from what looks to be a large concert. Tempest begins on stage, with a mic. We see musicians behind them. There is high-calibre lighting and a fancy chandelier. The recording is multicamera, so we get different angles of the performers and shots of the crowd, as well. The opening poem is setting up the narrative of the city, and the chaos and brutality of modernity. There is an oscillation between what might be classified as Spoken Word—with lyric language, narrative prose, and even dialogue—and hip hop parts that have musical flow, rhyming, and repetition of a chorus. This performance is before their transition; they have long white curly hair and visually read very much like what you might expect from a British rapper. As they perform we see a lot of what we might call ‘Rapper hands’; that is, a combination of deictic and motor gestures that do not necessary denote a particular meaning or illustrate the words but serve to accent the vocal and musical performance. For example, the kind of pointing and hand waving we see around 3:19-23 of the video (“...Tempest” 3:19-23).<sup>82</sup> These hand gestures are common in hip hop but contrast the more specific hand and body gestures we

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<sup>82</sup> This citation is complicated given that the original video uses Tempest’s dead name. My dissertation was already deep into the process when I learned of their transition, or I might have used a more contemporary work. I do not want to include that name in this dissertation out of respect for Tempest, so, I have replaced it with an ellipsis. The link in this chapter and in the Works Cited at the end of the dissertation will take you to the video where Tempest performs their set but, as a warning, this video still uses Tempest’s dead name. I have also removed the name from an amazon link below. These instances are systemically inequitable to trans people, and an example of how current MLA citational practices need to be updated to be inclusive of trans rights.

saw in Evanson and, as we will see, in Mojgani.<sup>83</sup> These sections of this poem do not just go across mediums, but also across genres, with certain moments feeling like Spoken Word poetry and others like hip hop. If I didn't know that this work by Tempest was a poem (which is directly stated on the front cover of the book), I would likely classify it as hip hop. The music is beat driven and makes me nod my head as I listen and watch.

The audio version, similarly, listens very much like a hip hop album. There is a decidedly British use of synth in dark and broody ways and a drowning, echoey, reverb-heavy production value like you might hear in New Wave or Goth from the UK (think The Cure or The Smiths or more recently The Vaccines) or British hip hop more generally. The delivery is very similar to the live, though sonically it is obvious that they are different. There is a fidelity to a studio recording versus a live recording that is hard to mistake. Tempest has a very distinct accent, obviously British, though I am not sure what part of the England it is from, though, in keeping with the hip hop aesthetic of the work, it is working class/urban coded. Tempest's Wikipedia page states that they grew up in "Brockley, South East London" so we might assume that the accent is from there ("Kae Tempest"). The initial experience of listening to Tempest's album and watching the video of Tempest perform is very similar. Tempest is a dynamic performer, but their embodied performance does not add much to the voiced performance in terms of

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<sup>83</sup> I think it is worth noting that we might also consider Tempest's subject position as a white person, and the ways that hip hop culture have been appropriated from black cultural practices. Rapper hands, then, might be considered as a gestural cousin to African-American Vernacular English, and part of a greater cultural appropriation of black culture by white hegemony. In some ways, this hearkens back to a critique of Spoken Word poetry more generally and its possible appropriation by white culture, a point that Corey Frost notes, citing an online comment that says that Spoken Word is when "skinny white teenagers talking like they are 40-year-old black women" (*The Omni* 120).

expanding the printtext's meaning or affective experience (aside from the physical presence of *Tempest*) due to their hip hop gesture.

Finally, we come to the print iteration of the poem. It notes immediately in the print text that "this poem was written to be read aloud" (*Let Them Eat Chaos*) There are two epigraphs: a quotation from William Blake, and the Bible verse John 4:18, which I will return to below. The work sprawls across the page rather than hugging the left margin. The text is polyvocal, largely in second and third person but with character dialogue in first person. The book begins in second person, telling an implied reader to "Picture a vacuum // An endless and unmoving blackness" (*Let Them Eat Chaos* 1). It goes on to describe the cosmological experience of living on earth, echoing the opening sections of the Bible: "Here is our Sun!...There is our Earth" (*Let Them Eat Chaos* 1). Their work is somehow vague, despite all the concrete details, but an enjoyable and compelling read, nonetheless.

#### *Step 4*

*Let Them Eat Chaos* muses on the state of the world through character-driven narrative and sonically-skilled lyricism. The record/long poem "follows seven individuals who all live on the same street who have never met each other before. But then at 4:18 in the morning, a storm causes these seven people to leave their homes and see each other for the very first time" ("Let Them Eat Chaos"). Like a play or a novel, the structured story builds a world around the desires of characters living in urban London, creating a robust landscape that *Tempest*'s verse and music can inhabit. The album's title references the famous phrase "let them eat cake," which refers to a phrase uttered by a French queen,

speculated to be Mary Antoinette, in response to hearing the lower, working class had no bread (“Let Them Eat Cake”). As the poor and labouring classes did not have access to any food, let alone cake, this phrase was largely meant to dismiss their needs. *Let them eat cake* means ‘not our problem—*let them figure it out,*’ or, more literally: starve to death. In echoing this famous phrase, Tempest’s work is immediately situated within the needs, whether social, cultural, or economic, of the discarded classes of the world.

In the video, there are a number of visual elements available for consideration and interpretation—unlike the live video of Evanson’s “Temple Exercises” or the other poems that make up this case study—including set pieces, lighting, cinematography, and the crowd. The video has a very high production quality. For example, the shots are crisp and clear, and the show is shot with multiple cameras, providing a variety of angles and perspectives. The video is a full performance of *Let Them Eat Chaos* from start to finish. This contrasts with many of the other videos studied in this case study that are of a poet reading either a singular poem or reading a number of poems that are not necessarily from the same work. In terms of body set, Tempest has long, curly, blonde hair. They wear a green baggy army coat, and dark blue baggy pants. Unlike any other video I study in this project, the performance is collaborative: there are many bodies on stage instead of just one, although the musicians are in the background and are not the focus of most of the camera shots.

The video starts in darkness (again, almost echoing the biblical narrative of there being darkness in the beginning, and God creating the light), with the house lights down (“...Tempest” 0:00-04), and I see a strobe of chandelier lights before a title comes up on the video: “...Tempest – Let Them Eat Chaos” (“...Tempest” 0:02-04). Then the screen

goes black again, and Tempest begins speaking, a voice and nothing more: “picture a vacuum / an endless and unmoving blackness” (“...Tempest” 0:07). Then, a backlight behind Tempest comes up, though house lights remain down (“...Tempest” 0:10), and they continue reciting the opening lines of *Let Them Eat Chaos*. We see band members, static, in darkness behind Tempest, awaiting their cue. There are large set pieces like chandeliers, and huge whirring fans (I assume they are whirring, though they are not picked up on the audio recording) and screens with twinkly, circular lights moving on a black background like stars in the sky. Lights slowly come up and we see more of Tempest’s face. A string instrument is played as they recite the poem (“...Tempest” 0:12-1:25) and eventually other mechanical sounds, such as a synthesizer creating sounds that are not quite music—in that there is no rhythm or melody—but rather an ominous din, like a score from a Christopher Nolan movie (“...Tempest” 1:42). The words “4:18” are projected on the roof, which connects to the poems in various ways, as I will note below, and we see a large screen behind Tempest where the album cover is projected.

There are two very distinct modes that Tempest presents the poem in: (1) A *Spoken Word poetry register* and (2) what we might refer to as a *rap register*. Register often refers to orality/aurality; however, I use it here in relation to the body as well as the voice. In the Spoken Word poetry register, their voice and body align with what we expect from a poetry reading: they speak slowly and annunciate clearly, in a mostly unmetred rise and fall of words.<sup>84</sup> They emote certain words in this register. For example, when they speak the line: “or is it the tremor of dread” (“...Tempest” 1:35-37) they have a faint whimper on the word dread. In this register, their body actions are dynamic and

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<sup>84</sup> Not dissimilar to what Marit Macarthur refers to as ‘poet voice’, as discussed above.

serve to animate the words through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous movements. For example, when they speak the lines “now we start on the corner with our back to the wall” (“...Tempest” 5:29) they make a flattened hand gesture, signifying either the wall, our backs, or perhaps both. In the rap register, Tempest aligns their vocal delivery to the beat and the complex metre of the music that accompanies the words. Their body actions take a back seat and fall into a kind of predictable swaying and ‘rapper hands’ that are not necessarily asynchronous to the meaning of the words, but they do not portend to mimic, dramatize, or explicate the words either. Rather, their hands in this register are somewhat driven by, and synchronous to, the beat (see, for example 3:46) (“...Tempest”).

At times, these registers shift quickly or bleed into one another. For example, at times Tempest’s hands and body set are synchronous/asynchronous or dynamic/static, no matter the register. However, largely these two registers are quite distinct and have very clear moments where we shift between them. We see this shift when they speak the last lines of “Picture of Vacuum,” “What am I to make of all this,” when the drums come in and the next poem/track “Lionmouth Doorknocker” begins (“...Tempest” 2:59-3:03). On speaking the word ‘this’ their demeanor immediately shifts. The lights start pulsing and a heavy drum beat begins to play. They start dancing to the beat (rapper hands ensue), and they pull the microphone off the stand. This is the first instance where the show feels more like hip hop, after the beginning of the performance felt very much like a literary performance.

The performance context is very different than what we find in any of the other poetry videos in this case study. Mojgani’s takes place at a bookstore, Bertolutti’s at

Shaw Studio in Kelowna, and Evanson's at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity—all very commonplace venues for a poetry reading. None of these events have a very large audience. From what we can see based on the videos, I would estimate that there are less than 100 in each case. The stages are all very simple, and no one else is on stage but the poets, who rarely have more than a few artefacts, a book, or a mic with them. Tempest's show, however, is on a much larger scale, perhaps because of their level of fame or their dual draw as both poet and hip hop artist. When we see shots of the crowd, it is large, standing, and packed tightly. As alluded to above, there is a robust light show that accompanies the performance, as well as a number of musicians and all their gear on stage. All of this signifies a musical performance rather than a poetic one; as a result, I find myself less focused on the words in this video, at times, than with other video or audio in this case study. Despite their body actions not being as dynamic as what we see from Tempest (especially in the hip hop register), the entertainment value of the shows feel on another level than what we come to expect from a poetry video because, well, it isn't one.

I described Tempest's body set above, but I would like to return to it here to also consider persona and identity. Because of Tempest's non-binary identity, it might be tempting to read this element of their subject position into *Let Them Eat Chaos*; however, upon numerous viewings/readings/listenings, this poem has no direct references or thematic inclinations towards gender identity. In contrast to Evanson, whose cultural identity connects directly to the poetry she is reading, *Let Them Eat Chaos* tells a fictional story of a group of characters who all live on the same street in London; the work is likely not autobiographical, and if it is, Tempest's non-binary gender

positionality does not feature. Tempest's identity as a non-binary person is therefore not a readable element here. Additionally, the performance takes place prior to Tempest changing their pronouns.

The audiotext and printtext of the video version are quite robust. The audiotext is being performed live with a group of musicians. Tempest's vocal performance, which is almost identical to what we find on the record, is dynamic. As mentioned, we also encounter a lot of mechanical sound in the form of synthesizer (again, akin to a movie score). There are print elements everywhere, from logos, to banners, to posters, to projections. When I watch the video on YouTube, there is the text below it, different videos beside it each time. 4:18 projected on the roof, which refers to the John 4:18, an epigraph at the beginning of the print version that I will expound upon in a following section. However, the most significant element of the printtext is the distinct and synchronous shift between the outlined registers of rap and Spoken Word. The content of the Spoken Word poetry sections/register has more of a storytelling approach, with vivid details, narrative beats, and character dialogue; the rap sections/register uses more lyric language that privileges fitting the content into metre and rhyme, like one might expect from song lyrics more generally. Below I have two examples to illustrate this shift in printtext between the two genre registers. First, we have a rap register section:

Smart flats. Rough flats.  
Can't-get-enough-cat flats,  
You know, seventeen cat flaps.  
Rich flats, broke flats.  
New flats.



Old flats.

Luxury bespoke flats.

And this-has-got-to-be-a-joke flats. (“...Tempest” 4:18-28)

Next we have an example of Tempest in their Spoken Word poetry register:

The road runs ahead of you

Houses and flats either side

Walk down it;

Go past the yard with the caravans,

There behind the hedges.

Now look, here.

In the house opposite:

Black gate-post

With the concrete frog squatting on top of it. (“...Tempest” 5:37-54)

This dynamic performance of the printtext, and its synchronicity with the greater tonal and register shifts going on with the live performance make for a dynamic and interdisciplinary viewing experience.

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The audiotext of the audio version of the first two sections of *Let Them Eat Chaos* listens more like a concept album of music than a poetry album. Similar to listening to a Pink Floyd record, each track flows into the next rather than having distinct gaps between them as you expect from most albums (whether music or poetry). While not apparent sonically, the shifts between tracks are made explicit because the album is split into tracks on apple music, and each track has a title.

The audiotext is quite similar to the one we heard on the video version of the poem. It begins with a voiced part in Tempest's Spoken Word register. After Tempest speaks the line "gold as a pharaoh's coffin" we hear the chime of bells in the background ("Picture a Vacuum" 0:21-23). The ominous, movie-score-like synthesizer we heard on the video comes in on the lines "the sadness of mothers as they watch the fates of their children" ("Picture a Vacuum" 1:33-37). Immediately after this line, the pace of Tempest's voice grows quicker and a sense of urgency enters their voice and slowly increases as they ramble off a long section in second person, speaking to an implied listener who is sick with the experience of living in the chaos and pain of the world and human life. Tempest speaks: "all of that peace that you felt is replaced with this furious never know passion" ("Picture a Vacuum" 2:01-07). Tempest's voice ebbs and flows in its fury and gentleness as they deliver the lines for another 30 seconds. There is a sonic emphasis placed upon the line "Let's call her London": Tempest pauses for a moment between the words 'her' and 'London,' and when they speak the city's name there is a robotic voice layered behind theirs that echoes with reverb ("Picture a Vacuum" 2:30-33). This signals to the listener the importance of place to this piece: despite speaking to global issues of violence and poverty, London is the setting for the story *Let Them Eat Chaos* tells. The poetic register continues until the final lines of "Picture a Vacuum" are spoken: "What am I to make of all this?" (2:01-07). Immediately, "Lionmouth Doorknocker" begins, and a hip hop beat comes in loudly, along with a low, rhythmic keyboard that almost replicates a bass guitar. Despite this concept-album-like flow, the first two tracks represent the two distinct registers of Tempest: "Picture a Vacuum," a Spoken Word poem with ambient music behind it; and "Lionmouth Doorknocker," a hip

hop song, with the occasional Spoken Word poetry interlude. When listening to the album on Apple Music, it reminded me of listening to a music album more than listening to a poetry album. Apple Music as a ‘reading context’ perhaps made the musicality of the work feel more prominent, though, this is speculation. I did not feel that way when listening to Evanson’s poem on Apple Music. The musicality of *Let Them Eat Chaos* is never more apparent than in the repeated chorus in “Lionmouth Doorknocker”: “Is anyone else awake? Will it ever be day again?” a line that Tempest sings with highly produced, layered vocals with an effect that gives the line the sound of many people speaking a mantra or chant (“Lionmouth Doorknocker” 0:53-58). “Lionmouth Doorknocker” is largely a hip hop song, with the same beat backing the song, verses with both end and internal rhyme, and Tempest staying in their hip hop register. That is, until the end of the track, where Tempest momentarily switches back into their Spoken Word poetry register. The rhythmic keyboard stops, and we are again left only with the beat and the ambient synthesizer. This section describes the road that all of the characters live on in London (“Lionmouth Doorknocker” 2:27-44).

In the audio tracks, the visualtext and printtext, similarly to Evanson, are somewhat inconsequential during the actual listening experience. In terms of printtext (other than the voiced lyrics/poetry) there is a title, album name, track names, etc. The visualtext text contains the viewing context of Apple Music, which, other than the intervisuality of some playlist names and other front end platform elements of the app, provide little to look at. However, unlike on Evanson’s albums, here we find a description of the album written by an Apple Music writer, which signals that Tempest’s work is prominent enough for the streaming service to do so. Apple Music has writeups

about some artists and albums and not about others, which is generally tied to the popularity of the band. For example, Taylor Swift has extensive writeups for her as an artist, as well as each album and single, whereas my friend Matt Price's solo album, *Sleepwalking*, does not—sorry, Matt. The writeup Apple Music provides offers context for Tempest as an artist and for the album itself:

The poet/playwright's mastery of detail and character translates into engrossing rap. With evocative descriptions of the everyday, Tempest's second album portrays seven lives on one London street being transformed by the forces of modern living, while producer Dan Carey's steely electronica reflects the hard times and spiralling tensions within those stories. ("Let Them Eat Chaos" Apple Music)

This type of general copy is common of the descriptions on Apple Music, but it is working in a few ways. First, it gives us a generalized description of the narrative that helps bring together the often-oblique storytelling. And second, it notes that Tempest is a poet and playwright, the latter a fact that is apparent in the way *Let Them Eat Chaos* appears on the page in the print version. Finally, the track listings, as an element of printtext (albeit paratext), have been illuminating, which I will build on below when reading in plurality.

The audiovisual experience of the audio version of *Let Them Eat Chaos* feels quite cohesive: the lyrics and poetry match the music, ambient sound collage, and apocalyptic cover imagery of the album. The music has a sombre and, at times, tense ambience to it, which, when not acting as a song, acts as a score to the words Tempest speaks. For example, "Picture a Vacuum" begins with a vast, cosmological references,

describing the “speck of light in the furthest corner” (0:17-20). Tempest’s voice is calm, matching the poetry’s wonder at the miracles of the universe. However, the words and their tone of voice, as well as the music that comes in to accompany the voice, shift from content to concerned when Tempest, speaking anthropomorphically about the earth says: “Is that a smile playing across her lips? / Or is it a tremor of dread” (1:29-32). It is at this moment that the whirring ambient synth comes in the background like the sound of an engine underwater. This synchronicity of voice, music, and words carries throughout the first two sections of *Let Them Eat Chaos*.

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The print version opens with the caveat “this poem was written to be read aloud” (Tempest 1). What this caveat illuminates about the text is twofold: (1) *Let Them Eat Chaos* (the print version at least) is a poem, as opposed to a play or song lyrics; and (2) the way it appears on the page is connected to how one might read the poem aloud, rather than privileging its existence as a separate print object; and 3) we might say that perhaps an insistence on Tempest’s part of the prioritization of the aural/oral over print, or Spoken Word poetry over print poetry.

On the page, *Let Them Eat Chaos* does not hug the left margin, instead sprawling from margin to margin, utilizing the opportunities not just of words, but of white space, too (reminiscent of Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*). I evoke Olson above because the print version of *Let Them Eat Chaos* appears to follow a kind of breath line, which we will see when reading in plurality below. But here, it is worth noting that the sprawling nature of the poetry does not feel arbitrary. The use of white space, indents, line breaks, stanza breaks, and short lines versus long prose lines feels quite deliberate, and, in fact,

creates readability. For example, the lines:

And these  
are the only  
times

you have known.

*Is this what it's come to?*

You think

*What am I to make*

*of all this? (Let Them Eat Chaos 5)*

There are clues here about how to read the text. The line and stanza breaks signal where one might break and breathe and pause were they to speak these poems. Additionally, the italics are obviously the direct thoughts of the implied listener, likely the characters living on the London street, though this is not verified. The characters' voice is distinct from the narrator voice of the poem, both in terms of the italics denoting that difference on the page, and also how the narrator speaks in second person and the characters, when we encounter them, speak in first. The white space and stanza breaks create some nice dual effects though enjambment: “these / are the only / times // you have known” contains the double meaning of mortality; “these / are the only / times” echoing the Latin ‘sic transit gloria mundi’, loosely translating as ‘everything ends.’ But the additional meaning provided by the line “you have known” expands the meaning of these “only times” as

perhaps referring to the state of the world lived in by the characters in the narrative that the narrator is speaking to, and how they have not known anything but this chaos. These lines mimic the overall interplay between the galactic and universal and the specific and the personal.

There is very little in terms of audiotext and visualtext, and therefore audiovisual, and they do not affect our interpretation of the words much, with the exception of the book's front cover, which shows a world with a smouldering city on top of it. Of course, this is synchronous with the themes of the work, as well as the narrative 'matryoshka doll' that the piece creates through juxtaposing cosmological imagery, the smaller civic narrative of the city of London, and the still smaller narrative and imagery of the shared experience of neighbors who wake up in the night and come out of their houses at 4:18 in the morning.

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Reading *Let Them Eat Chaos* in plurality was a very fruitful and illuminating undertaking. Each medium the work appears in contributed new insight into the meaning and experience of the work as a whole. The video version, as with Evanson, contained the most interpretive opportunities for each of the three texts. The audio contains a relatively similar audiotext to the video version, but the apparatus around the audio version contained important contextual information. The print contains a lot of clues about how we are to read the text through how it appears on the page and its utilization of the breath line. As much as reading these versions in plurality illuminated about *Let Them Eat Chaos*, it also posed further questions of form and genre. Specifically, the book's liminal existence between long poem and hip hop album is complicated by the work existing

across mediums, and perhaps a basis for arguing that the true encounter of *Let Them Eat Chaos* is indeed across all three media.

Similar to Evanson, the audiovisual experience is most apparent when watching the video. We get a rich mixture of the robust audiotext, with Tempest's body, the stage show and other musicians, the light show, and the projections. The audio version of the poem contains almost no reference to the number 4:18, a biblical number mentioned above that appears as epigraph in the print, but only fleetingly in audio. This number has a dual meaning of referring to the biblical verse, which reads: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love" (*Let Them Eat Chaos* 1). This connects to the overall narrative of the work, about finding love and connection between people from different walks of life, and perhaps more abstractly represents love's ability to triumph over fear, but also refers to the time in the morning the characters simultaneously wake up. Without this epigraph, or its projection in the video, this number is lost to the ether of the album's music. However, despite its appearance in the video, without the epigraph it would take a keen eye to immediately assume this refers to John 4:18. In this way, the three versions of the poem each contribute to the interpretation of this number.

The video, as it does with each poem in this case study, allows us to experience the embodied performance of the poem. However, due to the hip hop register taking place for at least half of the performance, the embodied performance does not add much more than Tempest's persona and body set. Of course, this is contrasted by the dynamic body actions that Tempest enacts during their Spoken Word register. Seeing Tempest adds a layer of complexity to how we might read the work in each medium, as well: should we



read the performer into the poem as we did with Evanson? In short, no. The content of the poem does not appear to be biographical. And further, in terms of reading responsibly, that person performing is not the same person Tempest is now. They have since transitioned. So, even if we were to find reason to read their body and persona into the content of the printtext, it would present the dilemma of what that means for who Tempest is. At this time, they were still performing the gender they were assigned at birth, which perhaps means nothing to the person Tempest is. It would be interesting to do a reading of the poem from a more contemporary video to think thematically about Tempest's work in regard to trans experience. Interestingly, during the parts in Tempest's hip hop register, we actually receive the most persona not through body set or body action, but through voice. Their accent sounds working class, and class is one of the chief themes the work is dealing with. In this way, we might read their assumed working-class upbringing as pertinent to the fictional characters that Tempest develops in their story.

I think we see a strong correlation between the audiotext across the video and audio mediums. At times, with others like Mojgani and Evanson, we see the audio tracks incorporating musical elements, but then the live/video versions are quite different: in Evanson's case, for example, the live version had no musical or mechanical sound at all. But there is less difference here between Tempest's audiotext on the album and live: similar to when you go see a band, the expectation is that the tracks are replicating what you heard on the album. Akin to Evanson, the chief difference was that the volume with which Tempest voices the printtext is louder in the video version. Again, this is likely due to the context of live performance necessitating that a performer project their voice to be heard above the din of the crowd and the din of the music, whereas in the studio, with

high calibre recording equipment, a performer can speak more quietly and more softly and still be heard (or rather, recorded). Other than the volume of Tempest's voice, they largely replicate the listening experience of the album—a difficult and virtuosic feat in and of itself. The exception to this is the point of the printtext when the music starts. In the audio version, the chiming of bells happens at the end of the line: “gold as a pharaoh's coffin” (“Picture a Vacuum” 0:23); however, on the video version, these bells are so quiet at the end of “coffin” (“...Tempest” 0:25) they are barely audible, and instead come in at “blazing a fire you can't bear” (“...Tempest” 0:40). This is likely due to whomever is running sound missing a cue, or more specifically, the volume on the backing track for the bells is turned down and then is turned up on the line “you can't bear.” When performing live in collaborative ways, the performance is always going to be less stable than on a studio recording or on the page.

There is an important layer of printtext in the audio version of *Let Them Eat Chaos* that contributes much in plural reading. There is the Apple Music description of the album and the track titles that I have spoken to above. The album description provides a summary of the narrative that makes our listening experience clearer. The track titles give us an idea of where ‘poems’ start and stop, as well as containing more interpretive content themselves: the titles. In the track “Lionmouth Doorknocker” there is a line: “the lionmouth doorknocker flaps in the breeze” (1:39-42). But without knowing this is the title (as is our experience in print and video) I would not have read the image of the doorknocker as significant. Now I read it as perhaps metonymic of that which separates our characters (doors) but also that which connects them (their homes being on the same

street). There is also a third layer of printtext on the album version of *Let Them Eat Chaos*, which is lyrics.

The lyrics, written by Apple Music (or possibly generated by a computer), look like the lyrics in any old liner notes, a left-margin capitalized, quatrain ballad form that has existed for centuries in print culture. This strikes me as a huge editorial decision when we look at the print version and how the poem plays and sprawls. This is one of the most significant findings we have found from reading in plurality: printtextual difference, which I will return to below and in my conclusion.

It is much easier to hear the printtext being voiced on the audio version than it was on the video version due to the fidelity of the recording and the slower, gentler voice Tempest speaks in on the album. So much so that I did not hear the line: “this is a city, let’s call her London” (“...Tempest” 2:42-47) when first watching the video, a line that gives important narrative context for our interpretation of the poem. On the audio version, this line is much clearer, and its importance stood out.

Generally, the verbocentrism we find with most mediatized Spoken Word performance was less prominent here, with Tempest, due to the heightened importance of music, which destabilized the hierarchy we are used to in Spoken Word poetry. This destabilisation is exemplified further by the way that the words are not always synchronous to the audiotext of the audio and video versions because the audiotext often had an upbeat hip hop sound (especially in “Lionmouth Doorknocker”) while the words were often very sombre and dealing with heavy geopolitical issues. Obviously this is not true for the print version of *Let Them Eat Chaos*.

Due to the breath line that Tempest uses, the print version of the poem replicates

much of the voiced printtext from the audio and video. Take this passage from the print version, for example:

Picture a vacuum  
An endless and unmoving blackness  
Peace  
Or the absence, at least  
of terror. (*Let Them Eat Chaos* 3)

When I listen to the audio or the video, each line break and stanza break is represented by a pause or a breath in Tempest’s performance (“Picture a Vacuum” 0:00-13; “...Tempest” 0:04-16). The audiotext is more robust in the printed version than we saw with Evanson, as well. Not just because of the metre and rhyme, but also the lines in italics, which denotes a different way of speaking to them as opposed to dialogue. For example, the chorus “*Is anybody else awake? Will it ever be day again?*” (*Let Them Eat Chaos* 8) is italicized, and we know from listening and viewing that this is the chorus. Interestingly, the shift from “Picture a Vacuum” to “Lionmouth Doorknocker” is not signified in print as it was in video and audio with audible and embodied shifts in tone and register; the only clues are formal with a shift from short, sprawling poetic lines with lots of white space to longer lines hugging the left margin and collected in stanzas.

In this way, we not only get a good sense of how the poem will be performed from how it appears on the page, but we also get a sense of how to read the poem on the page from what is contained in the audio and video texts (titles, tonal shifts, etc.). Finally, I felt that reading the print version allowed me to follow the narrative and understand the work more fully. I found Tempest’s thick accent hard to understand in the video and

audio versions. Again, coming back to my own listening positionality as a non-British person. Their accent is only hard to understand because I am not from the same community. And while we can see markers of dialect in print, accent is less prominent.

The question of form is an interesting one with the interrelations of mediums in *Let Them Eat Chaos*. Is it poetry? Is it monologue? Is it hip hop? Wikipedia refers to it as the second “studio album” of Kae Tempest (“Let Them Eat Chaos”). Apple Music notes that Tempest’s experience as a “poet/playwright” strengthens the writing of this “rap” (*Let Them Eat Chaos* [Apple Music]). When describing the print version, Amazon refers to it as a “narrative poem—set to music on their album of the same title” and a “long poem written for live performance and heard on the album release of the same name.”<sup>85</sup> So, what is *Let Them Eat Chaos*? Formally, then, we might say perhaps the different iterations, whether in print or video or audio, take different shapes in these different mediums, or perhaps each version incorporates elements of many forms. What we might infer is that although the print, audio, and video versions of a poem contain similarities and replications (the printtext, in particular, often goes across all three mediums in largely unchanged ways), ultimately they are still different works, each containing form, genre, and content that does not appear, or perhaps appears differently, in the other mediums. When distributing a work of art as a poem versus an album versus a live performance, an artist must consider the conventions of each. There are benefits to adhering to those conventions. For example, if your album was one 45-minute track, less people would listen to it than when it is broken into the shorter sections of songs. This is nowhere more evident than when comparing the print version of *Let Them Eat Chaos* and

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<sup>85</sup> Can be viewed online, here: <https://www.amazon.ca/Let-Them-Chaos-Kae-Tempest/dp/1632868776>

the lyrics accompanying the album version on Apple Music. Though each is a printtext of the same root work, these iterations are simply not the same piece of writing, let alone the same genre.

### *Step 5*

I think that there are some obvious biases here. First, I am from Canada, not the United Kingdom. There are words, and meanings, and contexts to Tempest's lyrics/poetry that I probably cannot grasp as an outsider to that context. As mentioned, at times I cannot easily understand what Tempest is saying due to their accent. But reading in plurality across mediums lessened the gap, allowing me to view lyrics on Apple Music or read the print version of the book, which in turn helped me understand the audio and video versions. Another potential bias here might be my own interest in class narratives, which may lead me to find this work more compelling than another reader. I grew up fairly poor, so these narratives have always been a point of interest for me as I see my own experiences reflected.

### *Step 8*

Subsequent readings have not changed my perceptions or interpretations much. However, the more I listen to the album, read the print version, and view the video, the better I am able to understand Tempest's thick accent, and parse the words through their quick delivery. It is a dense, long text that at times has a kind of global vagueness to it. That is to say, it uses a number of abstractions which are not always matched in the volume of

concrete details. But in returning to these texts, I feel I grasp the story and the themes more strongly each time.

### **Anis Mojgani's "Shake the Dust"**

Anis Mojgani is an American Spoken Word poet, children's author, and performer. He is of Black and Iranian descent ("21 Thoughts") and was born in New Orleans and grew up in the American south, despite his poetic practice being largely based in Portland, Oregon where he is currently the Poet-Laureate.

To date, he has published six books and a libretto. His performance practice has dominated any sort of audio or visual outputs, with an extensive world-wide touring practice under his belt. Although he does have one live album and other audio material, his work has largely appeared on the stage or, as a visual artist and as a poet, in collaboration with art galleries and museums. He has been a resident poet across the United States at Vermont Studio Center, Caldera, AIR Serenbe, The Bloedel Nature Reserve, The Sou'wester, and the Oregon Literary Arts Writers-In-The-Schools program, among others. Mojgani's work has been published widely in print in American literature magazines like the *New York Times*, *Rattle*, and *Bat City Review*. He has also appeared on HBO, NPR and in the "Academy of American Poets Poem-A-Day" series ("Anis Mojgani" [The Piano Farm]). Mojgani is a two-time US national individual Slam champion, he placed 2nd in the 2007 Individual World Poetry Slam first in the 2007 World Cup Poetry Slam. He has performed across the globe from US universities to the Sydney Writer's festival, to the United Nations. He was also part of the Solomon Sparrow's Electric Whale Revival and 2008's Junkyard Ghost Revival, both Spoken Word poetry touring shows, as well as a number of slam teams in both New York and in Seattle ("Anis Mojgani" [Wikipedia]).



Mojgani's work on the page often takes the form of prose rather than appearing like lineated verse in stanzas and lines. His work is both personal and narrative, while also being surreal, and contains sonic play. He uses less rhyme than others represented here, and some of his most well-known works employ variations on the list format (a staple of Spoken Word poetry). His live performances, for which he is known, combine both memorized works heavily employing body action, and traditional print poetry readings in which the body is very static. In terms of content, his work has a hopeful and whimsical tone, telling surreal stories of a mythical nature, but he is not afraid to be political, engaging his cultural heritage and background and thinking through race, as well as his personal experiences as a bi-racial person in the US. For my case study, the poem I have chosen is "Shake the Dust." For your reference, the video and audio can be found here,<sup>86</sup> and the print version can be found at the end of this chapter in Mojgani's *Songs From Under the River*.

### *Step 1*

"Shake the dust" is an important poem for this case study to consider because, perhaps more than any of the other poems I study here, it is a very classic Spoken Word poem. This classification is more intuitive than empirical, as someone who has been a part of the Spoken Word world for many years. But to attempt to exemplify this assertion, what I mean is threefold: (1) The poem takes the form of a list poem. The list poem is one of the most common Spoken Word poetry forms, and, specifically, it is very common at poetry

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<sup>86</sup> The audio version can be found on Apple Music, with a subscription. The video version I analyze can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PWrlOgrzHQ>

slams. “Shake the Dust” is not a numbered list poem and rather an anaphoric list poem, repeating two phrases throughout to begin and to punctuate lines, which are the eponymous phrase “shake the dust” and “this is for,” which directs the poem towards an implied audience the poem has supposedly been written for; (2) The poem has a very colloquial tone with an uplifting message, both of which typify Spoken Word poetry because they play well with audiences: if a poem is easy to understand and people feel good it will appeal to a wide range of audiences (and maybe even score it high in a slam); and finally, (3) It was one of three poems Mojgani performed in the 2006 US National Slam competition, which “put [him] on the map” (sgq5007). Mojgani is one of the most successful and celebrated poets to come out the American slam scene. As this poem was significant to his career, this poem carries additional historical significance to slam and therefore Spoken Word poetry more generally.

“Shake the Dust” was collected in *Songs From Under The River: Early & New Work* (2013), a book by Mojgani that collects a number of poems that lived for many years only on the stage and were collected into print in 2013 when the book was published (17). The audio I have chosen comes from Mojgani’s album *Live at Mother Foucault’s*, his only poetry album to date. The video I have chosen is from a reading at the Bowery Poetry Club in 2012 and can be found on YouTube. As “Shake the Dust” is a very popular poem, there are a number of recorded versions of it living on the internet. One could do an interesting study on how these poems progress, but that is outside the scope of this work. For the purpose of this case study, I chose the video at the Bowery because it had the highest audile and visual fidelity of every version except one: the video recording of Mojgani’s reading at Mother Foucault’s that was recorded for his album.

While the video at Mother Foucault's is of better quality, he is sitting and not using body actions, which is atypical for Mojgani. Further, I did not think it would be fruitful to study a video version with the same audiotext as the audio version.

### *Step 3*

I have seen a number of mediatized versions of this poem over the years, first encountering it in 2007. Compared to my memory of others, on the live album Mojgani performs the poem with a quicker pace than I remembered him performing it in earlier versions of the work. It is interesting to think about the way something is performed when you have performed it that many times—the way your performance may change, for better or worse, over time.

The message of “Shake the Dust” seems to be one celebrating change. Mojgani tells listeners to ‘shake the dust,’ let go of the past, and lists all the people who should. While listing the poem's chosen audience, the speaker of “Shake the Dust” directly addresses the listeners/readers metafictionally: “This is for the fat girls,” and for the “little brothers,” and for “the schoolyard wimps and for the childhood bullies that tormented them” (*Live From* 0:08-18).

I can hear white noise in the back, though I am not sure if it is instrument or a fan or a car or what, but it is there and it is constant. I do not hear the noises I would expect to hear on a live recording, which says the audio has been isolated and produced in post-production. What we are hearing is the same live video that has been put up on YouTube. There is a bit of crowd noise, including some ‘woeing’ and clapping at the end (*Live From* 3:40-48). I did not feel as moved by it as I am by other performances of this poem

or other poems in this case study, or as I was when I first encountered the poem, though I do not know if I have changed over the years, or the poem has.

Though it does not say so like *Tempest*, the print version has been organized on the page to be read aloud, it seems, an assertion I will explore further below. Most of the stanzas are in prose, but smaller chunks with white space in between each stanza (or we might refer to them as paragraphs). The prose itself is not challenging and is, in fact, very accessible and enjoyable to read. But there are also many images, one after the other, that challenge the reader to fit them together with the theme of shaking the dust. For example, the images of the “the nighttime cereal eaters” and the “retired, elderly Wal- / -mart store front door greeters” (*Songs From 87*) are disparate, but perhaps we might interpret them as the type of person who needs a change; the type of person who needs to let go of something such as the past, people’s perceptions of you, negativity, or maybe to simply avoid stagnation. Towards the end, Mojgani switches into first person to state, somewhat dramatically, that each time he writes a poem he is “cutting out parts” of himself to give to the readers. The many images and imperative statements aggregate with the anaphoric phrases and first-person statements to put forth the idea that you need to go and seek out opportunities and embrace change.

On the video version, Mojgani stands on a stage in front of mic in front of a black background. We can hear the crowd, but we cannot see them. The sound and visuals for the video are fairly clear, but it has the shake of a hand holding a smart phone. The audio crackles when the crowd gets too loud (“Anis Mojgani ‘Shake the Dust’” 0:21-23). He is a short, skinny man with a bald spot, crazy hair, and glasses. He is very casual, wearing an old brown t-shirt. He is smirking, and takes a big, deep breath, and delivers the first

line: “This is for the fat girls,” which is received by huge cheers—the audience clearly knows this poem (“Anis Mojgani ‘Shake the Dust’” 0:15-22). He uses big hand gestures; for example, when he first speaks the line “shake the dust” he does a sweeping deictic gesture, pointing out to the crowd (“Anis Mojgani ‘Shake the Dust’” 0:42-43). His pace is moderate to fast, yet he enunciates all the words clearly. He has a slight lisp and is smiling often, which feels more like an interaction with the crowd than it does an intentional facial expression for the poem.

This poem is where one of my initial epigraphs comes from, as well as the closing lines of the Introduction, in the hopes of evoking Mojgani’s thematic focus in this poem in my own work, thus shaking the dust off of the normativity in institutional literary studies in terms of how and what type of poetry is studied.

#### *Step 4*

Unlike *Let Them Eat Chaos*, the message of “Shake the Dust” is simple and can be gleaned from the poem with less interpretive work: we must embrace change and take the opportunities for it when they come or risk ‘gathering dust.’ It is a sentiment reminiscent of Shakespeare’s famous imperative statement from Julius Caesar: “we must take the current when it serves” (IV.ii. 269–276). What that change is, exactly, is more debatable, which is an intentional function of the poem. Through a list of images and archetypal characters, Mojgani directs the message of the poem at anyone who is willing to “[m]ake these words worth it” (*Songs From* 88). That is, for anyone who is willing to make the changes they need to in their lives—for anyone willing to shake the dust. The poem is told in a combination of first, second, and third person, chiefly in the imperative. For

example: “For the 2-year-olds who cannot be understood because they speak half-English and half-God. Shake the dust” (*Songs From* 87). Many of the lines in the poem are like this one, containing a metadiscourse listing an archetypal person the poem is for, and noting they should shake the dust. In stanza 12 in the poem, and then again in stanzas 16, 17, and 18, the poem shifts to be in the second-person imperative, with lines such as: “Do not settle for letting these waves settle” (*Songs From* 87).

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In the audio version of “Shake the Dust,” Mojgani begins by saying “This is a little poem I wrote called Shake the Dust” (*Live From* 0:00-01), with a tone to his voice that signals that he knows people know the poem. The reading is at Mother Foucault’s bookstore in Portland, Oregon. His vocal performance has a quick pace. The audiotext has no music to accompany it and is limited purely to his voice and the occasional sound from the audience.

Mojgani masterfully uses tone and pace to animate and complement the text in largely synchronous ways. For example, he slows down at the line “this is for the tired and the dreamers” (*Live From* 1:57-59), with the slower speed here matching both of these archetypal people: we are slow when we are tired; dreamy, spacey people are often thought of as moving at their own pace. Another example of his vocal delivery synchronizing with the printtext is when he delivers the line “this is for the hard men that want love but know that it won’t come” (*Live From* 1:08-10); he softens his voice and pauses after. The soft, sombre tone in which he delivers the line makes me feel sad for “hard men,” alone in their masculinity. But the portrayal of masculinity here is also atypical: despite being a “hard” man, this man is also self-reflexive and affective. The

pause after the line gives the audience a moment to consider the image of these men, which elevates its importance. It is not just pace and tone he uses in his audiotext, but also rhythm. When he reads the line: “pushes and pulls and pushes and pulls, it pushes for you” (*Live From* 1:40-45), he reads in a rhythmic way that mimics the action of pushing and pulling, putting a variable rhythmic emphasis on these words through a trochaic foot followed by an iambic foot (as in “PUSHes and PULLS and PUSHes and PULLS”).

There are other times where pace is used not necessarily to synchronize the content of the printtext with the audiotextual delivery, but instead to create a dynamic affected experience: *peaks and valleys*, they say. In the middle section of the poem where he is making imperative demands, he speeds up his delivery in contrast to the slower delivery of the section before. For example, the line “speak every time you stand so you do not forget yourself” (*Live From* 1:20-22) is delivered at a furious and impassioned pace.

The poem ends on a powerful image exemplifying the poem’s theme, but also showing the complexity of what Mojgani is asking his audience. After a long stanza where he returns to and unpacks the idea of shaking the dust, he tells listeners/readers to “run forward” into the arms of the world (here, perhaps symbolic of the opportunities we have to change), into its “widespread greeting arms, with your hands outstretched before you, fingertips trembling though they may be” (*Live From* 3:20-3:40). We might interpret this final image to mean that even though change can be scary, which is why our hands might be trembling as you greet it, we must still embrace it when it comes. He ends the poem with a “Thank you,” signalling to the audience the poem is over, and the audience can be heard clapping as the track ends (*Live From* 3:40-48).

There are the same kinds of visualtext and printtext for “Shake the Dust” that we

find for all the other audio pieces on Apple Music. These elements are present in the front end of the app, but somewhat inconsequential. There is no artist or album description, other than to categorize the album as “Spoken Word.” The album cover is a stylized picture of Mojgani at the reading, sitting in front of a mic, holding a book and looking at the camera with a fairly expressionless face. He has short balding hair, glasses on, and a collared shirt, looking like a fairly ordinary person. Not much of his charismatic persona comes through in this visual text, but we at least have his face and the bookstore in our minds as we listen to his words.

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In print, “Shake the Dust” appears to be organized using prosaic stanzas, loosely organized for reading. The poem is broken into shorter and longer prose stanzas that create a reading experience organized by the list format. The elements of the lists Mojgani is presenting are broken up into smaller sections, separated by white space and stanza breaks. For example, some stanzas, like 1 and 2, are one sentence. Most of the stanzas are in standard prose that goes from margin to margin, wrapping around to the next line. For example:

For the bus drivers driving a million broken hymns. For the men who have to hold down three jobs simply to hold up their children for the night schoolers and for the midnight bike riders trying to fly. (*Songs From 87*)

The content of Mojgani’s lines have a prosaic flow to them: they are in complete sentences with typical syntax, which contrasts poetry with its atypical syntax and shorter lines that focus more on imagery or lyric language than the components of a full sentence. For example, harkening back to Evanson, the line, “clean it, cook it, move it,



doctor, pray, wash, sweep” (“Temple” 64) is not a conventionally constructed sentence and rather a rhythmic list representing the repetitive nature of spiritual and physiological tasks in our lives. But stanzas 14 and 17 of “Shake the Dust,” unlike all others in the poem, have lines that are broken (*Songs From* 87). For example, a section of stanza 17 reads:

And when you hop off,

Shake it again.

For this is yours. (*Songs From* 88)

The effect here, much like I discussed about the audio version, is to create a dynamic reading experience through contrast that matches the content shift happening in the poem. These stanzas with shorter, broken lines come towards the end of the poem when there is a shift in the content from the image-heavy lists to the imperative statements around how the people the poem is written for should embrace change.

Mojgani plays with sound and unique details to create both a list of novel images that are fun and imaginative, and a dynamic audile experience through the sounds in his word choice. For example, Mojgani uses subtle internal rhyme throughout the poem, as with rhyming *eaters* and *greeters* in the line: “For the nighttime cereal *eaters* and for the retired elderly Walmart store front door *greeters*” (*Songs From* 87). In this example there is a play with sound through the loose repetition of spondaic feet, creating a staccato rhythm (FOR the NIGHT-TIME CEREAL EAT-ers and FOR the RETIRED EL-DER-LY WAL-MART STORE FRONT DOOR GREET-ERS). Additionally, we *hear* in print the assonance and consonance of the repetition of *e* sounds and *t* sounds and the stilted rhythm created from this. There is a power to the many adjectives here, as well. It is not

just cereal eaters or Walmart store greeters, but a hyper-specific version of these people that serves both to create unique images through an abundance of concrete details and add words, making possible the dense accentual metre.

The visual text is fairly minimal, though it is worth noting that Mojgani is also a visual artist and designed the cover art for the book. The cover has a person on a house floating on a vast sea. The person is holding a homemade telephone—that is, a tin can on a string. The art has a cartoonish simplicity, but the rich colors and imaginative image has a feeling of childlike whimsy and hope. This feels very synchronous with not only “Shake the Dust” but Mojgani’s writing as a whole.

Other than the play with sound mentioned above, the audiotext is also quite minimal.

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In the video, the visual text is simple: Mojgani performing with a black background behind him. There is only one camera shooting him, perhaps a phone. But his body actions are dynamic and create a moving affective experience.

Mojgani’s body actions expand the poem in dynamic ways that are both synchronous and asynchronous to the printtext. He uses a number of deictic and motor gestures that are not always synchronous with the words of the poem so much as colloquial and conversational in nature. For example, when he speaks the opening line, “[t]his is for the fat girls,” his hands open up, not to denote wideness but rather in an ineffable kind of motor gesture that one might make in conversation as they speak (“Anis Mojgani ‘Shake the Dust’” 0:19-21). There are moments when his gestures do synchronize to the printtext. For example, when he speaks the line: “I am cutting out

parts of myself just to give them to you,” he ‘gives’ to the audience, making a symbolic gesture with his hands (“Anis Mojgani ‘Shake the Dust’” 2:56-59). Other times, his body actions are subtle, but still affect our experience. For example, his facial expressions: throughout the poem he is smiling. And although this is not greatly intrusive to the printtext, when combined with the printtext, it makes the reader feel hopeful, like they are being supported in this act of change, which can be a destabilizing or uncomfortable experience. Despite gentle moments throughout the performance, there is a driving energy in Mojgani’s voice that the pace of his gestures matches—the crowd cheers loudly throughout the reading, suggesting that this energy is being exchanged between audience and performer.

His body set is consistent with what we might expect from a poet—he looks like a hipster Ginsberg with his frizzy, balding hair and tight-fitting clothes. He is the only poet featured in this case study that has glasses, which in this poem he adjusts often. Glasses can be coded intellectually though they do not inherently denote intelligence—this is simply a cultural construct. However, they are an interesting example of body set that is pragmatic, and therefore not part of one’s persona, per se, but a necessary artefact, like a wheelchair. Pragmatic artefacts, therefore, are not the same as props.

His poems, here, are not autobiographical. In this way, like *Tempest*, his body set and subjectivity feel like they do not matter to the meaning of the poem as they did with *Evanson*. However, his tone when reading, this hopefulness I have picked up on, is obviously part of his poetic persona. It may not be a subject position, but certainly positioning himself as wise and joyful, which combines with the often-didactic nature of his poems, legitimizing what he says through the modelling of joy. As audience

members, we want to believe his words and take them seriously because we want that same joy. We want to be close to people with charisma and confidence. Poets, preachers, and teachers, politicians, celebrities, and cult leaders—charisma plays off of our desire to both be that person and have what they have: a perceived joy, peace, or happiness. Now, I am not saying that Mojgani is being insincere, but charisma certainly is part of his poetic persona cultivated in this video and others. This gentle and joyful persona he cultivates, and his natural charisma, are part of the dynamism of his performances.

The reading context in this video seems significant, as well. I think it being at the Bowery Poetry Club makes it exciting—there is a credence given to a poem when it is read at an important venue in a historically significant area. The Bowery Poetry Club was founded by Bob Holman—who is an important figure in the American Spoken Word and slam scenes—and has been an important space for Spoken Word in New York. As a historically significant venue in New York, like CBGBs and the Nuyorican Poets Café or City Lights and The Greek on the West Coast, performing there lends the historical-cultural capital of the place to one’s reading. However, this is not something every reader/viewer of this poem would necessarily recognize.

The audiotext is quite different here than on the video. Like many of the performers studied in this case study in their live videos, Mojgani projects his voice loudly and firmly. The crowd is more active in this video than in others: when Mojgani speaks the first line, the audience cheers: they clearly know the poem. As a viewer, this gives an immediate sense of legitimization to the poem (“Anis Mojgani ‘Shake the Dust’” 0:19-21). Mojgani’s use of pace, tone, volume, and rhythm creates a dynamic audiotext here, though not one that is vastly different from what we encountered above

listening to the album version.

The printtext, other than what is voiced, is largely inconsequential to our reading. The poem is featured on YouTube. Below the video, there is a short description that deliver little information that the video itself does not tell us already: it is Mojgani, he is reading “Shake the Dust,” and it is at the Bowery. The description does note some facts about Mojgani being a storied poet and winner of national slam championships, and that “Shake the Dust” is one of his most famous poems. There are a number of comments below praising Mojgani and the poem, as well (“Anis Mojgani ‘Shake the Dust’”). And while these printtextual elements do give a sense of social stock to the poem, it does not add greatly to the affective experience or the meaning.

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I suggest the three mediums are not strongly related in the case of “Shake the Dust.” The video, the audio, and the poem come from a number of different points in the poet’s career, spanning from his time in college in the 90s (print) to the recording of *Live at Mother Foucault’s* (2018). This contrasts Tempest’s *Let Them Eat Chaos* across mediums, which were all created within two years of one another as part of a wider mediatized release. Despite the temporal distance, the three versions of Mojgani’s poem nonetheless illuminate each other when read in plurality.

I do think it is worth mentioning again that the print version is in a book called *Songs From Under the River* collects, as you might expect, older performance poems in print alongside newer poems (17-19). In knowing that this is a print iteration of a performance poem, the print version does not in any way achieve the momentum, charisma, or the energy transfer of the readings (though when reading in singularity, this

does not matter). Because of Mojgani's performance background and skills with both his body actions and vocal performance, the print alone is inadequate. His hopeful and uplifting tone of voice, the joy on his face when he read, the charisma of his performance persona, and the subtle synchronicity and asynchronicity of his hand gestures are all lost when reading in print (and some are lost when listening). However, the poem is densely layered with rhythmic, unique imagery, and on the page, it is easier to parse more clearly than how we hear them in video and in audio. Despite being able to scrub back and forth, viewing video and audio is somehow still more ephemeral than on the page. We can slow down and return. But the page mimics, in some ways, the way he reads in both the audio and video versions, appearing in chunks of prose rather than line breaks. For example, lines:

This is for the fat girls.

This is for the little brothers.

This is for the school yard wimps.... (*Songs From 87*)

There are gaps in between these lines. This is exactly how he reads them, with a short pause in between each (*Live From 0:08-14*; "Anis Mojgani 'Shake the Dust'" 0:19-29). However, I would not say that the print version of the poem is enacting an Olsonian breath line in the way I suggested for *Tempest*. There are many pauses and breaths not represented on the page. For example, in the book the lines, "for the milkcrate ball players. For the nighttime cereal eaters," are part of the same stanza. However, in the audio version, Mojgani has a long pause between "ball players" and "For the nighttime"

(*Live From* 0:18-22). Instead, Mojgani's print version exists somewhere between a print object organized for reading (as in, a score for the author) and a print object organized for, well, reading (as in, a reader who is not the author engaging with the print object). There is a way that the performance also reflects the momentum and energy of prose. When we read prose, unlike verse with its shorter lines and line breaks, there is a continuous flow to our reading. Mojgani achieves this continuous flow when he reads longer stanzas like stanza 12 on the video version ("Anis Mojgani 'Shake the Dust'" 1:28-2:04).

The audio version of "Shake the Dust" is interesting because it is audio of a live performance, which differs from the other audio poems I engage with in this case study. Similar to the other audio versions of poems by Tempest and Evanson, Mojgani's vocal delivery is softer and gentler than in the video; however, this is interesting because, unlike Tempest and Evanson's studio-recorded audio, this audio version was recorded live. Perhaps Mojgani speaks softly due to context: a bookstore, like a library, often has a quiet atmosphere. This contrasts the audiotext on video where he is almost yelling at certain points of the poem. However, at a venue like the Bowery Poetry Club, which is a space used specifically for performance, and not the buying, selling, and reading of books, this makes sense. We might say, then, that audiotext can be more tied to context than printtext or videotext.

There are some minor changes to the audio and video from the print version, but nothing to write home about. In both the audio and video, it is clear the audience is familiar with the poem, both by their reactions and by how he introduces it. But on the audio version, Mojgani feels less invested in the poem. This maybe is due to, again, the

venue. Or perhaps it is because it is an old work that he no longer wants to read. Or as one of his most popular poems, and as a poem he has been reading for 10 to 20 years at this point, it is a poem he has probably read an incredible number of times in his life. To think about this from a musical perspective, how many times can you play “Freebird”?

#### *Step 5*

I have a bias toward Mojgani, who was been an influential poet for me in my life. I have heard this poem 100 times—maybe more. I first listened to this poem over 15 years ago. I have seen many videos and many versions of it, and it was one of my favourite poems as a teenager just starting to love poetry. So, I think I read some of the joy I feel from his work generally here due to my love of him as a poet. That said, I also found it hard to analyze the poem due to how well I knew it. I kept writing claims about the poem with little or no evidence. Because I know it so well, I have found it hard to find as much to say. I’m not sure why that is.

#### *Step 8*

As mentioned, I do not think there is a huge difference in my interpretation in subsequent readings. However, when I first encountered this poem it was the most creative dynamic thing I ever witnessed. It changed me as a writer. But listening/viewing/reading now, compared to when I first encountered it, the poem feels formulaic in some ways: a typical Spoken Word list poem. The meaning is simplistic and does not offer as much on subsequent reads as poems like “Temple Exercises” or *Let Them Eat Chaos*. Mojgani himself admits these were poems he wrote as a young poet trying to find his voice and



what poetry is (*Songs From* 17). But then I wonder if this is the elitist view of poetry that a university education instills in its students creeping in. That, thinking back to El Jones' statement I quoted in my introduction, in undervaluing this poem I am valuing poetry that "rewards frequent engagement" (Evanson et al. 179). I would be interested to test this theory by viewing other iterations of the poem on video—perhaps it is just his video that doesn't move me as it isn't being performed the way I first encountered the poem. However, this type of investigation is outside of the scope of this project.

## Mark Bertolutti's "Chaos of it All"

Mark Bertolutti is an amateur poet, drummer, and roadie from Kelowna, British Columbia. The son of a blaster and a bookkeeper, Bertolutti started writing poetry in his teens (*Bad News* 1). Bertolutti lives with a brain injury; in an interview for the BrainTrust, a local organization that works with folks with brain injuries, he said: "in 1974 I was four-years-old, and I got hit by a car and I was in a coma for a month and it's been kind of tough ever since but it's easier because of BrainTrust" ("Paddling"). Bertolutti is a member of the grass-roots non-profit Spoken Word organization the Inspired Word Café collective and has been working with IWC to create a Spoken Word poetry community in Kelowna for over 10 years. His primary avenue of publication has been live performance, and he has been in a number of slams with IWC over the years. He works largely with audio recording and live performance of both poetry and rock music.

Bertolutti's inclusion in this collection is important through contrast. Unlike the other three poets studied below, he is not a professional writer and has few publications. He has not published formally, instead distributing his work through grass roots efforts, using SoundCloud, performing locally in the Okanagan, and appearing on local arts programs such as Shaw Cable's *Inspired Word Café*. He has also created a video poem in collaboration with BC-based writer and sound artist Craig Carpenter.<sup>87</sup> When I told him I was interested in studying his work for this book, he provided me with his self-made work, *Bad News*, a leather-bound book that collects his poetry throughout the years.

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<sup>87</sup> This poem can be found here as part of Inspired Word Café's Video Poem Module: <http://www.inspiredwordcafe.com/video-poem-module>

Despite the lack of traditional publishing, he has a prolific performance practice dating back over 20 years. I met Bertolutti through my association with the Inspired Word Café and have been in community with him for years. Including Bertolutti in this study is part of the important work of upholding local and amateur art alongside other forms. Having representation from someone outside of the professional field of poetry is important and fits with the community-minded aspects of my work.

Despite his injury, Bertolutti memorizes his poems almost exclusively, rather than reading them aloud from the page. He is a rock and roll drummer and frequently sings his work. On the page, Bertolutti's work is terse and often replicates what we might see from song lyrics. His work has elements of personal narrative, political poetry, and love poetry. He uses various types of rhyme heavily; he says that he always thought that, if his work rhymed, "people would remember what he was trying to say" (2). His work is written in accessible style, using colloquial language. His poems are never more than a page or half a page long.

For the case study I have chosen one of his poems: "Chaos of it All." For your reference, the video and audio can be found here,<sup>88</sup> and the print version can be found at the end of this chapter in Bertolutti's *Bad News*.

### *Step 1*

*Bad News* is a handmade print collection that, like Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, grows each year as he continues to write and collects all of Bertolutti's poems to date.

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<sup>88</sup> The audio version can be heard here: <https://soundcloud.com/mark-bertolutti>. This video can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfeo9-xHTjY&t=821s>

This includes “Chaos of it All,” the poem I have chosen for this case study. In video, I engage with a video on YouTube from Shaw TV’s *Inspired Word Café*, a local Kelowna cable show that ran for 3 seasons from 2015 to 2018. “Chaos of it All” is available as an audio track on Bertolutti’s Soundcloud page.

### *Step 3*

“Chaos of it All” is short, direct, and colloquial, showcasing Bertolutti’s style and contrasting some of the longer, more narrative poems from the other poets, studied above. The video is embedded in a longer video, an episode of Shaw TV’s *Inspired Word Café* show, where Bertolutti performs a headlining set of poems. The video is not bad quality, but not great. The recording is not high definition, so visually it places it in a particular time-period of videos on the internet prior to that technology. Shaw no longer has local studios in Kelowna, so that also places it in a particular time. He is a white male with long hair in a ponytail. He looks very working class, or perhaps like a ‘biker.’ He is holding paper in his hands, and states: “This next one’s called ‘Chaos of it All’” (“*Inspired Word Café*” 2:43-45), then immediately begins reading the poem. The camera shot is wide. We can hear him breathing heavily. The poem does not last very long, and he thanks the crowd at the end (“*Inspired Word Café*” 3:11). I was at this recording, working the camera or directing in the back somewhere, so it is interesting to be studying a video that I am in, albeit not in view.

On the page, “Chaos of it All” is centre aligned. The book it comes in was photocopied, handmade, but in a leather zip-up case. It is ringed and looks like it was created at Staples or another such mass printing facility. The poem seems to be about

traveling and trying to find your way. The poem is broken into four short stanzas of 5-7 lines each, with short lines of between 2-6 words per line. The voice of the poem is first-person and meditates on the ontology of existing in a world full of chaos and “endless” travelling. Travelling here seems to be both literal, in terms of driving, and figurative, in terms of our movement through life. For example, he writes “The road is endless / What do I do / I keep thinkin’ / This is senseless / I need to find / My way to you” (Bertolutti). Earlier in the poem, the speaker writes of driving a car down the street, but here we see the dual meaning of the travelling within the poem, and the way the speaker is searching for a “you,” perhaps a lover or a friend (“Chaos of it All” [*Bad News*]). The endless road, then, is how the speaker has interpreted their movement through life, with the hope that this movement gets them closer to this person they desire. There is also a musical element to the poem, which describes listening to music on a “stereo” and the experience of being “lost in the music,” an idea I will return to below with a more in-depth analysis. The poem ends kind of abruptly, on the image of a book on a shelf, but this is nice, as it doesn’t overstay its welcome. I can’t help but think it would be beautiful put to music.

On the audio track, there is just a voice and nothing more. Bertolutti reads very quickly and does not emote (“The Chaos of it All”). There is a high fidelity that is common with the audio recordings of the previous poets, though it is a little rougher and has some kind of reverb on his voice throughout. The audio version of the poem has slightly different phrasings than the live and print versions, but this seems insignificant to the overall meaning and experience of the poem. Like the video, he starts by speaking the title before quickly beginning his reading (“The Chaos of it All” 0:00-01). The poem is fast—like a hardcore song, it is less than a minute—but he is also speaking very quickly.

Someone speaking the poem more slowly could let a poem of this length take much longer. He speaks in colloquialisms and clichés, but very earnestly, with no note of irony in his voice and no attempt to be clever in his deployment of these clichés in the printtext. For example, he speaks of his “storybook romance,” which ends on a “shelf” (“The Chaos of it All” 0:22-24). This cliché is used in earnest to describe the “you” the speaker is yearning for in his movement through life and its chaos.

#### *Step 4*

“Chaos of it All” seems to be about traveling and trying to find your way in the world, literally and figuratively. It feels like a song in some ways, not unlike Tempest’s long poem, about a search for purpose (phrased as “searchin’ for something else”) (“Chaos of it All” [*Bad News*]) and belonging when you feel like life is hard and the world is broken. The poem has a free flow to it, not centring around a particular image or a particular story, necessarily. There are elements of narrative—the opening stanza of the poem centres around a journey, beginning in a car. In the car, the speaker is listening to music, which they turn up “louder and louder” (“Chaos of it All” [*Bad News*]). There are two dominant metaphors, driving and music, through which the poem explores existentialism, ontology, and chaos. The second stanza introduces a “you” that the speaker of the poem is searching for (“Chaos of it All” [*Bad News*]). The third stanza brings back the music, noting that the speaker is “lost in the music, and / lost in the lyrics” but shifts to also add “lost in the / chaos of it all” (“Chaos of it All” [*Bad News*]). This third stanza takes the seemingly literal description of driving around aimlessly, searching and wandering, and listening to music, and then maps this onto a figurative wandering, and the feeling of

being lost in the chaos of the world. All the while, the speaker has this goal of finding someone, literally, who they feel might end their figurative lostness. However, similarly to the message of Evanson's poem, the fourth stanza closes on the speaker's epiphanic moment of realizing that they do not need to find someone else to feel whole. Rather, their romance is a book "on a shelf", the words of which are "truly felt" ("Chaos of it All" [*Bad News*]). This ambiguous line seems to imply that they have given up looking, and though they feel the weight of that, they are okay with their journey leaving them in solitude. The speaker of the poem has found peace in the acceptance of joy in their own company.

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In the video version of "Chaos of it All," Bertolutti's body set is more prominent than his body actions. His persona reads as a working class or countercultural, like a rock and roller or biker. That is, his appearance, voice, and attitude fulfills the codes of what a working-class person is imagined to be. He is wearing a KISS shirt and a blue jacket. His hair is slicked back and tied off into a ponytail. At first glance, he looks like, as my grandpa would say, 'the type of person you wouldn't want to run into in a dark alley.' The poems are not explicitly coded as autobiographical, per se, but there is a sweet contrast between the gentle and thoughtful content of the poems, and the hard way that Bertolutti's body set reads. He is a large, rough, working-class type. The content of his poems contrast his body set, breaking with the societal and cultural expectations, that is, stereotypically, the world might have for this person.

His body actions in his performance are very minimal. He begins looking at the crowd, standing, and holding the paper he has the poem printed on ("Inspired Word

Café” 2:45). Bertolutti holds himself in a reserved way, making his body small. Looking at his face and his body language, he seems nervous but also proud at the same time. He looks at the page before he is going to read, but then he recites the words from memory. The paper is a crutch. He looks out at the crowd the whole time (“Inspired Word Café” 2:43-45). There is a nervousness to his reading. He blinks a lot, and paces back and forth throughout the poem (see “Inspired Word Café” 2:57 for an example of this), at one point lifting his paper up like he has forgotten the poem, but then, not looking at it, sets it back at his side (“Inspired Word Café” 3:02). But other than this nervous energy, his face is neutral. He uses no hand gestures, deictic, motor, symbolic, spatial or otherwise. This is a very common reading style for what we might call ‘page poets’ and one that contrasts professional performers like Evanson and Mojgani. It is interesting that because Bertolutti does not overact, overemote, or otherwise animate the poem immensely through his body, it allows the printtext and body set to become more prominent. Further, it allows the body actions that are static or subtle to become more apparent and pronounced. For example, his brief moment of lifting the page up to read and then putting it back down to his side stands out prominently because he otherwise moves so little. There is a balance that is brought to the asynchronicity of his body actions and the printtext. In the printtext, there is a grand sense of the state and chaos of the world and our shared experience of it. However, his body actions do not mimic this through similarly dramatic gesture. When a poem with heavy content is performed vocalized and embodied dramatically, it can diminish the message of the poem through a kind of heavy-handedness. But Bertolutti’s calm and understated demeanor allows the message of the printtext to remain heavy, while supporting this with a voice and a body that are not as



severe as the words. It creates a hopeful effect, as if to say: *the world may be chaotic, but I stand before you calmly; if I am okay with the journey, so too can you be*. As nice as this is to read, there is an equally good chance this effect of his body on the words is not intentional, and rather Bertolutti's performance style.

There is visuality in the field of view not related to Bertolutti. The reading takes place in a small Shaw studio, with lights projecting geometric shapes behind him. The walls are blue and black and there are screens around the room. You can see the crowd as well, and they look on lovingly and connected. They are not rowdy, but they are engaged and the connection between them and the poet is clear. This is the only video in this case study where we get a sustained view of the crowd.

His persona is subtle, egoless, and understated. His disability does not feature in the content of his work, though when introducing Bertolutti the host of the show tells the story of his accident ("Inspired Word Café" 0:30-8). And while I don't think it is necessary to read his disability into the work, there is something compelling, again like a memoir, about hearing his story and then hearing his poems. Bertolutti was not expected by doctors to have a normative experience of life, after his accident, and now he is writing, memorizing, and reciting poetry (*Bad News*). There is a weight and a power this adds to the words.

The audiotext of the video is made up of Bertolutti's voice, the sounds of clapping and cheering from the crowd, as well as Bertolutti's heavy breathing, which adds to Bertolutti's nervous energy. The performance's tone and pace do not shift: he maintains a largely conversational tone with a slightly flattened affect, but a furious pace, reading very quickly and building momentum throughout. He does not emote, or do character

voices, or draw out the story through dramatization. He plows through the poem quickly, which shares his energy with the crowd, but his performance is not synchronous with the words in any way (other than the idea of chaos, perhaps).

The printtext, other than the voiced poem, is present, but not intrusive. The Inspired Word Café logo is behind him on two different screens. The Shaw TV logo is in the top right corner of the video as a watermark. The video is on YouTube, but there are no comments and no description of the video other than the words: “Featuring: Mark Bertolutti” (“Inspired Word Café”). We also see other words from titles of other videos, and the intervisuality of those other videos. However, none of this really affects how we receive the meaning of the poem.

The audio version of “Chaos of it All” on SoundCloud reads similarly to the audiotext from the video. Bertolutti starts, again, by saying the title (“Chaos of it All” [SoundCloud] 0:00-01). There is a little echo on the recording, which I assume is reverb, though might be recording context. The fidelity is quite good, but it is obviously not the same studio quality we hear from Tempest or others. There are echoes and imperfections that sound like it is recorded in a basement or in an at-home recording studio, giving it an air of DIY, which aligns nicely with Bertolutti’s amateur, community-artist status. For example, when he says, “The road is endless” (“The Chaos of it All” [SoundCloud] 0:09-10) his voice is much quieter than on the rest of the recording. This could be because of his distance to the mic, or caused by multiple takes being cut together, combined with a lack of levelling in post-production. We also hear an inaudible sound at 0:25 that sounds like perhaps Bertolutti bumped a mic, or a button is being pressed (“The Chaos of it All” [SoundCloud]). Bertolutti’s voice is clear, but he maintains his quick pace—the poem is

very short, over in just 26 seconds. The quick pace might be connected to the idea of chaos: Bertolutti's bustling reading replicating the fast pace of contemporary life. There is a real song-like rhythm created through Bertolutti's use of rhyme and syllabics. For example, in the line: "my storybook romance is on the shelf / and I'm sure words are truly felt" ("The Chaos of it All" [SoundCloud] 0:24) we get two lines of eight syllables each, with an imperfect end rhyme in "shelf" and "felt". Anyone reading these lines out loud would easily fall into the largely spondaic rhythm it dictates "MY STORY BOOK RO-MANCE is ON the SHELF / and I'M SURE WORDS are TRU-ly FELT".

In keeping with the trend from the poets above, his voice is quieter and his pace slower on the audio recording than in the audiotext of the video version, something I will return to below when reading in plurality. There is a verbocentrism produced by the lack of music or other machine and environmental sound, which allows for the printtext to really be the centre point. He has a deep, male-coded voice with a working-class Canadian accent, a small element of persona in the audiotext. For example, when he speaks the words "louder and louder" ("The Chaos of it All" [SoundCloud] 0:07) there is a certain way he hits the 'r' sound in these words that sounds distinctly Canadian (think, for a hyperbolic example, the way Canadians from the East Coast say the words "Car" or "Hard" and heavily emphasize the r's in these words). Interestingly, this audio has about 20 seconds of silence after the poem ends ("The Chaos of it All" [SoundCloud] 0:26-46). I am not sure if this was a choice or just part an accident of the recording, but it lets the poem sit in an interesting way.

The print- and visualtexts of the audio version are interesting here because there are different words and visuals on the SoundCloud website than we have seen on

YouTube, Vimeo, or Apple Music. For example, when you listen on Apple Music, we can see the album cover and the song title etc. However, on Bertolutti's SoundCloud, we can see a full artist page, containing all of his poems in no recognizable order. Unlike Apple Music, another screen does not open when you play an individual track, so all of the other titles and elements of the SoundCloud page are present as you listen to the individual poem. Further, due to the social nature of the site, there is a heart to 'like' each poem and a button to repost it. At the bottom of the page, there are also suggestions for other similar, local artists to follow. This subtly provides a genre frame and places an artist in a particular box: *they are like this other artist who makes similar art*. In this way, the printtext of "Chaos of it All" crafts a particular reading experience for listeners—if we know this other artist, then we might read elements of their work into this work we are now listening to. An additional difference is that SoundCloud is a webpage, whereas Apple Music is an app. These are marginal differences, and affect the interpretation of the poem little at first glance; however, there is something to the context: a social media site like SoundCloud is very different from a music player app. SoundCloud feels DIY, with a very basic though kind of busy front end, whereas Apple Music, though in some ways just as easy to get your music distributed on, both has a more dynamic front end (complete with a navigation bar, more complex color schemes, and a cleaner more high-end look) and legitimizes the work through cultural capital of Apple Music. I, personally, don't buy into this value system (some of my favourite books and albums are hand-made or self-released), but if we are reading the platforms different poems appear on, this needs to be a part of the consideration. The print version of this might be the different between a book on Penguin Random House's website vs. self-published on Amazon.ca. Again,

there is no guarantee of quality or experience from the Penguin book, but that publisher carries a social and cultural capital within the literary arts that legitimizes their work and subconsciously tells a reader that it will be a better read than the self-published Amazon book. Finally, beside each poem is also a picture of Bertolutti's face, similar to what we might see of an author photo in a book jacket. The picture shows him with long hair and a large goatee, and he has a stern kind of scowl on his face. Again, his body set here codes him as countercultural.

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The print version of "Chaos of it All" reads very much like a song of yearning. Yearning to be loved. Yearning to find one's way. The poem has four stanzas, driven by the type of rhyme and pseudo-syllabic metre like you might find in a song: all the lines have between three and six syllables. There is repeated usage of the suffix "-in'": "wonderin'," "leavin'," "drivin'," "wanderin'," a colloquial truncation common to song lyrics, which contributes to the 'common,' as opposed to elevated, tone of the poem ("Chaos of it All" [*Bad News*]). There is a play with and privileging of rhyme, but there is not a strictly repeated pattern. For example, the first stanza has no rhyme in it all, where other stanzas do. Additionally, there is the internal rhyme of the suffix "ing," shortened to "in'," (such as "drivin'," "wanderin'") peppered throughout the poem ("Chaos of it All" [*Bad News*]). When there are rhymes, however, they serve to highlight important thematic moments in the content of the poem: "The road is endless / What do I do / I keep thinkin' / This is senseless," with the rhyme being ABCA. But the implication is that because the road is endless, and as the chaos of life continues (or in this case the metaphor of the road), the speaker feels a crisis of an existential nature: perhaps life is pointless. The poem is

narrative at first, about the speaker “aimlessly wanderin’” around and driving. Thinking of a “you” and turning up the stereo. In the second stanza, however, the ‘driving’ force of the poem shifts into metaphors of travelling and listening to music, the former a metaphor for life’s journey and the latter a sonic metaphor for the eponymous chaos of life (“Chaos of it All” [*Bad News*]).

Other than this play with rhyme and a loose metre, the poem’s audiotext is almost nonexistent; however, the visualtext has slightly more to offer. On the page “Chaos of it All” is very different than we have seen with the previous three poets because the work is self-published. The print version on the poem is much different than we have seen from others in these case study. The book has been made by the artist, printed at a shop and coil bound, then placed in a zip-up leather cover. There is not the same kind of homogeneity of font size, typeface, alignment, or titling that is typical of a book produced by a press. For example, other poems in the text are left aligned, as opposed to centred like “Chaos,” and there are a number of different typefaces ranging from Times New Roman to Calibri, to others that I do not recognize simply from looking, and sizes ranging likely between 10 point and 15 point, though this, again, is a guess, as I cannot tell in print (*Bad News*). These different font sizes and typefaces and alignments, as visual elements, like Mojgani’s self-drawn covers, feel personal and intentional, though the effect it has on how we interpret the poem is minimal. The book has a number of pictures as well, an element of visual text, of the poet at readings, playing in a band, or with the Inspired Word Café collective, though none of these pictures correspond to “Chaos of it All” (*Bad News*). It is clear from these pictures, that Bertolutti is a maker embedded within community, and his community is important to him and his practice.

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In terms of plurality, reading the poem across the three mediums illuminates different sides of “Chaos of it All.” Namely, we gain new insight into the poem through experiencing Bertolutti’s body set and persona, we experience the vocal performance more clearly, as well as a few other small differences worth noting here. The video and audio iterations of the work do not feel as though they are re-presenting or replicating the print version of the poem. Rather, they are their own unique versions; however, they nonetheless speak to one another in plurality. Further, we see a synchronicity of Bertolutti’s amateur, DIY aesthetic in each medium.

As discussed above, Bertolutti’s body set brings more to his embodied performance than his body actions, but when we read this body set across mediums, there is a nuance and complexity that is brought to bear on the printtext in particular. As mentioned, he is not the type of person, and man in particular, society might expect to see reading and writing poetry. He reads as rough, countercultural, and working class but when combined with the tender, intellectual side of his printtext, his work becomes more interesting to watch and experience. Part of what readers really like about nonfiction is getting to experience someone else’s life that is different than their own. There is a sense of voyeurism. Because the poet is more present and embodied as than in print poetry, Spoken Word poetry’s appeal draws on that same voyeurism, even if the work is not making a pure truth claim like nonfiction. As audience members in performance, many of us like to watch unique bodies in space. We take pleasure in pondering who the performer is and what secret world their words divest, and more, how the secret worlds of a writer speak our own secret worlds we carry within ourselves. So, part of what is

potentially so compelling about Bertolutti's performance is the asynchronous relationship between his tender and thoughtful words, and his outward appearance (persona) and societal expectations for working class, countercultural men; the gap between printtext and body set (as an element of visualtext). Without reading in plurality, you would not see that in the print version or the audio version. We get a hint of this persona via body set on the audio version of "Chaos of it All" due to the author photo on SoundCloud. However, the print version of "Chaos of it All" is not totally bereft of the personal and autobiographical. Though the poem itself is not a deeply layered autobiographical piece, the book it is contained within, *Bad News*, carries an autobiographical statement that outlines the author's experiences with disability, and the way that writing has been an important outlet in his life (*Bad News*). As mentioned, when the host of Shaw TV's Inspired Word Café introduces Bertolutti, he alludes to Bertolutti's brain injury and the impact writing has had on his life as well. Suddenly, reading in plurality takes simple poems about chaos and the human condition and elevates the printtext to a complex picture of a man who has struggled with life-long marginalization. The autobiographical frame serves as a concrete detail that expands the abstract concepts explored in the poems. The audio version and printtext of "Chaos of it All" alone are bereft of this experience we receive when reading in plurality.

In addition to expanding our experience of content and personal context, the effect of reading in plurality is also formal and aesthetic. We receive a much different poem on the video and audio than in print. Notably, the use of line breaks, stanza breaks, and white space contrasts the appearance of pauses in the voiced and embodied performance. Take the following passage for example:



Turnin' up the stereo  
Louder and louder  
Every time I think of you

The road is endless  
What do I do  
I keep thinkin'  
This is senseless  
I need to find  
My way to you. ("Chaos of it All" [*Bad News*])

In this passage, we have consonance in the repetition of the "n" sounds in the first and second stanzas, and the rhyme of *you*, *do*, and *you* in lines 3, 5, and 9. There is also the internal/end rhyme of *endless* and *senseless*. These sonic elements, combined with the loose syllabic metre, create a songlike reading experience, one we might expect to hear replicated in the voiced performance. But this is not the way we encounter the poem when Bertolutti reads on audio or video. For example, above I have transcribed the poem as it appears in print, but the same lines above, if transcribed from the audio version might read like this:

Turnin' up the stereo louder and louder every time I think of you

The road is endless what do I do I keep thinkin' this is senseless  
I need to find my way to you ("Chaos of it All" [*Bad News*]).

In print, the lines are much shorter than you would expect when listening because there are line breaks and stanza breaks that are not audible on the audio version. Bertolutti has delineated his poems on the page in clear, short lines but he ignores page-based cues, reading through many line and stanza breaks, and pauses in other places that do not appear on the page. The print version, and the two performance versions, are therefore not seeking to replicate one another. They embrace the different modes. We might read this as an example of the contrast between a print poem and a performance poem. Different poets have different styles of reading but may want to accomplish something different on the page than in the performance. Here, that would be clarity on the page, and a driving pace in performance. We might also read this as signalling Bertolutti's amateur status as a poet. Unlike Mojgani, for example, who is formally trained in performance, Bertolutti may not be crafting how he bring the poems to life in live performance so much as simply sharing his words with the world.

In keeping with this contrast, the video and audio vocal performances are also not homogenous. The audio vocal performance, as is common of the other poets in this case study, was slower and clearer than on video. Bertolutti enunciates the words, and, though still quick in pace, does not achieve quite the torrid speed of the live performance. There are similarities between these two vocal performances, though. For example, in both, Bertolutti creates a driving rhythm through the imposition of spondaic feet (as explored above) in live performance. For example, in the same passage above, we might scan it on the page thusly:

the ROAD is ENDless

WHAT do I DO

i KEEP THINKin'

THIS is SENSEless. ("Chaos of it All" [SoundCloud])

However, in both the video and audio vocalizations, Bertolutti performs this with a more spondaic slant, which we may scan like this:

the ROAD is END-LESS

WHAT DO I DO

i KEEP THINK-IN'

THIS is SENSE-LESS. ("Chaos of it All" [SoundCloud])

Though the variation is slight, we can see that Bertolutti stresses more syllables live than we might expect from the print version of the poem. This is part of what cultivates the 'driving' (*see what I did there? It's a pun an account of the poem's metaphor...ah, forget it*) style of Bertolutti's work: the staccato rhythm of primarily spondaic feet in the vocalization of these poems.

Reading "Chaos of it All" in plurality here also opens up the clarity of the work, specifically in the video version. First, because of the fidelity of the audio recording compared to the audiotext of the video recording, we can hear the words much more clearly. This aids in our understanding of the video version, both in terms of hearing him speak the words more clearly, but also in terms of our experience of his voice, which has a polished sound not experienced in the live recording. This added clarity was not limited to the fidelity of the audio version but was also brought on by the print version. It is hard to read in print and watch video at the same time, as both are visual; however, reading it in print alongside listening to the audio version made it much easier to hear all the words because of Bertolutti's torrid pace, and the slight mumble to his vocal delivery. Like

subtitles in a noisy living room, seeing the printtext on the page allowed me, as a listener, to hear the printtext more clearly on both the audio and the video.

The DIY or amateur aesthetic that comes through more clearly in plurality than it does in any one medium. The print version has a simplicity and a clarity to it and showcases the personal nature of Bertolutti's work. For example, it is clear that *Bad News* is hand made, and it is clear that choices, right down to the font, were undertaken by the artist with a specific vision in mind.. In the audio version, we experience the type of home-made recording that is consistent with self-produced, self-distributed work. In the video, elements of his body set and artefactual communication (such as his KISS shirt) and his flattened vocal delivery, synchronize to exude the same DIY tone, along with the added element of a working-class persona. Bertolutti is not a professional putting on a complex high-level show like we saw with Tempest; rather, he is an amateur. He has no formal training like Mojgani, and he is not performing as his main source of income like Tempest. There is a nervousness that is exuded in the video that is not present in the audio or, obviously, in print, which further supports the amateur nature of Bertolutti's performance, but also, with his biographical context, endears us to him. As audiences, often we want people to succeed, especially when we know their struggles. Perhaps this is because we are also rooting for ourselves to succeed amongst our own struggles. Therefore, for some, enjoying poetry that is more personal and less dense can be as much about connecting to a subject and empathizing as it is about artistic aesthetic.

After reading/listening/viewing the poem a few times in plurality, the meaning and experience of the poem was clearer than I experienced in any one medium. In print the words are clear and easy to read, but as noted, the audio and video versions both

contained important markers of persona via body set and had a very different delivery of the lines than what I experienced on the page. In this way, despite the poem in each individual medium not being very different from the next, and perhaps not incorporating as dynamic a usage of the opportunities of audio or video as robustly as some of the other poets, it was essential to the nuanced, multi-layered experience of the work to have engaged with all three mediums.

### *Step 5*

The biggest bias present in this reading is that I know Mark and have for many years. I have watched him hone his craft as part of my participation in the same Spoken Word scene. But I think it is important to note that I also come from a particular background in poetry—I teach creative writing, have multiple degrees, I have performed and published widely, and I study poetics. With my background, at times it is hard not to have an expectation for the ‘quality’ of poetry we choose to study: that is needs to be new/unique, dense (or, *reward frequent engagement*), spark thought, tell a story, or put forth some universal meaning. Even though I do my best not to participate in these biases of my education, it is hard not to go through those motions in the act of close reading. But Bertolutti is working more out of an oral practice in which he is not privileging deep, poetic meaning densely packed into each line. These are songs written to be spoken; poems written by and for the working-class, everyday reader. The clichés that his poems use are used in sincerity, and the average working-class listener/reader/viewer of Mark’s work likely would understand and connect to these clichés. His poems are meant to be understood, and to earnestly inspire, and to describe the world, rather than to break poetic

ground or change the world through novelty. Readers who share Bertolutti's positionality are more likely to connect to this work than, say, Hugo Ball's "Seahorses and Flying Fish," or Robert Creeley's "I Know a Man" even though the latter two are held in high regard for their craft as canonized texts. This comes back to my discussion of high and low art from Chapter 1. While Bertolutti's type of poetry may not contain elements of craft as they have been institutionally constructed, it is important to value and to uphold as, in fact, most people with a poetic practice are more likely to work in this kind of mode because most writers are not trained and are not professional. For, as discussed above, without the amateur, there is no professional. Further, if we consider that institutional notions of craft are constructed based on historical value systems I have already identified as part of institutionalized white, western hegemony, then radical inclusion of work like Bertolutti's is an act of resistance to these systems, and part of the revaluing of diverse works I have discussed in Chapter 1. We cannot simply value and study works that are by diverse bodies that fit with literary value systems, rather, we must also be open to works that break from these value systems, and to study and value them on their own terms.

### *Step 8*

My views did not change much upon subsequent readings. This may be due to the length of the poem, which is very short.

## **Case Study Results**

The case study has been fruitful in exploring the possibilities for reading mediatized Spoken Word poetry. I have explored the appearance of these three texts in each poem chosen for the case study and read each poem in plurality across the three mediums. In most cases, the readings have upheld my theorizations of the printtext, the audiotext, and the visualtext as three readable texts of Spoken Word poetry that appear across mediums and provide unique opportunities for interpretation; however, at times my findings departed from my earlier formulations. As such, my original method did not account for all of my findings. Below, I will explore the changes to my method that occurred, outline the most prominent ways that the case study have enacted my theorizations from Chapter 1, or, in some cases, troubled them, specifically in relation to: textuality, affordances, and medium; reading the body; performance and reading contexts; and plurality.

### *Method*

Working through the case study yielded results that affirmed my theorizations of the printtext, the audiotext, and the visualtext, as well as how these three texts appear in the three mediums in which I encounter mediatized Spoken Word poetry. However, interestingly, the case study also led to a dialogic revision of the method; as I tested the method, I also edited it, and tested it again. The method that appears at the end of Chapter 1 is the edited version that resulted from my case study, and the readings produced in Chapter 2 are edited to reflect the newly edited method. I did not track each change to the method in a granular way, but I will outline some important findings in the process of reading in my case study.

First, the proposed method assumed that there would be a strong appearance of each text in each medium, and that each text would therefore be important to the interpretation of a poem across each medium. This did not turn out to be the case. As I worked through the case study, it became clear that the mediums most closely aligned with a particular text (print medium/printtext, audio medium/audiotext, video medium/visualtext) had the strongest appearance of that text due to the affordances of that medium. For example, in print the elements of printtext were most apparent and most easy to read. In video, the visualtext was most available for interpretation. And in the audio medium, the audiotext is most prominent. This is true with the exception of two facts:

1. The print text is pervasive, appearing significantly in all three mediums. Even when we do not see the written words, the printtext is there, albeit as a voiced spectre. As explored in Chapter 2, an argument could be made for this being included in the audiotext (which is how Novak formulates the audiotext). But despite the lack of material language, I construct the voiced printtext as printtext and not audiotext.
2. Out of the three mediums, the video medium most fully captures the experience of Spoken Word poetry if reading in singularity. The reason for this is simple: video contains the most readable elements and interpretive opportunities for all three texts, by far. This is because the printtext is present across all three mediums; the audiotext appears in both video and audio, despite the difference in fidelity; and, obviously, visual elements (primarily body set, body action, and artefactual communication) do not feature heavily in print or in audio, other than certain



material and paratextual elements such as author photos, album covers, book covers, and so on. The prevalence and emergence of video was surprising to me, though I am not sure why. Below, I will further outline the relationality between text, medium, and affordances as they appeared in the case studies.

Another prominent realization was that my initially proposed method, though thorough, was unrealistic to implement in too large a number of poems across the three mediums. Because of this, I had initially hoped to study three poems by each poet and ended up only studying one poem by each poet. Even eliminating two poems by each poet, close reading/viewing/listening to four poems across three mediums turned out to be a hefty ask. If I had studied each interpretive opportunity for each poem in plurality, this chapter could easily be 500 pages. As I implemented the method, it became necessary to narrow my scope to focus only on certain steps in the method, only picking up on a few novel aspects of each reading of each poem. Had I implemented the full method, a number of different interpretations might have been possible for each poem; however, this is built into the method itself, which has been constructed broadly to account for the myriad different reading practices, approaches, scopes, and contexts potential users might implement it in. However, in Chapter 3, where the method appears as part of my digital scholarly resource for teachers and researchers, I have narrowed the method further, as well as edited it for clarity and accessibility.

The changes to the method are minor in some cases: changes to wording, changes to the step order, condensing two steps into one, refining keywords, and so on. However, the realization of the dominance of video, the pervasiveness of printtext, and the strength

of audiotext across video and audio led to a method that more fully accounted for the ways in which the three texts appear in uneven ways across mediums, but also likely across poems, poets, and genres. Future researchers might explore the three texts as they appear in a broader set of poems and poets, but a project of this scope could not achieve this.

### *Relationality of Mediums, Texts, and Affordances*

The three texts and the three mediums aligned in a number of ways that I both anticipated and did not anticipate. As discussed above and in Chapter 1, the printtext appears prominently across all three mediums; however, in both these instances the printtext is voiced, rather than appearing as, well, *print*. Spoken Word poetry is a verbocentric artform, so despite the visual and auditory natures of video, audio, and performance, the printtext is still the primary interpretive text in a Spoken Word poem, whatever medium it appears in. Beyond the words, there were a number of other interpretive opportunities offered by printtext. For example, there were comment sections and video descriptions on the poems that appeared as video on YouTube, as well as banners, logos, or watermarks on certain videos, and a number of other instances of printtext in any given medium or poem. However, these non-poetry printtextual elements affected my interpretation of the poems very little, when I noticed them at all. For example, I did not feel that a watermark on a video or a comment below a video greatly shifted my perception of the poem, or even shifted it at all. The exception here was the Apple Music artist and album description on Kae Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos*, which I will expand upon more fully in the below section on plurality.

The visualtext and the audiotext have some interesting elements in the print medium, but they impact its interpretation very little. For example, there are author photos at the back of *Let Them Eat Chaos* and *Nouveau Griot*, and we might argue that certain sonic elements of print (assonance, metre, rhyme) are audiotextual, but largely, reading a poem in print is almost exclusively a printtextual endeavour. The outlier to this point is “Temple Exercises,” which has a visual, concrete poetic element. Through indentation, line length, and line break, the poem takes a shape similar to lines on a heart monitor. Despite this exception, I suggest that the print medium alone is largely inadequate to capture the experience of a Spoken Word poem, lacking in both the visual and audile elements that characterize the mode. However, I do not mean to say this lack is a failing on the poets or poems behalf; it is just a difference between the affordances of each medium and their ability to present the genre of Spoken Word poetry. As this case study has shown, Spoken Word poems in print tend to enact different textualities on the page than they do in performance. The most salient example is Bertolutti’s “Chaos of it All” which has a very different approach taken on the page than in print: in the latter, it uses short lines and short stanzas, but is voiced with few pauses and a furious pace in performance. However, there is, perhaps, a strategy here on Bertolutti’s behalf; if the page (re)presented this torrid, chaotic performance it would likely lack readability. As such, we might suggest that Bertolutti is using the two mediums to two different ends, capitalizing on the opportunities of the affordances of each medium. When reading in plurality, the poems on the page do have some relation to their performance, as I will explore below; however, when reading these poems in singularity, it is clear that print, on its own, is not a medium that showcases the interdisciplinarity and intertextuality of

Spoken Word poetry. In many ways, Spoken Word poetry on the page is indistinguishable from page poetry. However, in studying these poems in plurality, it becomes clear that these are performance poems in print. For example, in the case of Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos*, we are directly told in the opening pages that this is a poem "written to be read aloud." The other poems are not so direct; however, many of the poems that make up this case study seem to be organized on the page like a performance score of some kind. I will return to this later in this section.

On the other end of the spectrum (as mentioned in my discussion of the changes to the method), video's ability to capture the multivalence of Spoken Word poetry is unmatched by print or audio, which probably comes as a surprise to no one who has read this far. On video, the printtext, the visualtext, and audiotext are all present: we can hear the printtext as it is voiced, listen to the verbal, mechanical, and environmental elements of the audiotext, and see the body, context, and any other visual elements on video. In terms of a visual experience, body set and body action were visual dominants, and combined synchronously and asynchronously with printtext and audiotext to create a reading experience that well captures the full complexity of Spoken Word poetry in performance. Seeing a video of a poet reading their poem, and seeing the poem embodied by the voice and body it was designed for/by added much that the page was not able to capture because reading a Spoken Word poem on the page lacks one very key feature: the poet. The poet is part of the form and part of the content. To rephrase Bearder's proposition that "Poets do not *have* bodies, they *are* bodies" (208): Spoken Word poems do not just contain an author, they are an author.

It might be said that video still lacks the live exchange that many scholars of

performance hold crucial to its experience. However, as thoroughly outlined in Chapter 1, this study has chosen to explore mediatized performance. Thus, in the world of mediatized Spoken Word poetry, video is king. But this is not to say video is without its own limitations. There are issues of picture quality and sonic fidelity, for example. Though Evanson's video was high definition and well shot, it was a static, single-camera recording shot from the very back of the room. This led to a poor view of her face. Similarly, Bertolutti and Mojgani's videos are not of high professional quality. Their videos are available to me mostly through YouTube, and often shot by amateurs with low, outdated quality. Bertolutti's video has good audio, but the camera technology is out of date, not high definition, and similarly static and single-camera. Mojgani's video seems to be shot on a smart phone or a single, stationary camera and had very poor audio. The exception here is Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos*, which was shot with multiple, high-quality cameras, and had separate, high-fidelity audio that was likely mixed in post-production. This result is an immersive, dynamic experience of their performance, which in turn led to a more robust interpretation of that video than other poetry videos featured in this study. We might say then that higher quality video leads to more interpretive opportunities for mediatized Spoken Word poetry. But troubling this, it is important to mention that most poets will never see the level of success that Tempest has seen due to Tempest's crossover into the hip hop genre. As such, most poets will not see their work recorded with that calibre of equipment. Video streaming sites from YouTube to TikTok have changed the modes of distribution, allowing artists to get their work seen by more people than ever before; however, the trade-off of ubiquity is, for many, quality. And though Tempest's video had a level of polish not seen elsewhere in this case study, the

videos with amateur quality did not diminish the poems or their performance so much as limit our ability to experience the opportunities for interpretation that are present.

Evanson's video was likely shot by the folks at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity from a single camera in the back of the room. Bertolutti's video used Shaw studios with TV quality cameras but is one of the older videos and so does not have HD quality.

Further, it was shot and edited by volunteers (a fact I know, as I was one of them). But lower technical quality does not necessarily mean less enjoyable. Similar to a local punk band making their album in a basement sound booth, a mixed-tape by an indie rapper, or a self-published book by a local author, different audiences value different production values. We value punk-rock not because of the high production value, but because it was historically produced as part of a countercultural, anti-capitalist value system (despite since being commodified, like everything else under late capitalism). We value the handmade, limited-run, artist-produced chapbook because it is unique, and not subject to the pressures of the literary economy. We value the basement recording because it is free and perhaps the artist is local, which carries geographic value through a shared locus between performer and audience. When working with video of mediatized Spoken Word poetry, you can only use what is available, and what is available is going to vary greatly in quality from poem to poem and poet to poet. Further, like video, there was a range of quality available when it came to print and audio. While the quality of print and audio was similar for Mojgani, Evanson, and Tempest, whose books were published by commercial publishers and albums produced by labels, as an amateur poet, Bertolutti's print and audio were of the lowest commercial quality, printed on white paper and recorded in a home studio, respectively.

Video was not just king for the visual, but also had a strong element of audiotext, with voice, tone, and pace being major sonic influences on our audiovisual experience of each poetry video. While the audio version often has a higher fidelity, as well as differences in how each poet performs, ultimately, the audiotext is still present, and even robust, in video. This was true for every poet, but especially for Tempest, whose work has a significant musical element. Interestingly, though, the audiotext in the audio medium was often quite different than the audiotext in the video medium. In every single audio poem, when compared to its video counterpart, the pace of reading is slower, the volume of the poet's voice is quieter, and the tone and timbre of their voices were softer and gentler. I suggest this is due to recording context: a venue full of audience members is loud and energetic, and the performance context dictates that a performer match that energy and volume, which potentially leads to a more abrasive tone of voice and quicker pace. In contrast, a recording studio, whether professional or amateur, is a quiet space, with less environmental noise, and therefore the recording equipment can pick up a quieter, softer voice. In a studio, one has the ability to do multiple takes, in contrast to the ephemerality of a live venue, which leads to more control over volume, pace, tone and a number of other audiotextual qualities. In addition to the difference in performance style between the poetry videos and audio poems, many of the audio poems had additional sonic elements not present in the live recording. For example, Evanson's "Temple Exercises" had an audio clip of the Apollo 13 moon landing at the beginning of the recording. This creates a moment of reference and intertextuality that we do not get in the live version, nor in print. Again, the possibilities for studio recorded poetry are greater than a video of a live performance because there are opportunities for different

production, recording techniques, extratextual audio clips, performance styles and myriad other audiotextual elements due to the controlled space and the ability to do multiple takes that may not be represented in the final product.

Outside of video, the visualtext impact on interpretation was limited, both in the aforementioned print iteration, and in the audio medium as well. In fact, when it came to the audio poems, the only notable visual elements were album covers, or author photos, or the interface of the app or website on which one is listening. The author photo or album cover hint at some of the visual elements we are concerned with (body set and persona, for example) but as the picture is often a small, thumbnail image that is not necessarily attached to the poem we are viewing so much as the full album, or the artist catalogue that poem is a part of, it does not strike me as a prominent, interpretive element of the individual poem. The same can be said for author photos or album covers. So, while audio and print have their own opportunities for interpretation, ‘readers’ miss the visuality of the mode with each.

Though lacking in visuality, the audio poems had the most robust audiotext. With a high audio fidelity in each case study, the poet’s usage of audile elements such as tone, pace, and timbre were on full display. We could feel the synchronous shifts in tone in “Shake the Dust,” for example, as the message of Mojgani’s words shifts from energetic to sombre on the line “this is for the hard men that want love but know that it won’t come” (*Live From* 1:08-10), when his pace slowed and his tone softened, synchronizing with the content. In the audio poems, Tempest, Bertolutti, and Evanson each used the opportunities of voice, especially tone and pace, in their own ways as well. Interestingly, due to the visual lack of the audio medium, voice became the sole marker of persona. We



can hear Mojgani's caring tone as he seeks to uplift his readers into the fray of change. We can hear Bertolutti's working-class, Canadian accent and Evanson's charisma as she rhythmically sings. Each instance hints at the performance personas that we see iterated on stage in the poetry videos.

The audiovisual experience (that is, considering printtext, videotext, and audiotext working together in each poem) of mediatized Spoken Word poetry is complex to parse. But there are obvious ways that each text both synchronizes and departs from one another to create a variety of affects and meanings. For example, Tempest was very intentional and synchronous in their tone and pace shifts, and how they appeared across texts (that is, in their voice, body, music, and words) which created a recognizable duality of registers in their work. They consciously moved back and forth between a Spoken Word poetry register and a hip hop register throughout. But this synchronicity was not existent in each poet's work. For example, Bertolutti's body performance was static, lacking synchronicity to the message of his words or the torrid pace of his voice. However, this led to an understated poetic persona, dominated by his voice and body set, as well as to the message of his poems coming mostly from the printtext.

But the body, as anticipated in my Introduction, is a difficult site of interpretation. In my audiovisual readings it became clear just how complicated visuals in a live performance are to interpret in relation to the meaning of a poem. For example, the body actions of a performer do not always translate to language. It is hard to say, 'they made this hand gesture, and it meant the stars and that combined with the words of the poem in this way to create this meaning.' However, there is an ineffable way the body of a performer adds to their performance that has to do with the way that body set and body

action combine. That is, in addition to the conscious or unconscious body actions that we read symbolically into the poem, we also read, somewhat voyeuristically, the unique body set of a performer and their persona. I have previously likened this to the experience of reading a memoir: part of what we, as audience members, enjoy is gleaning the lives of others. The words that come out of their mouth, then, are mapped onto their body; however, this does not produce a stable effect. Spoken Word poetry, and the way the printtext, audiotext, and visualtext combine do not singularly or simplistically signify; sometimes, they simply *are*. In this way, to redeploy Moten's phrase, it is not just words that *go past there*, but bodies, voices, and artefacts, too. As such, as readers of mediatised Spoken Word poetry, we cannot always interpret a poem so much as describe it or describe our experience of it.

In the end, the way the three texts appeared in the three mediums, and therefore how they affected my interpretations of the poem, came down to the affordances of each given medium. Each medium became both a site of representation of each given text, but also a site of difference from each other medium. For example, while the printtext appeared in the print medium as words on the page, it appears differently in the audio and video mediums: as words from the mouth. The audio- and visualtexts either did not appear at all in other mediums, or, when they did, it was quite different than how it appeared in another medium. For example, the body appears in video as a moving performative element, but only as an author photo or not at all in print and audio. Additionally, the affordances of each medium create a different hierarchy of the three texts in each medium. Naturally, in print, the poetic form, the linguistics, and so on were all the most prominent readable elements, with audiotext and visualtext factoring into

interpretation minimally. In the audio medium, the audiotext and the spoken printtext are the primary readable elements, with visualtext affecting the reading experience little. In video, this hierarchy is less apparent. Though the visual is very prominent on video, the voiced printtext and the audiotext are important elements for interpretive consideration.

Furthermore, in this research, affordances turned out to be something contained not simply within the medium, but in the act of reading itself. That is, affordances both allow a poet certain opportunities for creation (for example in audio, sonic opportunities are greater) but they also allow a researcher or reader certain opportunities to interpret that creation. For example, I find it easy to listen to a poem or watch a poem and to type notes. But I find it difficult to read a poem in print and to type notes at the same time (especially without a second screen). And though print is more difficult to read and write about at the same time, the experiences of video and audio are more difficult to translate into words. Each act of describing audio or video is an act of translation, whereas describing words with other words is an act of description. Affordances are directly related to how difficult it has been, historically, to study Spoken Word poetry. When reconsidering Somers-Willett's suggestion that Spoken Word and slam demand "of [their] critic a new, interdisciplinary language that takes into account the complex set of literary, performance, and cultural issues that such work brings to the fore" (134), it becomes all the clearer that what Somers-Willett is describing is the way the affordances of an audiovisual medium misalign with literary studies' focus on print. Literary studies has been constructed in relation to the affordances of print, rather than video, audio, or live performance.

### *Reading the Body*

As expected, reading the body proved to be an especially complex endeavor, fruitful as it was. Though each poet has a body set, the deployment of body actions varied across the case study. For some, like Evanson and Mojgani, the body actions created a dynamic experience of each poem. We see this, for example, in Mojgani's use of gesture to synchronously expand the words of his poem and to simultaneously, and asynchronously, create a conversational exchange with the audience: he tells the audience their hearts contain "enough gallons of blood to make every one of you oceans" as he makes an emphatic motor gesture on the word "gallon" and then points at them in a sweeping deictic gesture on the word "you" ("Anis Mojgani" 1:55-58). We see this dynamic corporeal performance embodying and making apparent the importance of the ideas of ritual and repetition through punctuating, full-bodied finger snaps throughout "Temple Exercises." For Tempest, body actions were less important at times, especially as they slipped into rapper hands. However, the absolute synchronicity of their body to the printtext and audiotext were crucial in creating the effect of their dual Spoken Word and hip hop registers. For Bertolutti, the body actions were very limited and added very little. However, his body set was more important. It is interesting that when a performer does not use facial expressions or other body actions, that their body set and printtext become more prominent. There was something interesting about the contrast between the content of his poems, which were tender and heartfelt, and the working-class presentation of his body set. The prominence of body set to the reading of a poem was not something I anticipated when setting out to describe how we interpret Spoken Word poetry, but the

case study showed the importance of this element of visual text.

Body set emerged as an important readable element of each poem. Body actions are somewhat fleeting in a poem: they are there in a singular audiovisual moment combining with words and sound, and then they are gone. But body sets, and the persona tied to them, are present throughout an entire poem. Like a poem on the page, we can view a body set for a sustained period of time without it vanishing. I have already discussed the way that a poet's body is not always intentionally gesturing to create meaning. But in that being comes the opportunity to read identity and persona, which is perhaps more difficult than interpreting the direct actions of the poet's body.

In Chapter 1, I discussed at length the complexity of ethics and power relations present in the act of reading a poet's body. Completing the case study confirmed this complexity. The conclusion that I have come to is that reading the body into a poem needs to be done carefully (and responsibly, to return to Kimberly Blaeser's term from Chapter 1), on a case-to-case basis, and keeping one's reading positionality in mind in the act of reading interculturally. Reading body actions is one thing, but reading body set, as an element of persona and subjectivity, is very different. When we encounter Evanson, for example, the cultural projections of her body set is explicated and explored within the content of her poems. There are clues, such as artefactual markers (a staff, a head covering), that combine with narrative details within the poems ("dervish duties in the temple") ("Temple" 64) to illuminate more about Evanson and her culture and in turn illuminate more about the performance. This is exemplified by the process of learning I undertook when researching Evanson's staff, Islamic history, and Dervishes. It was also complicated by my reading positionality, with moments of my reading and interpretation

falling short of my goals. My theoretical intentions outlined in Chapter 1 became more difficult in the act of reading. I was unable to avoid reading from my white, western subject position. For example, my goal of reading cross culturally, and specifically not subjecting the work of diverse poets to white, western epistemes was limited by the lack of access to and knowledge I have of Evanson's cultural background and epistemes. However, this process was different when engaging with Tempest's work. For example, the video I was engaging with was prior to Tempest coming out as non-binary. This made reading their body when they presented as a different gender than how they currently identify, complex. But Tempest's work was not overtly autobiographical and did not contain within it themes of gender expression. Though, it would be easy to read gender identity into their work, it simply was not there. So, their identity as a non-binary person did not matter to the poem. However, their accent was recognizable as a working-class accent from England. Their work centred around urban life, globalization, and class in the experience of fictional Londoners. Their accent, as an element of their subjectivity and persona, was far more connected to the content of that work. Bertolutti, as a person with an invisible disability, was similarly complex. The story of his struggles with disability is present in the print iteration of his work as well as in the introduction to his performance on video, but disability is not featured as content in his work. Therefore, disability is not a readable element of his body in relation to "Chaos of it All." That said, one of the more interesting elements of his performance was his persona, that of a working-class, alternative male and how our expectations of that subject position contrasted the thoughtful and gentle content of his work. This contrast gave depth and nuance to his poems that did not exist in the print alone. Here, I felt comfortable reading his persona

into the work because I was not making assumptions based on race, gender, or disability and rather taking pleasure in the disparity between his persona and his poems.

Additionally, my positionality as a reader is more aligned with Bertolutti's, albeit I do not share his position as a disabled man. However, this effect is caused, in some ways, by my stereotyping Bertolutti in two ways, or reading his subject position where it is not invited by the work: (1) He reads as an alternative, working-class man, and therefore social perception of him signify that he is likely lacking in emotion, thoughtfulness, and care. And as a result, I am surprised and delighted when those elements appear in his work. (2) I also note that his poems have an added weight and meaning due to his overcoming a brain injury to present poems from memory. If I made stereotypical assumptions about Tempest based on gender or Mojgani based on race or read these elements into the poem when the poem does not invite it, the effect may be a reading that borders on transphobia, racism, or essentialization. My faltering here is likely due to my subject position. Perhaps I feel more comfortable reading the body and persona of a white, cis, working-class man, despite the content of the poem not exploring these positions, because I too am white, cis, and working-class.

Perhaps, then, I can return to the ideas I put forth in Chapter 1 with certainty: reading people, their bodies, their subject positions, their personas, and their lives into their poems is a complex act, albeit one invited by the embodied nature of Spoken Word poetry. There are social relationships in the act of reading; our subject position as a reader interacts with the positionality of a poet as expressed in their performance. Therefore, how I read Bertolutti versus how I read Evanson are different because of different social interactions in our positionality. And while we can attempt to read critically,

responsibly, and in detail, the knowability of a poet through their work is limited. Therefore, there is a responsibility (responseability) not to essentialize poets based on their positionality. This is especially true if the poem itself does not invite us to consider a poet's subject position. Further, the relationships of power inherent in studying the bodies of others are difficult due not only to personal positionality but also the structural constitution of literary studies, both of which, in spite of intention, can be hard to move beyond. Acknowledging and naming our own epistemes and their limitations, as well as our missteps, and trying both to do better next time, is sometimes the best we can offer. However, we must push to do even more; we must strive to create change to the systems that marginalize certain identities in the first place, something I hope this project is working towards.

Another interesting finding was how secondary the face was for many of the video performances. Novak notes that the face can be highly expressive and is typically thought of to be the "visual focus" during communication; however, when reading mediatized Spoken Word poetry, I found the face to be much less important than other visual elements like artefactual communication and hands. However, this was largely because of the videos themselves not necessarily due to the face as a readable element of poetry. In Tempest and Bertolutti's videos, their face was either unclear due to poor camera fidelity or the camera shot was so far back that we could not really see the full range of facial expression. Mojgani's face was more visible as the camera shot was close, but again the video quality is low. Tempest video had the highest quality, as noted, and the best shots of the face. In my readings of Mojgani and Tempest, I mention their facial expressions far more than in my readings of Tempest and Bertolutti.



Reading the body also has the potential to read elements into a poem that do not necessarily matter. In the video for “Temple Exercises,” Evanson is not wearing shoes, which could be interpreted as a simple, grounded body set choice; however, there is an equally good chance that there is another reason. For example, maybe all she had was a particular type of shoe with her that did not go with the clothes she brought to wear on stage. Maybe her shoelaces broke. Who knows? This is an interesting element of body set. Although it finds itself as part of the poem, there is no guarantee that you know how to read it or that it should be read or that the intention was there. Perhaps, even alive and embodied, the author is ‘dead,’ after all; reading a poetic work is not the same as interpreting a poet’s intention. Additionally, our pursuit of knowledge about bodies as formal and aesthetic elements of performed poetry might also have problematic outcomes. For example, again, if we are viewing a poet who is disabled, as an able-bodied reader we may be tempted to ask ourselves, *what happened to them?* Or, if we are viewing a poet who is gender diverse, we may be tempted to wonder about their gender or body. Or, if we are viewing a poet whose culture is not explicit, as a white, western scholar we may be tempted to ask ourselves, *Where are they from?* Returning to Robinson, not all knowledge is for every person (reader) to have.

I have shown that a turn to the body in the study of performed poetry can prove productive in our construction of meaning in that poem. However, as with all reading practices, practices of looking and listening are bound up in historical atrocities and power dynamics. Nonetheless, if, as many scholars above have suggested, we proceed with care and openness to subjective and cultural context, while acknowledging our own reading positionality and potential participation in structural power dynamics, hopefully

we can respect those who we are reading, meet their work with considerations of their cultural paradigms as much as is possible, and avoid this type of literary violence, while deepening our understanding of those who are othered by the dominant power structures. If we are to move forward with care as scholars and researchers, we must read, listen, and watch responsibly, while acknowledging our own subject position and literary studies structural participation in continuum of white supremacy and other power structures. However, as I encountered, this can be a more complicated endeavor in the act of reading itself. Further, we must also try to take this further, and work towards undoing the conditions, systems, and practices that lead to certain bodies being othered in the first place. I hope that my dissertation, in opening up literary studies to more diverse possibilities for studying work beyond print, and therefore work from oral, local, and equity deserving communities; as well as by valuing amateur work; and modelling responsible community-engaged research is a step towards not just theorizing how we might radically include but actually doing so.

### *Performance Context and Reading Context*

While I have rejected the idea that Spoken Word poetry cannot be captured through mediatization, the place where we see the affordances of media fail to capture a meaningful experience of the live performance most is in performance context. At a live event, the venue can be influential in an audience member's experience. For example, one of my favourite music venues is Vancouver's Commodore Ballroom. I have seen more shows there over the years than I can count. Sometimes whether I go to a show or not will depend on where it is: if a show is at the Commodore versus the Rickshaw versus

BC Place will determine the type of environment, the intimacy of the show, and therefore my overall experience. Poetry events tend to happen in smaller venues, depending on the popularity of the poet, but the venue can still be important in the experience of the work. The quality of the acoustics, the seating, the lighting, the host, the crowd, and the amenities of the venue can greatly affect one's experience of a poetry reading. However, when mediatized, and specifically on video, the performance context affected my readings of the poem very little. Whether Bertolutti at Shaw Studios, Tempest at the large, unnamed venue their show was at, Mojgani at the Bowery Poetry Club, or Evanson at the Banff Centre, I did not feel like my experience of the poem affected in a meaningful way by any element of the context. As noted, there is a legitimacy given to a performance by certain venues. For example, when we see the name of the Bowery Poetry Club or the Banff Centre logo, it creates an expectation of quality that is linked to the historical and cultural capital of that venue. However, this effect, at least with these poems, was minimal. I would not say that I felt Mojgani's performance was better than Bertolutti's because it was at the Bowery Poetry Club and Bertolutti's was at Shaw studios. This difference might be more significant if you are synchronous and in person, shoulder to shoulder, hearing more of the crowd noise, smelling the venue. But in video, the place of performance is very secondary to other visual elements, like the body and the voiced audiotext.

Like performance context, my own reading context of each poem, both in terms of the platform I read each poem on and in terms of the location I engaged from, was so insignificant that it is barely worth mentioning. I would not say that the affective experience or interpretation of each work was influenced, but different viewing platforms

did lead to slight differences in reading experience. SoundCloud was slightly different from Apple Music was slightly different from a print book was slightly different from YouTube. On SoundCloud, for example, another screen does not open when you play the poem, so all the readable elements of Bertolutti's full catalogue of work, as well as the readable elements of the platform of SoundCloud itself, were present for the reading. This is different than Apple Music, where a unique window is opened for each song one plays (at least on a phone). As mentioned, SoundCloud is a social media site and Apple Music is more of a pragmatic music platform, so that was a very different context as well. For example, SoundCloud had a heart to like each poem, a link button to repost it, as well as buttons prompting your own signup for the platform. Listening and viewing on a phone versus a computer was also a different experience with different interfaces and options for each. But once a poem was playing, whether as video on YouTube on a computer or as audio on Apple Music on my phone, the experience of the reading platform connected to the textuality of the poems in insignificant ways. Therefore, in the contemporary moment, reading contexts (that is, platforms like SoundCloud or hardware like a phone) are many and each one has its own slightly different affordances just like media. They do alter how we receive the poem, and possibly affect how we interpret the poem, but ultimately these elements did not significantly change my interpretation of each work. Though, I do think further research could be done to explore the differences not just between mediums, but between the platforms and hardware we read on as well.

Finally, my own geographic reading context was similarly insignificant. Where I engaged with a poem, whether a coffee shop, my office, or my home did not affect my interpretation. When my kids were around, it often made it difficult to read at all, but

none of the context for my own reading and research made it into my interpretations in any significant way.

### *Reading in plurality*

Despite video's ability to capture all three texts studied in this dissertation, reading in plurality led to a wider understanding of each poem than video could have achieved alone. Each medium contained some readable element of the poem not present in other mediums. But reading in plurality was an uneven process, and the results varied from poem to poem. While some poems benefitted greatly from being read, listened to, and watched in relation to other iterations, other times plural readings added little. The key takeaways are:

- As print alone inadequately captures the richness and diverse textuality of Spoken Word poetry in performance, reading in plurality allowed a deep focus and understanding of printtext to imbricate with the embodied visualtext and the sounded audiotext leading to a more representative reading of the mode. Having a printtext available to read alongside a voiced or embodied performance limited the ephemerality of performance, allowing the words and affective gesture of the poem to be understood more fully or clearly in some cases. This contrasted reading in singularity; without the print version of a poem alongside the video or audio, there is still an element of disappearance: a poet speaks a word or completes an action that is fleeting and then

gone (at least until the next watch). In this way, the mediatized proved to be somewhat ephemeral after all.

- Print poems were more related to live performance than anticipated, often acting like a score or performance script.
- Reading in plurality, more often than not, expanded my understanding of either the content/meaning of the poem, the poet/persona of the poet, or both.
- The order I read each medium in created different pathways through our experience of both poet and performer, though this was less significant than I anticipated.
- Reading in plurality was less fruitful with certain poems than others. Some poets are more verbocentric, while others use their voice and bodies in more dynamic ways. Sometimes poems in one medium contained information that was key to understanding the poem in another medium; sometimes they did not. So, while there are connections across the mediums a poem may appear in, and reading in plurality can expand our readings of these poems, ultimately each iteration of a poem in a given medium should not be conflated with other iterations.

I will explore these findings in more detail below.

The first finding listed above has been said in other ways in this conclusion, but it is worth returning to in light of ideas of plurality, if only briefly. Reading these poems in print in singularity had little difference to reading any other genre of poetry in print. But,

when reading in plurality, my interpretation of the print iterations of these poems gained more richness than the audio or video did from the addition of print. The embodied performer, and the voiced poems, used the opportunities of audiovisuality to create a dynamic reading experience not seen on the page alone. The most salient example of this might be the lack of a musical element in Tempest's print version of *Let Them Eat Chaos*. The mechanical sounds of instruments and the musicality of Tempest's vocal performance do not appear in any way in print. But when we listen to the album and/or watch the video of their performance, we get to experience the work as a multimodal, multimedia performance. There are any number of similar examples from Bertolutti, Evanson, and Mojgani, as well. However, to simply say that print is inadequate to capture Spoken Word poetry is short-sighted in some ways. Studying the printed editions suggested that some were created with print-based intentions, rather than performance-based ones. We saw this exemplified in the way that Bertolutti and Evanson's poems on the page contained almost no cues or formal relationship to how they read the poems.

When reading in plurality, having the print medium to read added greatly to the experience of listening or watching. Reading a print version in relation to its audio and video counterparts allows a reader to slow down and take in the words in a different way than the fleeting and ephemeral nature of a video or audio file. For example, in reading Tempest's work on the page I was able to understand the words in ways that her thick London accent made difficult. Or when reading Evanson's "Temple Exercises," I was able to look up the many temples and religious figures she names in the poem to gain greater context, whereas in viewing or listening alone it may have been hard to pick up unfamiliar place names like "Mecca at Hajj" ("Temple" 64), especially with the fluid,

understated tone that Evanson voices the line. Again, coming back to my listening positionality, perhaps a Muslim reader or someone with a better understanding of world geography might have picked that up without the print version to read as they listen/watch. Another example is Bertolutti and his torrid reading pace: having access to the print version to read along with the live and audio recordings made it easier to hear all of the words. The pace that Bertolutti cultivates in his readings makes one acutely aware of the ephemerality, even mediatized, as you are not able to easily pick up the words due to a quick delivery; in some ways, despite performance scholarship that fears recording due to the loss of ephemerality and exchange, the digital performance has elements of ephemerality after all. Notwithstanding being able to scrub back and forth on video and audio, the nonvisuality of spoken words, the fleeting nature of sound and body action, do not allow a researcher very long to read or interpret. It is also not as easy to navigate to different points of a recording as it is in a poem in print. While this is not the same disappearance as happens live, mediatized performance is not as static and stable as a word on a page. Further, digital recordings do not exist on the internet forever. At one point in the research process, I lost the video for “Temple Exercises” I had been studying for so long. Just like that, after years of working with and teaching this video in the classroom, one day I went to view it and it was gone. I found two other videos: one of a full show at the Centre for the Creative Arts (CCA) at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, during which she performs “Temple Exercises”; and a version performed at the Vancouver Poetry House on May 2, 2016, which exists on YouTube as a singular video. I emailed Evanson to see about the other video, which was a better-quality recording, and she redirected me to her Vimeo account, where I found the original video I had been



working with. This was lucky but would not be the case with every video. Digital work has a different level of maintenance, and despite it seeming like we will always be able to access it, it is always already as ephemeral as its live counterpart. Print, audio, and video each expanded the readings of poems in other mediums in their own way.

Additionally, it may be worth noting that when thinking about the potential of reading in plurality, there are far more videos available than audio or print. In this small set of poets, each poet only had one print medium version available (with the exception of Kae Tempest, whose work appears as song lyrics attached to the Apple Music audio version) and one audio medium version, which was typically a recorded version of the poem as an album available on streaming sites and apps, or as a physical copy of the album. Video, on the other hand, had a multitude of versions available. Certain poems, like Anis Mojgani's "Shake the Dust," a poem that has been popular and circulating on the internet since the advent of Facebook in 2006, have as many as eight or nine versions of the poem in video.

Despite the lack of representation of performance on the page, I did find that many of the poets' page versions had elements of what Charles Olson called the breath line, or scoring. That is, the way the poems appeared on the page paralleled how some of the poets read their poems, and, in particular, where they break their lines and stanzas parallel where they take pauses in performance. Specifically, Mojgani and Tempest organized their work on the page similarly to how they performed live, taking pauses at many of the line breaks or stanza breaks. Evanson did not follow this trend, often pausing or continuing the flow of their reading in ways not represented on the page. However, overall Evanson's poem has long, prosaic lines, broken into a staccato rhythm by

punctuation. Even though not perfectly represented on the page, this is how they voiced the printtext, oscillating back and forth between stilted, staccato lines, and long flowing lines. Bertolutti broke from this trend altogether, with his short lines and short stanzas heavily contrasting his unbroken reading flow. The printtexts of all four poets also used the opportunities of the page in ways that could not be represented in the audio or video performances. For example, Tempest used large amounts of white space to organize parts of the story or lists of images, and Evanson had the aforementioned concrete element (heart monitor shape) that was certainly not performed live.

I was also struck by how similarly the poems from different poets appeared in print. This is a very small case sample, but it seemed that the print versions of these Spoken Word poems often appeared as prose, or with many stanzas with long prosaic lines. There was not an abundance of some of the common poetic features we often see on the page in contemporary page poetry (enjambment, non-traditional delineation, end rhyme etc.), with the exception of Bertolutti, whose poems were in lineated verse with a number of end rhymes. In this way, it seems as though the form of prose aligns well with the often conversational, narrative style of Spoken Word poetry. Combined with the breath line or scoring elements, we might say that the print versions of these poems are as much performance texts as they are page poems.

Perhaps the most productive findings through reading in plurality were not those of form, but of content and authorial context. There were a number of instances when reading in plurality helped me understand either the content of the poem, or the poet it belongs to, more fully. For example, when reading Tempest's *Let Them Eat Chaos* in plurality, each medium I encountered the text in had information not available in the

other mediums. For example, the live version had the number 4:18 printed on the roof, a number that is spoken in the live performance, but was not explicated in a clear enough manner for me to hear or understand. When reading in print, I could not only see the written number, but there is also an epigraph of a bible verse, John 4:18, which pertained to love for others and therefore spoke to the theme of connectivity. The audio version had a description of the album that told the story of the characters in the poem, who all live on the same street in London, wake up at 4:18 in the morning, and have a shared experience. Without each piece of information given to me by each medium, I would not have had nearly as full an understanding of the narrative the book portrays. For Bertolutti, I was able to understand him as a reader more fully when reading in plurality. For example, when listening to audio, we get only the poems title and his reading of it. There is no information about him as an author. However, *Bad News* contains an autobiographical statement, providing context of Bertolutti's working-class upbringing and the narrative of his disability. Similarly, the video features the host providing some elements of Bertolutti's authorial context.

In creating my method, I struggled with what hierarchy to enact in the process of reading in plurality. We cannot interpret the print, the video, and the audio all at once (though perhaps one could read the print medium alongside the video or audio mediums). So where to begin? I am always considering the fact that Spoken Word has been understudied, always carrying this idea (harkening back to Somers-Willett's notion that we need new interdisciplinary language) that we, as literary scholars, do not know how to study it and talk about it, and this is why we do not, due to a simple apprehension of the unknown. In the initial method I proposed above, I suggested starting with print, because

this is a medium that those who study poetry are likely going to be familiar with. But now, I wonder if there is something problematic in this. I just spent more than 150 pages trying to uphold performance and mediatized performance only to turn around and prioritize print again. So, I decided to try different points of entry into reading in plurality: print then audio then video; audio then video then print; video then print then audio and so on and so forth. In terms of medium, reading the iterations of each poem in a different order was interesting, but did not yield many results. I found that the audio version sounded often very quiet if I watched video first. I found that if I went the other way, the video version sounded like the fidelity was low. If I viewed the video or listened to the audio first, I found that I could only picture how that poet read the poem when reading in print. Conversely, if I read print first, I found that the video and audio versions were different than I had expected. This is because when we encounter something first it seems like the original. It becomes our point of reference by which we judge other versions. While interesting, this ultimately affected my experience of the poems in plurality or singularity very little, and after reading each version so many times, I no longer remember what the primary medium I engaged with was other than to look back at my writing.

Similarly, when doing subsequent readings of a poem (Step 8 in the method), it rarely shifted how I had interpreted and understood a poem. A few times, it saw me catch more interpretive opportunities (like not seeing the 4:18 projection the first time I viewed the video for *Let Them Eat Chaos*), but largely the first few times I read a poem in any medium saw me catch most of the interpretive opportunities present. However, that said, my readings and subsequent readings all had the same focus: a general interpretation of

the poem. I think subsequent readings with a more particular focus (disability, race, etc.) would open up an endless number of interpretive potentialities for these poems.

Despite all of the ways that reading plurality expands the interpretation of a given poem, it made it clearer than ever that each medium we encounter a poem in is, in many ways, a different poem. The audiotext is not stable across audio and video, the printtext is not stable across video and audio, and the visualtext is almost nonexistent in audio and print. Some performers used their body and voice in dynamic ways, while others remain verbocentric in the act of performance, simply reading the text. Evanson's reading at the Banff Centre is not represented by the printtext nor, other than the words, is it replicated on the album. Tempest's hip hop musicality does not appear in Tempest's print poem. Additionally, at times, reading in plurality did not expand my readings in any significant ways. For example, Mojgani's "Shake the Dust" did not yield much more in plurality than the amalgamation of the embodied performance and printed text, something the video largely does on its own. The differences across different readings might illuminate elements of the text not experienced elsewhere, but it also may simply be a variation, like a remix of a favourite song—it adds little but is enjoyable simply because it is different. And that difference (*différance*) is allowable. As we read these poems in their plural existence, we should not conflate them as the same text, but rather allow each iteration of a poem, and the affordances of the medium it appears in, to help us better understand other iterations we read/see/hear being performed, while embracing the print, video, and audio versions as their own unique poems, holding two truths evident.

## Chapter 3.

### **‘Communities Are the Ones Who Know the Answers To Their Own Problems’: Development of a Spoken Word Resource in Community**

*“communities are the ones who know the answers to their own problems”*

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (181)

#### **SECTION 1: METHOD, COMMUNITY, and AUDIENCE**

##### **Introduction**

In the Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2, I have worked through the idea that Spoken Word poetry is a recognizable (albeit nebulous) type of poetry within the much larger umbrella term of Spoken Word, and that this type of poetry is now one of the dominant modes of poetic production on the planet, being disseminated everywhere from TikTok to Instagram to open mics to HBO to print presses around the world. I have established that, despite this ubiquity, Spoken Word poetry has not entered the economies of academic research and the classroom. By way of Susan Somers-Willett, and other scholars, I suggest that this is due to a lack of understanding, training, and methods for potential English professors and researchers due to the multimodal, multimedia, and plural nature of the mode. At the end of Chapter 1, I outlined a method for reading Spoken Word poetry so that it might more robustly enter classrooms, syllabi, reading lists, and

bibliographies around the world, and be engaged with at the institution as much as it is in the artistic spheres outside of it. In Chapter 2, I developed a case study and tested my method, studying four poems by four poets across three mediums, confirming and expanding my understanding of the mode. Here in Chapter 3, I turn to developing the method from Chapter 1 into a digital resource that can be used by researchers, professors, teachers, readers, and aficionados of Spoken Word poetry for the multidisciplinary, multimedia art form's study, and demystifying hermeneutic engagement within literary studies. In the section that follows, I shift away from analysis and theory towards describing the community-engaged context and social-practice approach in which the method and resource have been developed, ending the chapter with the resource itself.

### **Community-Engaged Context and Process of Creation**

When I first began preparing my SSHRC application for what became this project, I was hoping to create a resource that could be used by those inside and outside of the academy. This is because I am, admittedly, at times more skeptical than your average literary scholar about the value of the work that we do. Despite being enjoyable, does studying the poetry of Wordsworth or Shakespeare do anything for the world? Will studying Spoken Word poetry do anything for the world? I do not mean to turn my nose up at the work that so many scholars of literature are currently grinding theirs upon. Nor do I mean to undermine my own chosen career, or the three-hundred pages you have just read, either. But it is an honest question, and one I think any scholar worth their salt should be asking—*what value does our work have outside the walls of the institution?*

In recent years, community-based art and scholarship, sometimes collected under

the banner of Social Practice, have emerged as major fields hoping to connect scholarly work to worldly impact, following a longer history of public and participatory arts practices. Gregory Sholette defines the greater field:

Social Practice art is an emerging, interdisciplinary field of research and practice that pivots on the arts and humanities while embracing such external disciplines as urban, environmental, or labor studies; public architecture; and political organizing, among others. Its overall objective is not merely to make art that represents instances of sociopolitical injustice (consider Picasso's *Guernica*), but to employ the varied forms offered by the expanded field of contemporary art as a collaborative, collective, and participatory social method for bringing about real-world instances of progressive justice, community building, and transformation.

*(Art As Social Action xiii)*

Developing alongside this growth, adjacent fields like public scholarship and the digital humanities (DH) offer opportunities for arts and the humanities to reimagine their roles and functions in society—to *do* outside of the walls of the institution.

This intention to produce art and research that affects those inside and outside the university is at the heart of Social Practice, which has an ethico-social imperative. That is, a mandate to produce positive change within society whether through theory or practice (“A Social Edition”). In *Living As Form* (2012), critic Nato Thompson writes of socially engaged work that it “[defies] discursive boundaries, [and] its very flexible nature reflects an interest in producing effects and affects in the world rather than focusing on the form itself” (32). As such, Social Practice is less a form and more an intention—an intention that permeates my work here as ethos, method, and also, well,



form. For example, I employ elements of the similarly socially-conscious field of Public Scholarship, which is marked by certain formal qualities such as an aim “to be jargon-free, accessible, and relevant to pressing needs” and “a turn toward participatory methods where non-academic stakeholders, indigenous (sic) stakeholders, and/or international partners are brought into the research process” (Leavy 702). This public scholarly approach, as a facet of my Social Practice ethos, is evident in the community context the digital resource and greater dissertation has been created in, and the goal (even failed goals of the project) of creating work that is useful and impactful inside and outside of the institution. Additionally, accessible and socially conscious methods and strategies, such as plain language and responseable reading, have been essential in creating this resource.

In the *Oxford Handbook of Public Scholarship* (2020), Patricia Leavy notes the different “shapes” that scholarship can take (6), and how shaping scholarship for a wider audience can benefit both our work and those with whom we hope to commune. She writes:

Public scholarship is all about reaching different audiences with our scholarship. In order to address different issues successfully and communicate effectively with diverse audiences, we need to be able to think, see, and build in different shapes and ultimately to produce knowledge in different shapes—transdisciplinary, collaborative, artistic, digital, popular shapes. (702)

My hope for this digital resource, in engaging an ethos of Social Practice and the methods of public scholarship and community engaged research, has been to give it a shape that will be meaningful to and successfully reach a diverse audience of academics and

university students, and be accessible to public learners who may want to use it.

Some might argue theorizing Spoken Word poetry as a *community-based* mode and Social Practice as the savior of the academy's relationship with the public sphere is utopian. As such, before moving on to describing the resource further, I will briefly trouble some of the more utopian aspects of *community* (as a keyword) and public praxis along the lines of cultural studies scholar Miranda Joseph in her book *Against the Romance of Community* (2002). Joseph's book is highly critical of discursive formations of community, suggesting 'communities' are not inherently altruistic, and in fact are complicit in global systems of power, domination, and exclusion. However, Joseph does not see complicity with the state as a negative, necessarily. Rather, she views "this complicity [as] a relief," and that by "marking the complicity of heterogeneous Social Practices, identities, and communities with capitalism, [she hopes] to make it possible to imagine alliances across those differences" (xxxii). Therefore, Joseph's deromanticization of community is generative, rather than destructive, making space for collaboration between potentially disparate communities that together can create change. Public Scholar Kathleen Fitzpatrick, too, evokes community not as a "dangerous, mythical notion of organic unity, but instead a form of solidarity, of coalition-building" (11). In her book *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (2019), Fitzpatrick argues that the bonds between the university and the public it purports to serve have been broken, and hopes, through a more public-centred approach, of rebuilding that connection (12). I use the term community in a similarly positive way, hoping that a socially constructed idea of community (that is, synonymous with altruistic collectivism) can be used not only as an artistic and scholarly methodology, but as a

guiding principle for building new relations between the artist, the institution, the state, and the public.

Despite the recent shift in the humanities towards Social Practice (for example fields like public scholarship, public humanities, community-engaged research, community art, etc. and open methods of distribution like open source and access work and scholarly blogs and podcasts) the institution is still very much a place with walls (whether those barriers are cultural, linguistic, class-based, or otherwise). When formulating this project, I set out with the goal of creating work that would have real utility to the public, and other communities that do not have the privileges that institutional communities do. My initially proposed project would create a digital resource for teaching Spoken Word. My aim was to make this resource useful to professors and researchers in the academy, to public intellectuals and teachers, to aficionados of Spoken Word, to high school and middle school—to *everyone*. This was a very common type of goal for the beginning of a PhD: to change the world, or at the very least, to change scholarship. Scope has never been my strong suit—the first draft of my Master’s project, which was supposed to be 100 pages, was almost 500 (sorry, Karis and Anne). Reaching everyone with this resource was a lofty goal, but it came from an honorable place: I thought I could do better than to simply put another book in the university library that only those up-to-date on their tuition would ever access. I wanted to do work that could perforate the walls, especially because Spoken Word poetry has historically existed in non-institutional communities. I wanted to create a project that would simultaneously allow Spoken Word poetry to enter the institution, while also creating a resource that people outside of the institution would be interested in using (and

not just theoretically). And while I do not consider this project a failure, I will admit that in some ways I have failed at that goal.

At the beginning of my PhD, I received a Community Engaged Research award from SFU to put on a program called “yoothspohk” (sic) with a local (to Kelowna) arts non-profit with which I was already affiliated, Inspired Word Café (IWC). As part of its community arts programming, IWC always does a youth Spoken Word showcase or slam in May or June. Prior to the creation of the program, at a youth slam held in 2019 by IWC, there were twelve high school and middle school participants from around the Okanagan, and about fifty audience members. These students were electric post-performance, but a few of them expressed to IWC that they wished they were better prepared for the event. So, it was decided that the following year IWC would offer some training alongside the event. Thus, “yoothspohk,” Inspired Word Café’s Youth Mentorship Program, was born. Naturally, my doctoral work on the pedagogy of Spoken Word seemed like a good fit to collaborate, and SFU’s Community Engaged Research Initiative (CERi) agreed. I received funding from CERi for my research portion and part of the program’s activities, and IWC received funding on their end from other sources in order to fund the rest of the program’s activities.

As part of this project, I pursued ethics approval from SFU to be able to test out early drafts of what would become my resource with community members who participated in the program. I would use the resource to teach students and then survey those students, as well as their teachers, in order to continue to develop the resource. The Department of Research Ethics at SFU, however, did not see things the same way as I did. They had a hard time understanding why I would need to undertake community

engaged research, or, for them, ‘research with human participants,’ in order to develop the resource. This required a number of drafts and interactions with the Ethics Department in order to frame the project properly. Of course, my rationale was that Spoken Word is a community-based form of writing, and that to study this form of writing totally divorced from community would be counterintuitive. I wasn’t able to convince them. So, after discussing with my supervisor, we decided that I would pursue ethics exemption, rather than clearance, on the grounds that it was an artistic project. SFU Ethics agreed to this, which allowed me to work on the program alongside yoothspohk, but not to consult the students, teachers, or other volunteers in any significant way (such as surveying or interviewing).

Despite a year-long break due to a global pandemic, in 2021 yoothspohk brought together six poets, four teachers, one hundred students, and fifty audience members in a three-month program. Poet-mentors (including myself) visited three local high schools and administered a Spoken Word training program based on my initial research into Spoken Word poetry, leading up to a final performance on May 27 where student-poets showcased writing they worked on in the program. yoothspohk was a huge success for students and teachers alike, and the program has since grown to include five schools and almost 2000 total participants this past year. But that first year did not do for my research what I had hoped it would. I did not have a draft of the resource—I just had smaller units that have contributed to the resource that appears in this chapter. I had developed a couple of workshops, but these workshops were mostly centered on writing, not reading or interpretation. Further, I was not able to survey students or test the parts of the resource I did have. When preparing for the second year of yoothspohk, which the CERi

also funded, I decided that maybe I would like to again pursue ethics clearance to survey and interview participants. This time, the process took a long time. That year, my fourth kiddo, Heath River Zayne Mash, was born, so amongst my daddy duties I was writing my comprehensive exams, working a book for McGill-Queen's UP, running a non-profit, and trying to be a poet and a person with friends and keys in there somewhere as well. I was not focused on the ethics process like I needed to be. The time of year we administer the program was suddenly upon us and I had not completed the ethics process. Exemption was what we landed on again.

However, ethics exemption turned out to be the right decision for the project. As I undertook the second year of the project, teaching and discussing Spoken Word in the classroom with the teachers and students, kids from ages five to seventeen, it became clear that, at that level, a resource for reading Spoken Word was not what participants or teachers wanted or needed. At these ages, school seems to be as much about social-emotional learning as it is about learning actual facts, skills, or theory. It was communicated by the teachers that students love to make and do and play. Further, Inspired Word Café did their own internal surveying to see how they could improve the project, and no one really filled out the surveys. Additionally, in the process of my comprehensive exams and prospectus, my project had narrowed its focus to reading Spoken Word poetry, not the more general act of making and critically thinking about the mode, like where it began. Reading, as a hermeneutic act, was not of interest to students or teachers. Teachers needed to be able to help their students create, and as mentioned in my introduction, there are a number of books, websites, and resources I could turn them to for that. And, with recent changes to British Columbia's curriculums, teachers have

more freedom to teach English or Creative Writing how they want to, as long as it is hitting certain learning outcomes;<sup>89</sup> traditional English Literature activities like close reading are no longer required by the curriculum. Thus, my realization was that the research I wanted to do (to develop and test a resource for reading Spoken Word in the classroom and in community) was no longer congruent with youthspohk, as it was not responding to an expressed community need. Simply put: the community wanted to make Spoken Word, not read it. So, what was I to do?

As outlined in the SFU's CERi *Community Resource Handbook* (2020), community-engaged research is not simply about developing a project and then finding a community to undertake the work with. This is an extractive mindset, and one that has been very common in historic relationships between the university and communities, especially with fields like Anthropology. The handbook states:

History has shown that, especially when working with communities disproportionately impacted by systemic injustices and social stigma, research can perpetuate stigma, undermine existing grassroots initiatives and cause emotional harm due to outsiders “parachuting” in and out. It can consume valuable and limited community resources (e.g., time, people, infrastructure) and misrepresent communities when done poorly. (21)

Parachuting, here, refers to the act of entering a community from the outside, extracting what a researcher needs for their work, and then exiting the community. During my work with Inspired Word Café over the years, we have experienced extractive university relationships before. We have collaborated on research and projects in which the

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<sup>89</sup> See more about BC's curriculum redesign, here: <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/rethinking-curriculum>

university approached us with an idea, we were given a very small amount of money and expected to do a lot of work on a project that we did not devise, and then, when the project was done, the university was gone and IWC was not much better off than when we started. The community gains very little, while the researcher gets what they need. For all the buzz-word-filled talk within the academy about public scholarship, public humanities, and community engaged research, how much research is actually helping communities? How much of it involves them in the research process? How much of the work responds to expressed needs? For the CERi, a critical first step to proper community-engaged research is to develop a project “working within and with the community to explore an inquiry into an issue or research question” (21). The project must not be predeveloped without community feedback. The researcher must not parachute in and out. The project must respond to community need, not researcher need. This requires a kind of research-based selflessness.

During the second year of yoothspohk, it became clear that not only was my project no longer congruent with the work that the community needed, but, other than perhaps a dialogic backdrop for me to think about Spoken Word and pedagogy, yoothspohk was no longer very aligned with the shifting goals of my project. Instead of trying to shoehorn yoothspohk into the needs of my project, or no longer working on yoothspohk at all, I decided, in alignment with the CERi’s view of Community Engaged Research, to continue work on the project in the way the community expressed a desire for: focusing on teaching kids to create Spoken Word. It has been three years of yoothspohk now, which has seen over two-hundred workshops given to more than five thousand total participants at schools around the Okanagan. I have developed and given a



number of different workshops during this time, none of which have affected my research in any significant way. Resources on how to create new Spoken Word poetry are not novel and therefore do not hold up to the discursive goal of scholarly work: to contribute new ideas to ongoing conversations. Continuing to work on the project has not really directly benefitted my research, but my knowledge of the mode and research on it as a poetic form has benefitted the community. This is, in some ways, a limitation of my work: it was never tested with participants like I hoped and set out to do. But I think that, ultimately, I have modeled the way that research can be truly public and community-oriented. That is, modelling how we as researchers may undertake work developed in community and for community, and continue to be responsive to expressed needs on an ongoing basis. These needs may contradict our own research goals and we should not abandon the work should this asynchronicity present itself, even if this means we do not produce the exact deliverable we set out to. I strongly contend that this is far more important than disseminating research that is not of any use to the actual communities in public forums and then calling that *public* or *community engaged*. It is a hard lesson to learn, and one that requires checking one's scholarly ego as well as redefining scholarly notions of success. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2013), decolonial Scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith contends that "communities are the ones who know the answers to their own problems" (160). Smith is speaking specifically of Indigenous communities here, in relation to "various governments and agencies" (160), and the ways in which institutions should uphold the expressed needs of Indigenous communities. However, I think there is a very salient lesson to learned from her statement by scholars under taking community-engaged research. Her observation

that “[Indigenous] communities know the answers to their own problems” can be taken as a caution for researchers who are working in any form of community-based research to trust that communities are experts on their own needs. This is a mantra that might guide scholars hoping to do this kind of work in avoiding instances of extractive parachuting and lead to more ethical and mutually beneficial relationships between universities and public communities.

Despite not being able to test the resource, the community context for my work taught me other lessons I did not anticipate. yoothspohk became the social and artistic context for my work, informing creative decisions despite not producing field research. I learned that, like the university, Spoken Word is starting to be taught in schools more frequently than I imagined. I learned about age groups and expertise level in relation to pedagogy: university students are not the same as Grade 12s, and Grade 12s are not the same as Grade 10s, or 8s, or 3s. This was a learning curve for IWC in the program, which led to us adjusting the content of our lessons for each group. It also led to a tough realization of scope and audience: my resource cannot be for everyone, both in terms of its usefulness to secondary schools and universities, but also in terms of age group. As such, I narrowed the scope of the project to focus on university students, professors, and researchers, with the outside hope that interested parties seventeen-and-up may also be interested in my research. Additionally, in seeing many students at the middle- and high-school levels take a keen interest in Spoken Word, I realized that there was perhaps a secondary effect. Through the normalization of Spoken Word and performance poetry at that age group, and developing a love and knowledge of the mode, unlike their current university-level counterparts, these students will be more equipped to read and analyze

Spoken Word when they get to university. They will perhaps even seek it out. This is a speculative hope, maybe, but not too much of a stretch when we consider Somers-Willett's idea that what the institution lacks is an understanding of Spoken Word. youthspohk may not have taught any students how to close read Spoken Word poetry in plurality, but it has certainly given a large group of young people the skills and knowledge to approach the mode, should they encounter it later in their educational journeys.

For Fitzpatrick, public scholarship, as a socially engaged form of research, should bridge the fissure between the private and the public by showing the value of artistic and critical praxis to a wide range of audiences. She writes: "If we are to correct course, if we are to restore public support for institutions in our fields, we must find ways to communicate and to make clear the public goals that our fields have, and the public good that our institutions serve" (22). Therefore, my work has utility not just inside or outside the walls on the university, but also in potentially repairing the relationship between the two. In the end, the gap my research is filling is about 'reading' Spoken Word poetry. This is an exigency in the scholarly discourse and not a publicly-expressed need. I've had to reconcile that what my research needed and what the community needed, while overlapping, are different. Alongside IWC, I am currently developing a separate set of resources for local teachers to use that will aid them in teaching Spoken Word poetry to their students. Though these resources did not make it into my dissertation, and perhaps the outputs of my dissertation were not 'community-engaged research' in a traditional sense, I didn't abandon the community when they stopped serving my research. Instead, I continued to do the work that they needed, and I let my research go where it needed. I

began with the idea that there is uneven power dynamic between institutional work and communities, wondering: if our work isn't serving communities, what is the point? In the end, I 'failed' at creating a resource that served communities outside the institutional wall. But I didn't fail at serving the community. And I feel that my current work will have positive influence inside the paywall. Perhaps, in Beckettian sense, I failed and hope, for the future, to fail even better.

### **Resource Content**

The intended audience for this resource are those who would like to begin the process of reading, researching, or teaching Spoken Word poetry. While I think it may be useful to a wide array of researchers, likely, due to its introductory nature, its intended audiences are those in the early stages of researching/teaching/studying Spoken Word poetry at the late high school/early post-secondary level. For example, it may be of use to those teaching introductory courses on poetry, performance, media studies, or even the tenured prof hoping to freshen up a first-year lecture course; or it may be of use for those beginning to write a paper or undertake a research project on Spoken Word poetry; finally, I hope it may also be of use to the general reader who is interested in literary studies and wants to critically engage with the mode.

In the Introduction, I outlined my rationale for a method of Social Practice as being important to Spoken Word and Spoken Word poetry. As noted in the Introduction, the sociality of Spoken Word poetry has been widely written about. Despite my resource no longer being aimed at those outside of the institution, I have still created it in a socially engaged context, outlined above, and, as I will show here, I have still

incorporated other elements of Social Practice in the content of the resource. I strongly feel that despite the audience being narrowed to the university, there are still socially conscious practices that can be upheld in its creation that will lead to a diverse range of students being able to access the material, and perhaps to the research finding an audience outside the institutional walls after all. I have done this by adopting the principles of plain language and organizing the resource in a way that privileges clarity and accessibility, as well as developing a colloquial, accessible, and somewhat performative voice in the text that will be inviting and entertaining for newcomers and aligns in many ways with the accessible poetics of Spoken Word poetry. There are other elements of content that do not come from an approach of Social Practice but are also worth mentioning below. In this way, despite being intended for a university audience, the resource aligns a social mode of writing with a methodology of Social Practice while also taking an accessible form that remains open to people with diverse literacy levels.

Using the Government of Canada’s “Plain Language Guidelines,”<sup>90</sup> as well as Erin Scott and Project Literacy’s *Plain Language Writing and Literacy Audit Tool Manual* (2017), I have created a clear, accessible reading experience. One may wonder if accessibility may lead to a lower level of complexity than the rigor of institutional literary studies demands; however, this is not the case. In *Plain Language*, Erin Scott quotes the *Securities & Exchange Commission Plain Language Handbook* (1998) in stating: “Plain language does not mean deleting complex information... instead, it assures the orderly

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<sup>90</sup> These can be viewed online here: <https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/services/communications-community-office/communications-101-boot-camp-canadian-public-servants/plain-language-accessibility-inclusive-communications.html>

and clear presentation of complex information so the readers have the best possible chance of understanding it” (3). Similarly, the Government of Canada states that the purpose of a plain-language approach in written communications is to convey information that the audience needs to know in a way that they can easily understand. It should not be confused with an oversimplified, condescending style. Rather, you can save your audience time and effort by using well-known and proven techniques. These techniques include: “choosing words that the audience knows”; “using short and clear sentence and paragraph structures”; “organizing and presenting material clearly and logically”; and “designing and structuring the document according to the audience’s needs.” Further, Scott’s guidelines go into much more specific detail about how you can design your writing to be most legible. Some of the important suggestions her manual includes are: Using the “active voice,” as well as avoiding acronyms and jargon (14); writing directly to your audience using first or second person (15); using 12 to 18 point font, with larger being better (21); using color to “highlight information” (22) and italics, bold, and underlining to “emphasize a point” (20); leaving lots of white space (21); and using page breaks and headers frequently when introducing new ideas (20). Additionally, the manual notes that Times New Roman is one of the easiest fonts to read (22). Though there is scholarly debate about whether serified or sans-serifed fonts are more legible (Beier and Minakata 2022; Daxer et. al. 2022), ultimately, I have decided to stick with Scott’s recommendation of using serified fonts for body-text, and sans-serifed fonts for headings and captions.

These are only a collection of the numerous suggestions for plain language that Scott and the Canadian government’s guidelines suggest in over forty pages, which

include anything from how to format graphics, to include faces instead of inanimate objects when using images (22), and even eliminating as many words over two syllables as possible (6). While I feel it is outside the scope of this PhD to include all of these principles here, in future iterations of the resource I hope to perform a full plain-language audit on the resource using Scott’s manual. In this first iteration of the manual, I adopt a collection of recommendations from each. In sum, here are the plain language principles I have adopted from Scott and the Government of Canada’s recommendations:

- I use words that are common and understandable to a wide range of audience members.
- Whenever possible, I use short, clear sentences and short, logical, well-organized paragraphs.
- I avoid jargon and acronyms whenever possible.
- I use the active voice.
- I use 12 to 18 point Times New Roman for body paragraphs, and 12 to 18 point Calibri for headings and figures.
- I use italics and bold to emphasize points.
- I liberally use white space to create a visually-clear reading experience through page and paragraph breaks.
- I use headers each time I introduce new concepts.

In addition to these principles, I have crafted a voice that speaks colloquially directly to the audience using the first and second person. But this presents an interesting challenge when creating a resource that is also academic. The Government of Canada suggests “designing and structuring the document according to the audience’s needs.” Part of the

needs of my audience are to create a reading experience that is both accessible and also adequate for use in literary courses of various levels. *Literary Studies* is filled with jargon, field-specific concepts, and a history of discourse. The voice I have cultivated in the resource below is direct, in plain language, and colloquial, while still maintaining a critical lens and engaging a certain level of poetic lexicon. For example, in the opening lines of the resource, I write: “Remember your days in university? You arrived bright-eyed and bushy-haired, with a love of poetry cultivated by a favourite high-school teacher or Mrs. Cragg, the art teacher who would lend out her own non-school-approved books and smelled kinda... skunky? (299). This voice simultaneously invites readers in with the colloquial and stylistically interesting approach to a scholarly text, and avoids the stiff, jargon-filled writing style that might preclude readers and students who do not already have the shared critical poetic lexicon the university commonly uses to discuss creative works. It is a voice that, wherever possible, avoids literary jargon and defines terms that not every reader will be familiar with. When I am unable to avoid jargon, acronyms, or large words in the resource, I provide a footnote for clarity. Even if I am being realistic about the fact that the “public”—by which I mean non-professional and non-institutional audiences—may not actually ever engage with this resource, it is important to consider that not all institutional audience members have the same knowledge base or literary background. By writing in a colloquial tone using plain language, I seek to bring different types of learners along, and leave the resource open to the possibility of the public engaging with it. If I made no attempt to bring them along, I would make that lack of engagement a certainty.

The resource proceeds with four parts. First, in **Introduction: Three Out of Five**



**Ain't Bad: The Who, Why, and What of This Resource**, I begin by clearly explaining the goals for the resource, who it is intended for, and what people will find within it. Next, in **Section 1 What is Spoken Word?** I draw on my Introduction to outline what Spoken Word poetry is, developing a shared understanding of the mode. Next, in **Section 2 A Method for Interpreting Spoken Word Poetry in Research and in the Classroom**, I truncate my method from Chapter 1 of the dissertation for use in research and in the classroom. I have also tried to rewrite it for accessibility, along the lines of the plain language recommendations. Finally, in **Section 3 Additional Resources**, I have a list of links and resources that might be helpful to get people exploring Spoken Word, as well as supplementing what I do not include in this resource. This aggregates to give potential users an understanding of the mode, a method for reading and interpreting it, and resources for further exploration.

### **Limitations and Next Steps**

The limitations of this project currently are related in many ways to the limitations of the dissertation and of the PhD. This is only a 4–6-year degree, with many hoops, and a 300+ page deliverable. This is far too little time and size to do everything this project might do and be. But as I see it, the main problems are twofold: (1) that the method has not been widely tested against other works of Spoken Word poetry, poetry in performance, or Spoken Word more widely, and (2) that due to the temporal and spatial limitations of the PhD and resulting dissertation, the resource itself is not complete.

Initially, I envisioned the resource as an HTML website that would have three main pages: (1) an interactive module on reading and interpreting contemporary Spoken

Word poetry; (2) an interactive module on the basics of writing Spoken Word poetry; and (3) a list of other books, tools, and resources to guide prospective users in the creation and interpretation of Spoken Word poetry (expanded from what is seen below). Pages 1 and 2 would function as an online course or module (similar to an online course on Lynda.com or at a university) with internal and external readings, videos, links, audio, tools, and quizzes, guiding users through the fundamental considerations of what Spoken Word poetry is or can be and how we read and interpret it and supporting users in creating their own poems to develop remedial skills in not just the theory, but also practice and creation. Using Badgr, a digital credentialing tool, the website would provide students with a Spoken Word poetry credential upon completion. The webpage would also have a PDF version of the resource that contains just the readings and resources, and none of the module's quizzes or credentialing features, for those teachers who want to incorporate this work into their class while still using their own pedagogical strategies and tools. Finally, I would also use Scott's literacy audit tool to audit the website for plain language and accessibility. This website would then be made free and available to anyone who hoped to use it and contain materials that might be helpful to a wide range of prospective learners, not simply those in the institution.

I have already outlined above the ways in which and reasons why I narrowed my scope to a truncated version of this initially-planned resource. My hope is to expand the resource further in future iterations of the project, eventually developing it into this website with a variety of resources for the creation and academic study of Spoken Word poetry.

## **SECTION 2: THE DIGITAL RESOURCE**

**Reading Spoken Word Poetry in the University: A Resource  
for Teachers, Students, and Researchers**

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## **Introduction: Three Out of Five Ain't Bad: The Who, Why, and What of This Resource**

**(Who)** Remember your days in university? You arrived bright-eyed and bushy-haired, with a love of poetry cultivated by a favourite high-school teacher or Mrs. Cragg, the art teacher who would lend out her own non-school-approved books and smelled kinda... skunky? You got to campus, maybe on Mommy and Daddy's dime. Or maybe after a gap year or two working at Triple O's to save tuition money. You signed up for English 112, or 151, or 199W, or any number of other section numbers hoping to read your favourite poets. Hoping to learn about the living, breathing life of literature that is out there in the world. But when you got to class, you were met with a grey, old tenured prof who started their opening lecture at the poetic beginning of time, saying you must learn about the giants who came before your giants. *Wamp, wamp*. Or maybe *woo-hoo!*? Maybe the prof that grey, old prof that taught your survey courses was amazing and inspiring. Lucky you! Maybe you love Chaucer and Milton, and you aren't interested in anything written after the steam engine was invented. But if this is you, I challenge you to go further. Despite this resource focusing on poetry from the last hundred years, it also speaks back to the oldest form of writing: *oral literature*.

Whatever your taste in poetry, maybe you are like me or other aficionados of that thing they call Spoken Word. Maybe you took your survey courses, and your "Canadian Literature Before 1940" classes, but somewhere along the way you discovered local open mics. You heard of that elusive thing called Spoken Word. You followed Sabrina Benaim or Rudy Francisco on Instajams and you showed all of your friends "Explaining My

Depression to My Mother”<sup>91</sup> on YouTube while drunk at parties. Maybe you were lucky and there was a creative writing course on Spoken Word (I was not so lucky). Maybe a prof here or there showed you a Shane Koyczan poem, henceforth ending bullying FOREVER. But nowhere along the way did an English class you ever took really look critically at Spoken Word as a mode. Through your Master’s and then your PhD in English, still no classes existed on Spoken Word poetry. Now, teaching at a college or a university, you want to teach the work that no one taught you. Or maybe you aren’t like me at all. Maybe you are a Wordsworthian, or even a Marlatter, or an Atwooder, but you just want to expand the way you teach and research poetry to include that hip, young form the kids call the *Spoken Word*. Whoever you are, *you have turned to this resource because are now a researcher or a teacher of English at a high school, college, or university yourself, and you want to read Spoken Word poetry in all its gloriously mediatized*<sup>92</sup> *forms, but you aren’t sure where to start.* Does this absurdly specific second-person narrative sound familiar? You aren’t alone, dear reader. And you came to the right place.

**(Why)** *Why study Spoken Word poetry?* Spoken Word is one of the fastest and largest growing modes of poetry, but it hasn’t entered the economies of the classroom or research. This is, in part, due to its nebulous<sup>93</sup> existence: it is **video, audio, print,** and

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<sup>91</sup> See “Explaining My Depression to My Mother” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqu4ezLQEUA>

<sup>92</sup> A term used by scholar Philip Auslander to refer to “the process whereby the traditional fine arts...come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system” (5). Mediatized then, in regard to Spoken Word poetry, refers to poetry that has been recorded, either as audio or video.

<sup>93</sup> Meaning unclear, vague, or hard to define.

**live performance.** It is published by presses and publishing houses, on social media, on YouTube, on HBO, and Apple Music. It is not your Grandma's poetry. But, despite its success as a mode of poetry, it hasn't dominated the critical departments of literary study in the same way it has dominated the literary world. *This resource hopes to give you a place to begin researching or teaching Spoken Word poetry in critical and literary ways.*

**(What)** In what follows, I will briefly define that thing we call Spoken Word poetry, specifically within the English tradition of poetry (poetry exists in many other languages and cultural traditions!). I will then walk you through a method for how to read and examine the mode as a researcher or teacher. And I will end with a section of resources and further reading/listening/watching/doing, to get you going. Sound good? Cool. Let's Spoken Word!



## Section 1: What is Spoken Word?

What is the difference between **spoken word**, **Spoken Word poetry**, and **slam poetry**? Are they all the same? *Spoken Word poetry can be a hard genre to define because there isn't a clear-cut definition of what exactly it is.*

### Spoken Word

We can use 'Spoken Word' as a literal term to mean words that are spoken or sounds that express meaning or communicate. But we can also use it as an umbrella term that includes a number of different oral activities, such as orature, storytelling, cultural knowledge and stories, public speaking and speeches, auctioneering, rap, comedy, poet's theatre, dramatic monologue, and any number of other oral/aural forms. Despite longstanding debates around 'spoken word' versus 'Spoken Word,' poet and scholar Corey Frost asserts that "[t]here is no question anymore that there is such a thing as spoken word, as distinct from "the spoken word" (*The Omni* 1).

Spoken word, in the general sense, is bound up in the histories of many forms of art and culture. Literary scholar Peter Middleton explains that there is a "long history of oral performance of written texts, which reaches back through the renaissance and medieval cultures to the classical world."<sup>94</sup> Metred verse is, in many ways, a remnant of poetry's origins in English. It is a mnemonic device, which is a fancy word for a tool to help us memorize, that bards and other ancient poets and singers used to remember the epic

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<sup>94</sup> From Peter Middleton's *Distant Reading*, page 273.

narratives they told in court or around the fire. As print technologies advanced, poetry in the English Tradition became more and more bound to the page, intensifying with the invention of the printing press in 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg. The printing press led to a wider existence of printed language, which in turn saw poetry turn away from its oral origins to the pages of books. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a turn back to the oral in poetry. So, Spoken Word is old because poetry began as an oral form.

Importantly, *Spoken Word's historical origins go beyond the English tradition* and includes a number of oral literatures like those of the griots of West Africa. Indigenous peoples and oral cultures across the globe have also been engaging in oral performance of text since time immemorial. Many scholars have traced Spoken Word's present-day origins in the English poetic tradition back through the Black Arts movement, as well as jazz and blues traditions, to the poet-performer movement which "lasted from 1870 - 1930 and involved the careers of Will Carleton, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, James Whitcomb Riley, Vachel Lyndsay, and others."<sup>95</sup> Spoken Word poetry owes much to hip hop and to the Black Arts, as explored in numerous works on the history and genealogies of Spoken Word and performed poetry more generally.<sup>96</sup> There are innumerable styles, genres, modes, mediums, and approaches that make up what lives under the big tent of Spoken Word.

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<sup>95</sup> From Lorenzo Thomas's "Neon Griot: The Functional Role of Poetry Readings in the Black Arts Movement," page 302.

<sup>96</sup> See Tyler Hoffman's *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (2010); Lorenzo Thomas's "Neon Griot: The Functional Role of Poetry Readings in the Black Arts Movement"; and Sascha Feinstein's *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present* (1997) for in-depth studies of that outline this.

## Slam

Some consider Spoken Word, as we know it now, to have its contemporary origins in the **poetry slam**. In the 1980s, Marc Smith, a construction worker in Chicago, created the poetry slam as a blue-collar poetry event that took poetry back from the elitism of the institution into bars and restaurants. It put the value decisions around poetry quite literally back into the hands of the common people: the audience.

Slam poetry is a bit of a misnomer—it is not really a type of poetry. *A poetry slam is a type of competition in which judges are pulled from the audience to judge poems as they are performed, typically giving them scores out of 10.* Poetry slams come in many types and formats. But generally, the poet who scores the highest in a round or multiple rounds of performance wins. Often, the type of poetry that is successful in slams is a subgenre of Spoken Word that we might call Spoken Word poetry.

Some, like the American poet Javon Johnson and the scholar Helen Gregory, use the term slam almost synonymously with Spoken Word,<sup>97</sup> while others, like myself and Chris Gilpin, maintain that slam is not a style, but a competition.<sup>98</sup> Spoken Word scholar Pete Bearder prefers the term ‘slammy,’ which he defines as: “**Slammy (adjective):** Crowd-pleasing poetry that uses excessive theatrics to perform humour, political rhetoric, or

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<sup>97</sup> See *Killing Poetry* wherein although Johnson does not define the terms, he uses the word slam reciprocally with the term Spoken Word. His book is an autoethnographic account of the mode comes largely out of his own experiences as a prominent poet from the American slam scene. Similarly, Gregory considers slam to be “representative of contemporary oral poetry forms” (“Poetry Performance” 86).

<sup>98</sup> See “Slam Poetry Does Not Exist: How a Movement Has Been Misconstrued As a Genre” by Chris Gilpin.

extremes of emotion (usually relating to the performer's own life), crafted with little attention to writing techniques typically associated with poetry.”<sup>99</sup> You may use the term ‘slam poetry,’ if you like, but is it incorrect to do so?

### **Which Term is Correct?**

Many scholars and poets have debated the use of the terms slam, Spoken Word, or Spoken Word poetry over the years. Some feel that these terms unproductively separate the genre from print-based writing. Others feel that they are synonymous with popular forms of writing, and therefore the terms denote writing that is of lower quality, relying too heavily on performance.<sup>100</sup> Famously, the critic Harold Bloom and the Canadian poet George Bowering have derided the genre, referring to it as an “abomination” (“Border Disputes” 3) and “the death of art” (“The Man” 379), respectively. Scholar Maria Damon dismisses Spoken Word as a “marketing term coined to dispel anxieties about ‘poetry’” (332). For Bearder, the difficulty in pinning down a definition is actually “proof of how successful [Spoken Word] has been” at incorporating aspects of many other genres of writing, performance, media, and other forms of cultural production. He argues that “spoken word draws on worlds beyond ‘literature’ alone and this openness is a defining feature of the genre” (70). You are not wrong if you refer to a type of poetry as slam poetry because many people use this term, but technically a poetry slam is a competition for performed poems. Simply parsed, **Spoken Word poetry** is a type of **Spoken Word**

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<sup>99</sup> From Peter Bearder's *Stage Invasion: Poetry & The Spoken Word Renaissance*, page 58.

<sup>100</sup> For a longer discussion of the debate on this term, see the Introduction of my dissertation, *Words Go Past There*.

that often appears in **poetry slams**. Simple, right? Maybe not.

The scholar Douglas Hesse has stated that writing genres are a “cluster of characteristics, rather than a fixed taxonomy.”<sup>101</sup> What he means by this is that not every work that falls within a given genre of writing shares all the same characteristics. For example, not every poem is in verse—some are in prose. Not all works of fiction have a singular, clear protagonist. But we might say that one of the characteristics associated with poetry is its organization into verse, and one of the characteristics we associate with fiction is a protagonist. Spoken Word poetry then, can be characterized by being a public type of poetry that is crafted for live performance, as part of, or by a poet who is embedded in, a performance community (whether locally in a slam or open mic scene, or globally on platforms like YouTube), and may or may not share a number of other qualities such as rhyme, narrative, colloquial language, and so on.

For Bearder the term is still complicated: “a name that both betrays and re-presents a history of the verbal arts that has existed under many names and many forms throughout humanity” (82). He notes that ultimately, many of the characteristics that we associate with Spoken Word poetry could be attributed to poetry more generally. Despite his doubts, Bearder does outline the “generic” traits he sees as constituting it as its genre (82), including: work for which the spoken and sung performance of texts is constitutive; work with a “[h]eightedened recognition of the audience’s role in the reception, ritual, and community of performance”; work for which the “‘audiotext’ and ‘bodytext’” are crucial

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<sup>101</sup> See Teaching the Short Story by Baldwin et. al., page 6.

in the process of meaning making; with an “emphasis on reading the poet’s own work, with value placed on identity and authenticity”; a dominance of everyday speech alongside often politically progressive work; work existing a “grass-roots organizational structure” or literary context that seeks openness rather than elitism; and finally work with “an innovative engagement with new technologies in the production, publication, and dissemination of poetry” (82). Bearder posits the idea that part of what cements the definition is that many writers “identify” themselves as Spoken Word poets (83). This idea is similar to Frost’s assertion that Spoken Word can be defined by context rather than content.

Importantly, like Frost and Bearder, my definition includes poetry that defines itself as Spoken Word through both context and identification with the term. That is, Spoken Word poets have been part of Spoken Word and slam communities or define their work as such, and often employ a public appeal or plain/colloquial language, as well as personal, cultural and political content.

### **Why Define Spoken Word Poetry?**

Why is it important to parse these terms at all? For scholar Susan Somers-Willett, Spoken Word and so-called slam ask “of [their] critic a new, interdisciplinary language that takes into account the complex set of literary, performance, and cultural issues that such work brings to the fore.”<sup>102</sup> So, Spoken Word and slam have seen little scholarly attention due

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<sup>102</sup> From Susan Somers-Willett’s *Authenticating voices: Performance, black identity, and slam poetry*, page 134.

to the complex set of interpretive considerations it asks of its readership and critics, and the fact that those readers and critics are ill-equipped to do this work due to a lack of training and knowledge. The ways that poetry has historically been understood, taught, and disseminated in the academy are designed around a print-based understanding, rather than a performance-based understanding, of poetry. Performance scholar Julia Novak echoes this sentiment, writing that the academy has failed to “update and adapt” its understanding and definition of literature to the new modes of writing, specifically in the wake of Spoken Word and performance poetry.<sup>103</sup> That is, literary studies has been historically designed to engage with a very particular, largely print-based, type of text, whereas contemporary Spoken Word, as an interdisciplinary, multimodal,<sup>104</sup> multisensory form requires new ways of studying the mode. But what are the main considerations for the critical study of such a complex mode of poetry?

### **The Elements of Spoken Word Poetry**

Spoken Word poetry is complex and difficult to define. Unlike what we might call print poetry, it includes more than printed words. There is also a body, and a voice. When we see it at a live event, there is the whole context of live performance, and the interrelation between poet and audience. If viewed on the internet, there is the complexity of the viewing context (whether on YouTube or other social media). As we will see in the

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<sup>103</sup> From Julia Novak’s *Live Poetry*, page 358.

<sup>104</sup> Here, I use this term to refer to Spoken Word’s appearance as many different genres of writing, different mediums, as well both as text and live performance.

method for reading Spoken Word poetry that follows, there are many considerations for reading contemporary Spoken Word poetry that traditional print poetry does not have.

As I outline in my dissertation *Words Go Past There*, Spoken Word poetry has *three main texts that we as scholars can engage*: the **printtext**, the **audiotext**, and the **visualtext**. This contrasts traditional page poetry in that the study of page poetry is only concerned with the printtext. These three texts can be defined as

- **Printtext**: the written words or other language available for study of a Spoken Word performance or Spoken Word published in print.
- **Audiotext**: sound that is part of a Spoken Word performance. This can include the voice (both verbal and nonverbal sounds), instruments or other inorganic sound, and environmental noise, such as white noise or crowd/venue noise.
- **Visualtext**: the visual elements of a Spoken Word performance available for study. That is, the body and body actions, facial expressions, clothing and other artefacts, props, performance context, or anything else visual.

*Spoken Word also tends to appear primarily in three mediums*: **Print** (for example published in a book or journal); **Audio**, such as albums or on streaming sites like Spotify or Soundcloud; and **Visual mediums**, such as video poems or poetry videos like those you find on YouTube, Vimeo, or social media, and live performance, which includes both performer and audience.



## **In Conclusion and Summary**

- Spoken Word, Spoken Word poetry, and ‘slam’ poetry each have different meanings and usages.
- Spoken Word can refer to a large number of artforms, such as poetry, comedy, storytelling, and more.
- ‘Slam poetry’ is not a type of poetry, really, but a poetry competition created by Marc Smith and designed to democratize poetry. Though, you are not incorrect to say slam poetry if you want, as many use this term.
- Spoken Word poetry is a type of poetry that may be community-based, uses the voice and the body (as well as other visual- and sound-based elements), has a public appeal, uses plain/colloquial language, has personal and cultural and political content, and defines itself as Spoken Word.
- It is important to define Spoken Word poetry separately from page poetry in a critical context because it has been historically undervalued and understudied by the institution.
- The study of Spoken Word poetry requires considering three texts: the printtext, the audiotext, and the visualtext.
- Spoken Word poetry often appears in three mediums: print, audio, and visual (which includes live performance).

There—now you know what Spoken Word poetry is (sort of). If you would like to read more about Spoken Word poetry as a mode of writing, there are a number of texts

included in the back of this document for further reading.

## **Section 2: A Method for Interpreting Spoken Word Poetry in Research and in the Classroom.**

### **1. Decide on a poem to read.**

What poem are you going to interpret? This is hopefully a fun question. *Choose a poem that is appropriate to the class you are teaching or research you are completing.* Browse around to see what versions of this poem might be available: is there a print version, an audio version, and a video version?

### **2. Decide what medium you will read this work in and if you will read it across mediums.**

With any given Spoken Word poem, you will often have print, video, audio, and maybe, if you are lucky, a live performance available to you for reading. You may also have multiple iterations of the poem in each medium available to you, none of which are necessarily the primary, authoritative text. Therefore, *you need to decide on an approach to your reading.* Which medium(s) will you read the poem in? How many iterations of each medium? This is something that may change as your reading progresses. For example, maybe you start out reading a number of videos of your chosen poem, but you are most interested by a particular reading. Different reading contexts and goals, whether

pedagogical,<sup>105</sup> epistemological,<sup>106</sup> or personal, will likely require different combinations of texts to be considered for different reasons.

### **3. Do an initial reading of the chosen poem in your decided-upon medium(s).**

*Read the poem and jot down what you notice.* Take note of any patterns or notable moments in the poem. Do not pause if you are listening to or watching digital media. Before moving too quickly to meaning, start by asking yourself, how did the poem feel? What was the affective experience of reading the poem? What did you like? What didn't you like?<sup>107</sup>

### **4.0 Read the three texts in each chosen medium.**

In Steps 4.1-4.4, you will build off of your initial reading from Step 3 by exploring the work with more depth and complexity. If you are reading the poem in just one medium, simply choose the sections of Step 4 that apply to the medium with which you are engaging (for example, if engaging with video, just undertake 4.3).

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<sup>105</sup> This refers to theories of teaching.

<sup>106</sup> This refers to the production of knowledge.

<sup>107</sup> Though “like” is not a critical category of interpretation, I think this is an important step in order to avoid tying the poem to a chair and beating a confession out of it as though it were a math problem to be solved. Reference that poem here.

I have laid it out here as though you are engaging with print first, then audio, then video. Of course, you may interact with your poem's mediums in a different order, or with only one medium. Largely, when reading poetry in any medium, it will be difficult not to begin with the printtext. However, each medium will have different opportunities for reading. Therefore, as you complete these initial readings, consider the medium you are engaging with, what affordances there are for that medium, and what reading strategy is appropriate for it. Keep in mind that for each medium you engage with (print, audio, video) you will be reading all three texts for that medium (printtext, audiotext, visualtext) and these texts are entangled with one another, not separate. Some of the texts will be limited or nonexistent depending on which medium you are engaging with. For example, the printtext in a video may be limited to a title and a YouTube description; the visualtext in a print poem may be limited to the book's cover and an author photo. Despite this limitation, it is still important to consider these elements in your discussion and analysis, even if you will not weigh their impact on the overall meaning and affective experience of the poem as heavily as the words, the voice, or the body.

*Read audiovisually.*<sup>108</sup> For each medium you engage with, you must also speak to the way that each of the three texts inform, alter, complement, or supplement the meaning the others present. How do the audio elements combine with the visual elements? How do print elements combine with visual elements? How do sonic elements combine with print

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<sup>108</sup> This term refers to Michel Chion's theories in his book *Audiovision: Sound on Screen*. In regard to Spoken Word poetry, as I outline in my dissertation *Words Go Past There*, reading audiovisually refers to the process of considering how printtext, audiotext, and visualtext combine to create a shared meaning or affect.

elements? Are the three texts synchronous or asynchronous, and what is the effect of that? How does this synchronicity complement or contradict the meaning of the poem? How does the visualtext and the audiotext expand the printtext? What sonic, visual, or textual elements speak to greater social, cultural, or historical contexts?

Finally, *throughout this process you may want to supplement what does not appear solely in the text with extra reading*. What can you find on the internet? The poet's website or Wikipedia? Are there reviews, publisher descriptions, or blurbs from other authors? Do not limit yourself to what is in the text itself—reading widely for historical and authorial context, as is very common in literary studies, can help you understand the text further.

#### **4.1 Do a print reading.**

*With the print medium, read for form, content, and meaning*. What form does the poem take? How is the form and content of the poem connected? Consider the concrete and abstract details. What are the dominant themes or images? What is the style? Consider poetic devices, including (but not limited to) rhyme, assonance, consonance, alliteration, line breaks, etc. How do these devices serve the poem? Begin to think about what the poem means. Parse the literal and the figurative as you begin to approach meaning: what literally happens in the poem? What figurative language and meaning is it putting forth? What social, political, or cultural meaning is present? What about the context this text was written or published in? How does this work relate or speak to greater social, cultural, or historical contexts? What is your response to the work? What does the text

not say overtly, but rather implies consistently throughout? What elements of visualtext or audiotext are present in the print version? For example, is there a paratext,<sup>109</sup> like an author photo or cover? Is the print poem dominated by voice or other sonic elements? How do the visual and audio elements, if at all, affect your print reading?

## **4.2 Do a reading of the audio.**

*Do your findings about the meaning of the poem in print hold up when encountering it as audio?* If no, how has it changed and why? Turn to the audio elements. How is the quality of the recording, or the fidelity? How does the reader read? What is the pace? What is the tone? What is the author's voice like? What kinds of sounds are there? Are there nonverbal sounds? Are there mechanical sounds, such as music? What is the soundscape like for the reading—are there environmental sounds? Do the environmental and mechanical sounds seem important to the poem? What aspects of persona can you hear in their voice? What print and visual elements are there? Is there an album cover, liner notes, or a description? Are you listening on SoundCloud or Apple Music or vinyl? How does that affect your perception of the artist and the work? Return to Step 4.1 and think about the printtext for the audio version as well.

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<sup>109</sup> Refers to the material surrounding the main text of a book. For example, table of content, author description, acknowledgments, etc.

### **4.3 Do a reading of the video.**

*Do your findings about the meaning of the poem hold up when encountering it as video?*

If no, how has it changed and why? Turn to the visual elements. Ask: What is the poet's body set (that is, what does the poet look like)? How is their posture? What are their body actions like throughout the poem? What gestures do they use, and how do those gestures speak? What are their facial expressions like? What do we know about the writer? What aspects of persona can you see? Is there artefactual communication (that is, what clothes, props, or equipment do they have and do those things augment how you read the poem)? How does the visual context of the video affect your reading of the poem? What is the place of performance? What is the spatial arrangement of the video like (venue, stage, or audience)? Does the space the performance takes place in directly affect the meaning or is it constitutive of the poem in any way? Is there an MC or paraperformance (that is, an introduction or other elements of performance aside from the poem itself)? What print and audio elements are present? Does the video have a title or a description on YouTube? Return to Steps 4.1 and 4.2 and think of the audiotext and printtext for the video, as well.

### **4.4 Read across mediums.**

*Compare and contrast the poem across mediums.* How is a poet's reading of the text different than how it appears on the page? How was seeing the poet reading different than listening to them? How is it different from how you pictured them in print? How did reading the poem in one medium inform, alter, complement or supplement your reading



of the poem in a different medium? How, for example, is the Vancouver Poetry Slam video different than the Throw Slam video? How is the album recording different than seeing it live?

## **5. Consider yourself as an active agent in the creation of meaning in your reading of these texts.**

*Ask: What are your own reading biases? What is your subject position? How is that different from that of the poet? Do not read apolitically, because you can't. Instead, read intersectionally and self-reflexively. Who are you? Who is the poet? What ways do your identities intersect or diverge? What is their worldview and how it different from your own? What might you have read into the text based on your subject position? How are your likes and dislikes from Step 3 bound up in your subjective experience and reading context? How are the practices of literary studies colonial or racist? If the poem does not invite you to consider certain elements of ethnicity, culture, ability, sexuality, gender then is that something that you should be reading into the poem at all? Or are you essentializing the poet based on your knowledge of their positionality?*

## **6. Consider doing specific types of readings.**

*The reading strategies outlined above might be too complex or too simple for your goals, skill/knowledge level, or students. Or, perhaps the reason for your reading and analysis is less about form and meaning and more about a particular social or political context.*

Perhaps you read specifically from a feminist perspective, for example. If so, you could review all of the points from above but consider them from a feminist perspective. How does the audience treat the poet, for example? Does it seem different because she is a woman? Did the MC call her poems beautiful rather than powerful?

## **7. Consider doing subsequent readings.**

*Subsequent readings can focus in on particular aspects of a poem.* For example, maybe you do a reading just for nonverbal sounds, or just for hand motions. These subsequent readings may be spurred by a particular moment of interest from your initial readings.

## **8. Once you have done a reading, check your work.**

Do another reading in light of your conclusions. *Do they hold up on second reading?* What about if you wait a few days? This is a new reading, a new performance, a new poem. The text is not different, but you are. Do your interpretations still hold up? If not, how have they changed?

## **9. Modify this method based on your reading goals and context.**

This is a longform version of this method. However, if you are going to study a Spoken Word poem in a high school classroom, and you only have an hour, *maybe you just want to look at one video version of a poem.* You can pick and choose what elements from this

method you might then use. Likely, it will still be fruitful to think about the print and audile elements, but your focus will be largely on the video, and therefore the visualtext. A method of this nature cannot hope to capture every topic or element of a poem that you, as scholars and teachers, might focus on. But whatever your reading goals are, engaging the three texts of a Spoken Word poem will be a crucial first step before you augment this method to your own needs.

### **10. Do not attempt to decide on a final meaning.**

Allow these poems to have many possibilities for meaning rather than searching for a single meaning. *Rather, what are the opportunities for meaning and affective experience created by the many interactions between the poem and its past, present, and future readers?*

### **11. Share your reading publicly.**

Now that you have critically interpreted a Spoken Word poem, see if you can get your work out there! Consider starting a blog, submitting your interpretation to a public forum, sharing your work on social media, creating a video essay of your reading and sharing on TikTok or other platforms. *Sharing your work outside the university context may help bring attention to the great work that your chosen poet is doing, as well as help to share what you have learned about Spoken Word poetry and its criticism in wider public circles.*

## Section 3: Additional Resources

### 3.1 Books and Readings

- Bernstein, Charles. *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*.
- Camlot, Jason and Katherine McLeod. *CanLit Across Media: Unarchiving the Literary Event*.
- Camlot, Jason. "Poetry and Performance." From *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*.
- Casas, Arturo and Cornelia Gräbner. *Performing Poetry: Body, Place and Rhythm in the Poetry Performance*.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio Vision: Sound on Screen*.
- Cowan, TL. "Editorial: An Emerging Discourse." *Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 130, no. 1.
- Cowan, TL with Rick Knowles. "Spoken Word Performance." *Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 130, no. 1.
- Elevid, Mark. *Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip-Hop, and the Poetry of a New Generation*.
- English, Lucy and Jack McGowan. *Spoken Word in the UK*.
- Feinstein, Sashca. *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present*.
- Frost, Corey. *The Omnidirectional Microphone*.
- Gingell, Susan. "'always a Poem, Once a Book': Motivations and Strategies for Print Textualizing of Caribbean Canadian Dub and Performance Poetry." *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol. 14.

- Gingell, Susan and Wendy Roy. *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond: Interfaces of the Oral, Written, and Visual*.
- Greene, Roland et al. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.
- Hoffman, Tyler. *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop*.
- Holman, Bob. "Disclaimer." From *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*.
- Jaime, Karen. *Defining The Nuyorican Aesthetic: Spoken Word, Slam Poetry, and Hip-Hop Theatre*.
- Johnson, Javon. *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*.
- Middleton, Peter. *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*.
- Moure, Erin and Karis Shearer. "The Public Reading: Call for a New Paradigm." From *Public Poetics: Critical Issues in Canadian Poetry and Poetics*.
- Nagy, Gregory. *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*.
- Noel, Urayoán. *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*.
- Novak, Julia. *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance*.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Poetry On and Off the Page*.
- Pinsky, Robert. *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*.
- Schmid, Julie. "Spreading the Word: A History of the Poetry Slam." *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, vol. 23, no. 26.
- Sibley Jr., Ramon LaVelle. *Oral poetry in a literate culture: A performance ethnography of poetry slams*.

- Smith, Marc and Joe Kraynak. *Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam and the Spoken Word*.
- Smith, Marc. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry*.
- Somers-Willett, Susan. *Authenticating voices: Performance, black identity, and slam poetry*.
- Somers-Willett, Susan. "Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity." *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* vol. 38, no. 1.
- Stanton, Victoria and Vincent Tinguely. *Impure: Reinventing the Word: The theory, practice, oral history of 'spoken word' in Montreal*.
- Swigg, Richard. *Quick, Said the Bird: Williams, Eliot, Moore, and the Spoken Word*.
- Tomlinson, Lisa. "Gendering Dub Culture Across Diaspora: Jamaican Female Dub Poets in Canada and England." From *The African-Jamaican aesthetic: cultural retention and transformation across borders*.
- Wheeler, Leslie. *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*.
- Wilson, Sheri D. *The Spoken Word Workbook*.

### 3.2 Resources

- Inspired Word Café's Video Poetry Module ([www.inspiredwordcafe.com](http://www.inspiredwordcafe.com)).
- Button Poetry (<https://buttonpoetry.com>)
- Princeton Poetry Encyclopedia (book)
- Poetry Foundation (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org>)

- Poetry.org (<http://poetry.org>)
- Pennsound (<https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>)
- SpokenWeb (<https://spokenweb.ca>)
- UBU Web (<https://www.ubu.com>)
- YouTube (search Slam, Spoken Word, Poetry, Poetry Reading)
- Google (search Slam, Spoken Word, Poetry, Poetry Reading)
- iTunes/Spotify (search for the genre or for Spoken Word Albums by favourite artists)
- Coursera (especially ModPo with Dr. Al Filreis) (<https://www.coursera.org>)

## Conclusion

*“Exposure to a diverse range of affects provides us with opportunities to apprehend and reflect on varied emotions and feelings. The education of the senses through affective experience equips us with better ways to understand the critical and social contexts of ourselves as individuals”*

- Jack McGowan, “The Spoken Word Experience” (116)

*[L]istening and sounding responsively (responsibly) are coterminous processes. If we’re doing both well, we are constantly being pulled off center and then recentering to a new position, which entails being open to exploring new ideas. The problems occur when we think we can prehear the outcome; and I think that applies as much to listening in the audience as it does to composition or performance. It’s not surprising. A postsecondary, classical music education is almost entirely designed to train students to predict certain kinds of outcomes and to control for them.*

- Ellen Waterman, *Hungry Listening* (Robinson 250)

In the conclusion to Dylan Robinson’s *Hungry Listening*, composers and scholars Ellen Waterman and Deborah Wong are in conversation with Robinson, who invited them not only to be early readers of the book, but also to contribute to it by answering, through conversation, what decolonial listening might be (239). The conversation turns to ideas of critical listening practices that I have engaged in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, and particularly the idea that Wong puts forth: “the word listening should really have the word settler in front of it much of the time” (251). What Wong means here, as she



summarizes some of Robinson's argument, is that our conceptions of listening practices are colonial by virtue of their construction, and that listening and sounding responsibly doesn't just mean that we are acknowledging our positionality, but seeking to trouble, disrupt, or 'unsettle' the very foundations of (settler) listening. Engaging in (settler) listening means that we are likely to hear a particular, colonially conditioned and therefore delimited, and somewhat predetermined, outcome. Waterman extends this idea to the very foundations of musical education in the western world. She argues, as the epigraph that begins this conclusion states, that due to the colonial construction of listening, we are preconditioned to hear in a particular way and, conversely, musicians or others who create sound are preconditioned to create a certain kind of sonic output that meets settler expectations of value (Robinson 250).

This logic can be easily extrapolated to hermeneutic practices in literary studies as they interact with Spoken Word poetry and other oral forms of literature. I have previously shown that current methods of literary studies have been designed to focus on printtextual elements of writing, and that, as a result, the types of writing that are valued, and the affective experience that researchers, students, and teachers take from poetry are predetermined by those tools. Along Waterman's logic, we could also make the argument that the creators of poetic texts are also participating in this value system and delimiting the possibilities of their work to narrow colonial expectations for writing (again, echoing El Jones' statement about poetry that *rewards frequent engagement*). Current literary methods, tools, and practices for hermeneutic engagements with texts are print-based, which, as explored in Chapter 1, in some ways also means colonial, white, and western. Performance literature is not new, and it is not going anywhere. If we as scholars are to

see it and hear it through the deafening roar of print-dominance, it must be a choice to do so. Literary studies should not simply train our students to create and critically evaluate and interpret literature along colonial lines leading to predetermine meaning, affects, or outcomes of writing. When literary studies remains focused on preconceived notions of literary value, as well as preconceived ideas about what the object of literary studies looks like, we limit our ability to hear, see, think, and act in new ways. If literary studies does not have the tools to think outside of the printtext, or outside the proclivities of the white, western canons a focus on the literary printtext reifies, then we are not training our students to think critically, but rather to rehearse and reify already dominant ideas of white supremacy and colonialism. Rather, new methods and approaches to literary interpretation need to be less stable and less settled, which, as Waterman puts it, means being okay with being “pulled off center and then recentering to a new position” as a way of remaining “open to exploring new ideas” (Robinson 250). Rather than a rigid new set of tools, strategies, and methods for engaging literary works that go beyond the print text, literary studies, and the study of poetry in particular, must realign its interpretive strategies to accept and work against their intrinsic normativity through a radical openness and inclusivity. While Chapter 1 of this book still provides a prescriptive set of steps for reading and interpretations of Spoken Word poetry, which may still be inherently white and western, the steps have been designed with openness, reflexivity, and space for the myriad possibilities of texts one might encounter and interpret (not to mention the myriad poets and interpreters themselves), and in (perhaps too brief) consultation with critical race theory and decolonial studies. I hope that this is an important step to opening up the work of literary studies to new possibilities beyond its

current white, western epistemological contrition.

Building on the work of many scholars from Julia Novak to Maria Damon to Dylan Robinson, I have striven to provide a solid base for future scholars to begin approaching reading, teaching, and researching Spoken Word poetry in a critical context. *Words Go Past There* ambitiously brings together Social Practice, literary studies, media studies, sound studies, and performance studies and other fields to suggest a clear method to begin to open up our syllabi, our works cited lists, and our libraries to one of the most popular literary modes on the planet. I have explored and troubled the terms Spoken Word and Spoken Word poetry, concluding that these terms are not universally embraced, but ultimately useful within the context of the institution in order to be able to allow the genre to enter the economies of the classroom and research. I have outlined the three texts (print, audio, and visual) necessary for understanding the mode and proposed a method for practically ‘reading’ this work in the classroom or research contexts outside of the live performance venues it typically lives. I have tested out this method with a case study, showcasing how we might approach reading Spoken Word poetry, created a resource for others to continue this work, and outlined the community-engaged context in which it was created. I will not retread all this ground here. However, in the conclusion that follows, I want to think through the implications of this project for these future researchers, teachers, and students; I want to think through the possibilities of this research for the world outside the walls of the institution; and I want to think about the ways this ways this project is limited, and, therefore, where future iterations past the PhD defense, and past the dissertation might take this work.

### **So what? Who cares?**

Any proper conclusion should not simply summarize, but answer the somewhat hurtful questions: *So what?* and *Who cares?* I want to avoid, here, claims that my dissertation is going to change literary studies or the world at large, though, as expressed above, I do think that the project has strong implications for disrupting the white, settler, and print dominant tendencies of the former. Further, my project builds upon the centuries of work that great literary scholars have done: it is not a new idea to think of the text outside of print; it is not a new idea to study performance literature, sound, or media. But my work is novel in its formal consideration of Spoken Word poetry, in particular; it delivers a practical, and potentially disruptive, method to begin studying this work more in the institution; it models the incorporation of plain language into academic texts; and it models ethical and considerate ways of doing community-engaged research.

My research challenges the work of the long-held focus of literary studies on the print-text, and brings together disparate work on the body, looking, and listening in order to provide new opportunities for the future of literary studies. I am not simply arguing for Spoken Word's inclusion within literary studies and using the same old tools to study it, but rather I am casting off the dust of the tools themselves, in order to bring the field into the future that cultural studies and postmodernism have long lived in: studying vernacular, popular, and performance-based forms of literature with tools that are suited to these nonnormative forms, and with a critical self-reflexivity on the biases of literary studies and our own listening positionality. Additionally, if literary studies is opened to nonnormative forms of literature, and the many writers who work in these nonnormative forms who often come from historically underserved and equity deserving communities,

it will lead to the exposure of its students, faculty, and researchers to the diverse voices that create, think, and exist outside of the circumscribed boundaries of the colonial institution and its episteme.

This work might be continued by future scholars of Spoken Word, but it has practical application outside of this mode to Spoken Word (in a general sense) or any other kind of performance, mediated, or mediatized literature. I also hope that this work will have value for others hoping to consider the complex interrelationality of forms and mediums when studying an array of different mediatized texts, not just spoken word. For example, it is common now to see a movie or an anime have a novelization, and a graphic novel, and an audio book, and maybe, if you are lucky, some you tube videos of Neil Gaiman or Patrick Stewart reading it. My method could be extrapolated to these or any other audiovisual texts that have a plural existence across media.

My essay has attempted to create a roadmap for rethinking how we do hermeneutic work in literary studies and what type of texts we interpret and value; however, the study of Spoken Word poetry has value that goes beyond reshaping the tools of the university but may positively impact the students as well. Spoken Word has been shown to have a positive effect when taught in schools for mental health, learning experience, and sociality.<sup>110</sup> In the community work explored in Chapter 3, I have seen the positive effects of teaching Spoken Word firsthand. For example, a teacher at one of the schools I worked in was shocked by the way that certain students opened up to

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<sup>110</sup> See Nadia Alvarez's "The benefits of writing and performing in the spoken word poetry community"; Sue Dymoke's "'Poetry is not a special club': how has an introduction to the secondary Discourse of Spoken Word made poetry a memorable learning experience for young people?"; and Ian Levy's *Hip Hop and Spoken Word Therapy in School Counselling* (2021). According to Alvarez's study, performance poetry "confer added benefits that would not be found in writing alone."

learning when engaging with Spoken Word poetry. One student in particular, who came from a rough background, went up and performed an autobiographical poem about abuse. The teacher was floored by this, noting that this student never engages in any shared activities or group exercises, and rarely hands in homework. Now the benefits seen in my anecdotes or a number of texts on the positive mental health benefits of teaching Spoken Word poetry may be related to the creative side rather than the critical; however, if this project might lead to Spoken Word poetry entering critical discourse of poetry and literature in the academy, more students might be exposed to, understand, and find interest in the genre. Further, if the methods of research creation were used in critical contexts alongside my hermeneutic methods, students could create as part of their journey to study and understand Spoken Word, which in turn might lead to positive benefits for students' mental health and social experiences, and therefore their engagement in their learning. Additionally, as a white, settler scholar, modelling ethical ways of looking and listening cross-culturally for nascent scholars and students, especially those sharing my white, western positionality, has potential import beyond literary studies and into our social relations within the world.

### **Limitations, Naysayers, and the Future**

I have already outlined some limitations and naysayers in Chapter 3 in regard to the resource, so I will not deeply retread that ground here. But I would like to briefly return to some ideas about how this project might have gone differently, and where it will go in the future.

Firstly, while my findings are limited to the particular texts I study here, I strongly

believe that they also matter for anyone interested in Spoken Word poetry. But I also think that they could be tested against a wider group of poets and poems to learn even more about the three texts. Conversely, it could be tested against a smaller group of poems but reading those poems even more acutely. At times, due to the volume of poems I was working with (even only at 4), I was not able to fully explore every reading opportunity each poem brought forth. In Chapter 2, there are innumerable readable opportunities I wasn't able to pick up on due to space and time. For example, there is little focus on authenticity or silence in the audiotext. I also wonder what specific types of readings, such as a Marxist reading of *Let Them Eat Chaos*, might illuminate. This latter suggestion, of specific theoretical readings, is a part of the method I developed, but again, due to space and time and scope, and the laborious type of audiovisual, plural reading I undertook in this case study I wasn't able to explore every possibility the method accounts for. Should this method be refined and retested, I might challenge, reframe, or nuance some of the findings and conclusions I come to in Chapter 2. For example, one of the concepts in particular that I think deserves more time than it has received here is that of intervisuality. My study did not conclude that intervisual contexts affected the reading experience in a significant way; however, with constantly changing visual contexts and a wide array of platforms and visual technology on which to engage with media, I feel with further exploration this may be a fruitful avenue for study. Additionally, I think my study might be expanded outside of mediatized Spoken Word poetry into studying live Spoken Word poetry as well. I think, in some ways, this would cross the work over into too close of relation to the work of Julia Novak; however, as I have departed from her approach in a number of ways not merely limited to liveness, I wonder what including a live reading

in the plural approach might do? It could bring in more of the subjectivity of the performer, the context of an event, and the co-existence and exchange of and between Spoken Word poets, audience, venues, hosts, producers, other poets and any host of other elements that are more prominent in a live context than on a video of a poet from that live context.

Due to the wide array of fields and disciplines, topics, mediums, texts, forms, genres, and theoretical approaches this project brings together, at times I feel like my engagement with the discourse of particular topics is surface level. For example, I think a different project may have sustained a longer discussion of historical reading practices, digital humanities, performativity, decolonial studies, critical race studies, or film studies. Additionally, a number of other opportunities for the study of Spoken Word poetry were not explored at all, such as: theatre studies, affect theory, work on embodiment and disability studies. Further, subjectivity, identity, authorial intent, positionality and the way that these concepts intersect and dovetail with the act of reading, and reading the body in particular, and conditions of racism, ableism, gender normativity, and colonialism might be meaningfully expanded upon, in particular. The basis of literary studies for this project means that as much as I push back against interlocking systems of power, I am still always also working within them. How might I, for example, consider listening or looking in ways that resist ableism? How might I approach Spoken Word poetry in truly decolonial ways? Though I have begun to approach these questions, I believe there is still work to do on this project in these fruitful areas. Though, I incorporate decolonial studies and critical race studies, and I think this work moves literary studies in a critical and ethical direction, I am not certain my methods truly break



free of white, western epistemologies. Further, technology is ever changing, and this dissertation has not scratched the surface of different mediums and formats, listening and viewing platforms, social media platforms, or diverse performance poetic practices. As I revise sections of this project for publication as a monograph, I hope to consider, more fully or at all, those discourses and technologies and socio-cultural contexts that were left out altogether or only briefly glossed.

I think the future of this text is about its audience: who will use it? And while, as I have noted above, I hope that researchers, teachers, students, and aficionados of Spoken Word poetry will take up this text in the critical study of the genre, the one person I know for sure is going to continue to use this text is, well, me. I have plans for expanding this beyond the act of the dissertation. First, my goal is to publish the Introduction, Chapter 1, and Chapter 2 into an academic text on ‘reading’ Spoken Word poetry. Next, I will expand the digital resource into a larger digital project and repository in continued collaboration with Inspired Word Café, the school district, and potentially as a post-doctoral project. The goal here, as noted at the end of Chapter 3, would be to create a website complete with resources, readings, and other curricula and a badging system for educators to incorporate the critical study of Spoken Word poetry into their classrooms. This website would be free, to be open access and accessible, and likely housed on a sustainable website built in plain HTML and CSS. I will conduct further research to decide the most sustainable and accessible digital format and place to house the resource in order to maximize its distribution and longevity, working with a university library so it does not need a lot of updating and maintenance over the years. At this point, it would also be important to think through audience, and perhaps create separate resources for

middle school, high school (for this, I would work with my contacts in the local school system to align it with core curriculum), first- and second-year university, third- and fourth-year university, and potentially Master's/PhD level. I might consider rewriting the content to not contain as many quotes and as much jargon to make it even more accessible. I might also seek to have the website peer-reviewed as well. As with all digital projects, sustainability will be a consideration. Additionally, I think teaching an English course on the critical study of Spoken Word poetry, and implementing the method, would be an expansive endeavor. Further, this work lives on the work that dovetailed from this work. I am currently gearing up for yoothspohk again with a big grant to evaluate that project and create new resources for creative engagement with SW.

### **The True End**

In many ways, I don't really know how to end this dissertation. I feel like I am just growing into the knowledge I have presented. I feel like every time I search on the SFU library website there is a new book on Spoken Word that fills me with joy to see but fear to open up for how it might dismantle, complement, or supplement my argument.<sup>111</sup> But I think these are all positive things. It means that Spoken Word is getting its time inside the walls of the academy. I look forward to continuing to grapple with, expand, hammer, explode, deconstruct, easy-bake oven, and fold tiny paper boats out of the work I have started here. Knowing that this is the ending of something that isn't complete, all that is left is the true end. In story structure, the true end comes after the falling action/denouement. All story lines are wrapped up, all questions are answered. All that is

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<sup>111</sup> For example, the recently released *Spoken Word: A Cultural History* (2023) by Joshua Bennett.

left is to be left, so as a way of leaving, I want to refer to the other epigraph that begins this chapter. As in my epigraph of Jack McGowan's above, opening up literary studies to a wide array of texts and mediums through the study of Spoken Word poetry, and having the right tools and methods and readers and researchers to do so, will not only expand the possibilities for literary studies and literary pedagogy, but it may have a secondary effect that goes beyond the boundaries of the institution: it will (re)educate our senses and allow us to understand the many modes including under the big tents of Spoken Word, literature, and poetry, but also the "critical and social contexts of the world" (116). That is to say, engaging Spoken Word poetry in a critical context might not only expand the possibilities for literary studies, but our ability of be open to and engage with the myriad social, cultural, and political contexts of the world. This might lead to us opening up how we engage with diverse literary works, but the diverse people who create and study them. And, as McGowan so aptly quotes theorist Michael Hardt, this will not only lead to us having a "greater power" to understand the world and how to create positive change within it, but it will also lead to a "greater power to act" and create change (116). Because, after all, it is not simply literary studies collecting dust, but the world itself.

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<sup>112</sup> As mentioned above, this reference contains Kae Tempest's dead name. I do not want to include that name in this dissertation out of respect, so, I have replaced it with an ellipsis. The link will take you to the video where Tempest performs their set but, as a warning, this video still uses Tempest's dead name.



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