

Loud Noise from Impact:
An Auto-Ethnographic Exploration of the New York City Slam
Poetry Community

by

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Introduction

The harsh incandescent glow from the streetlights outside filters through the translucent white curtains. Poets are sprawled out on oversized hotel beds as two white men perform a poem together shouting to undermine masculinity. They are pitch-perfect, timing impeccable. They flow off of each other and rise into a crescendo. Their vocal peak is met with an insistent shush. On this warm April night in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the last night of College Poetry Slam Nationals, this is a private party hidden from the prying view of the other poets in the competition, less gifted in the poetry slam hustle for points and victory.

A portly and bombastic poet named Jackson lumbers off of a bed, swills his drink, and introduces 'The Third Round', "Third round is a refuge from the onslaught of scores. It is the space for the poets to explore each other's work without the gaze of a judging audience. It has been, and should forever be, the space to allow poets who haven't been able to perform as many poems a chance to have their work heard." He drops the remainder of his grandiose speech into his whiskey glass and calls up a member of the winning team, the team that had touched the stage the most, to perform a poem.

I am stuck to the wall in the back of the room, unsure if I may step in further. As he begins his poem, I can begin to hear the rumbling. Even pressed into my corner, there are too many voices to ignore. Filtering through thin glass frames are the shouts of hundreds of poets assembling for third round in the parking lot below. The mass call for the public third round, one not hidden behind a locked door and an insistent shush, had been heard yelled down hallways. The poets outside form a massive circle of bodies which engulfs the gray of the asphalt beneath them. One steps into the center and begins to bounce his sound-waves off the concrete without apology.

The officiator of this still secret third round groans, "If these kids don't learn how to shut up, it's gonna get broken up. Anyways, keep going." The small audience returns rapt to well-crafted syllables railing against the status quo poured from respected mouths.

Sunken into a shaded corner of the room, too many questions come kicking out of my gut. Is this is how the democratization of poetry sleeps, in silk sheets and with a bird's eye view?

In many ways, it is this moment that birthed this project. There comes a point when the contradictions in our lives become wide enough to suffocate us, when questions threaten to fester if abandoned, when hypocrisies burrow into chests and refuse release. When asked about the roots of this project, I settled on a single honest answer, "There were just too many contradictions in a world that I love to go without question. In a world loudly dedicated to shaking the status quo, how could our hands be holding steady the foundation?"

This thesis is an auto-ethnography of my time in the New York City slam poetry community. Over my time in the larger slam community and during my fieldwork, I grew to primarily focus on issues of hierarchy, identity and power. Even as systems of oppression are denounced from the stage, they are often reinforced and pervasive in off-stage dynamics. This auto-ethnography seeks to explore these insidious contradictions which so often permeate communities ostensibly striving for social justice. As a member of the community I am studying and as a beneficiary of patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism I must interrogate the ways in which I am implicated in these systems of hierarchy. If I did not, I would almost certainly reinforce destructive systems of power within the production of this work. Not marking my positionality and privilege would risk re-inscribing the white male narrator as the point of objectivity and enable paternalism and dangerous misunderstanding.

My Positionality

My positionality going into this work is multi-fold. To begin, I am a white man who comes from class privilege who presents as heterosexual. I was born in New York City but quickly moved to the affluent suburbs outside of the city where I grew up. My upbringing was defined by a safe neighborhood chosen for its well-funded public schools. The daily stresses of poverty, food insecurity

and consistent uncertainty about the future, that many within the New York City slam scene face, are not part of my experience. I attend Wesleyan University not as an exception but as an expectation, facilitated by my family's wealth, a supportive school system and many educational advantages.

Attempting to understand how my privilege functions within the New York City slam scene is a consistent thread throughout this work. Often my privilege would function in counter-intuitive or obscured ways, but it is nonetheless always present. More disconcerting than the dynamics I identified are those I am sure I missed. Even though the focus is on auto-ethnography, I must acknowledge that there are certain types of knowledge that will be obscured to me as inevitably outside of my experience as a white heterosexual man coming from class privilege. I believe it better to acknowledge those limits and attempt to avoid the dangers of paternalistic pontification.

The Journey to Auto-Ethnography

I did not begin this process intending to do Auto-Ethnography, but as research projects often do, this work shifted both over the course of my fieldwork and as it was being written. David Graeber's Work, "The Auto-Ethnography That Can Never Be and the Activist's Ethnography That Might Be" informs a broader understanding of reflexivity which includes interrogation of the academy as the site of knowledge production. Graeber writes, "They (ethnographies) are written at universities. Reflexive anthropology, however, almost never had anything to say about the power relations under which these texts were actually composed" (Graeber 2005, 189). After returning from my fieldwork in New York City, I was faced with the overwhelming task of making pages of field notes and hours of interviews into a cohesive narrative. It became clear that the unifying thread was the most obvious; my experience. In some ways, this was inevitable as my positionality would influence how I would conduct any type of fieldwork. Rather than hiding from this realization, I had decided to work with it to produce a work striving for reflexivity and self-awareness. What followed was a narrative critically exploring my

process of entry and acceptance into the New York City slam poetry community.

Auto-ethnography became my chosen method of exploration for a number of interlocking reasons. Primarily, as briefly explored above, it was born out of a desire to avoid the paternalism of anthropology in the past. As a discipline, what is most attractive to me about anthropology is that it considers the implications of the work produced. Rather than believing academic work is created in a vacuum of objectivity without repercussions, anthropology openly acknowledges that objectivity is a myth which invisibilizes the position of white male authors, “By not insisting on some sort of personal accountability, our academic publications reinforce the third-person, passive voice as the standard, which gives more weight to abstract and categorical knowledge than to the direct testimony of personal narrative and the first-person voice” (Ellis and Bochner 1996,4). By lauding the passive voice, traditional work can enable paternalistic interpretations in the guise of 'objectivity.' Gina Ulysse explores the necessity of reflexivity in her work Downtown Ladies from the position of a 'third-world subaltern female', “Despite the professional pitfalls and more fearful of committing epistemic suicide, I considered a reflexive approach a mediator that would help me become a mediator, given the difficulty of occupying this slot” (Ulysse 2008, 9). Ulysse explores the contradictions of being both subject and ethnographer. She is writing from a place struggling against a system designed to discredit and silence her. Reflexivity offers a mechanism for rebellion against this silencing, as a means to produce a political work and as a means to mitigate some of the potential pitfalls of ethnography.

I find myself writing from the other side of that same system; whereas Ulysse's positionality seeks to silence her, mine would allow me to slip into a role of paternal, abstracted narrator. Auto-ethnography allows a mechanism for me to be clear about the bounds of my knowledge and to create a work which hopes to mitigate the dangers of representation posed by ethnography. This is not to say that I have fully avoided these issues, but rather that through honesty and clear intention I can produce self-aware work. While I do engage with others stories in this work, I try to rely as much as possible on

their self-representation through interviews and to avoid conjecture as to their feelings or intentions. This is informed by a governing ethos within the New York City slam poetry community as well. As will be explored in Chapter 1, the scene honors personal stories which are tied into larger political narratives. That is what I have hoped to produce so that my form may work fluidly with my content.

Much like Ulysses, this work seeks to be political. Indeed, much of this work focuses on the bounds and potential pitfalls of anti-sexist and anti-racist work from privileged bodies. For insight, I turn to Stokely Carmichael's seminal work, Black Power. Carmichael describes that many white activists were more than willing to come into Black communities to fight racism, but would not return to their own communities where that work was just as needed, "Given the pervasive nature of racism in this society and the extent to which attitudes of white superiority and black inferiority have become embedded, it is very necessary that white people begin to disabuse themselves of such notions" (Carmichael 1967, 81). Informed by Carmichael's suggestion, I believe that the role of anti-racist and anti-sexist activists coming from the dominant group is to implicate themselves in the systems they oppose and educate others in the dominant group of that system. As Carmichael explores, subaltern peoples have important work to do organizing their own communities and one of the best ways for white allies to be in solidarity is to educate other white people so that subaltern people don't need to expend resources doing so. This auto-ethnography seeks to follow in that tradition.

Auto-ethnography is not without its dangers. Particularly for my positionality, it could serve to mark the white male subject while not dislodging him from the position of analyzer. In an attempt to remain humble through this work, I draw on theorists who have engaged in critical anti-sexist and anti-racist work before me. While I do conduct analysis, the overarching questions posed were overwhelmingly born out of conversations I had with poets and participants within the scene.

The use of theory in itself poses risks when attempting to allow self-representation by subjects. It is difficult to write using theory without imposing it from the top down onto the situation. Indeed, at

no point in my fieldwork did someone identify their actions in relation to any of the theories I cite. This produces a conflict; how to de-center myself as final arbiter of analysis while allowing those within the community I studied to speak outside of the constraints of theory they did not produce? In my attempt to balance these competing interests, I seek to let the field work speak before introducing theory and try to apply theory only when relevant and apt. In some ways, theory must be understood in fragments, indeed, as Victor Turner writes, “Moreover, we tend to find very frequently that it is not a theorist's whole system that illuminates, but his scattered ideas, his flashes of insight taken out of systemic context and applied to scatter data” (Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 1975, 23). With this in mind, theory must be understood with its caveats and always in service to the larger work. Despite its pitfalls, I believe an auto-ethnographic approach enables the most holistic and least problematic analysis¹.

Context, Fieldwork and Pitfalls

I wrote my first poem for slam in the spring of my freshman year at Wesleyan. It was a polemic disguised as comedy bucking against the hypocrisies of a youthful anarchism blinded by privilege. In slam, I found the space to shout aloud the clash of contradictions bubbling beneath my skin. In a world so deeply defined by insanity and violence, slam offered the space for a cathartic scream.

In the summer between my sophomore and junior years, I began spending time at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, one of the three major slam venues in New York City. I came to admire their unabashed style, the diversity of those who felt comfortable in the space so different from my stifling upbringing in the suburbs and, perhaps most of all, their politics. I came to Wesleyan because I believed the propaganda of a student body teeming and ready for revolt. With time, Wesleyan revealed itself far

¹ As a grammatical note, I have elected to use their/they're as a single gender neutral pronoun rather than he or she to be inclusive to the variety of gender expression and self-identification within the New York City slam poetry community.

more nuanced and real than glossy pamphlets can allow. In slam, I was ecstatic to find a world of 'real people' angry and loud about the oppression all around. When the Wesleyan slam team became a reality my junior year, I was enthusiastic to try my luck. Many sets of sweaty palms and out-poured soul later, I had made the cut. On the inaugural team, I was defined by a haphazard mix of enthusiasm and naiveté. This new world revealed itself as far more nuanced and real than glossy poems can allow. In my first season, immersed in the culture of the college slam scene I began to notice the cracks, the insidious questions that I could not ignore. Can I reconcile this public and unabashed hierarchy with the radical politics I sought? Hidden beneath a coat of alteriority, how did men dominate the scene? How had white supremacy seeped into a form so rooted in poets of color performances of spoken word?

The formalized structure of a thesis allowed a space to let these questions grow. In the summer of 2011 I moved into New York City to conduct my field work. What would follow would be a consistently overwhelming, destabilizing and often joyful experience. By the time I arrived in New York, the three venues, The Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Urbana Series (based out of The Bowery Poetry Club) and the Louder Arts Project, had already formed their teams for the season. There is a fourth venue in NYC, the Intangible slam. However, I do not engage with it in this work because they were not holding events over the course of my fieldwork and because they were only founded a few years ago and thus did not have the same established culture and following of other venues. I spent my summer nights in slam venues, befriending poets, performing poems and searching for the pulse of the community. Facilitated by my status as a poet and the friendships I built, these events revealed themselves as complex and conflicted social spaces. I attended a few one-person shows produced by slam poets, parties slam poets threw for various events, and as much as possible tried to inhabit a space that would allow me access to the poets beyond their presentations on stage. Through the process of building these relationships I was able to conduct interviews with many poets which, ideally, transcended standard banter and enabled honest dialogue. These interviews are woven throughout this

work identified with pseudonyms. At the end of the summer, I attended the National Poetry Slam in Boston and watched the teams that had grown and shifted over the summer compete on a national stage. I was able to taste the culture of the unified national scene as well.

My time conducting fieldwork brought me to the guiding questions of this work: How does one enter the New York City slam poetry community and how are its bounds defined? How do hierarchies function within the scene? How do systems of oppression, particularly patriarchy and white supremacy play out in the community? How does the community regulate itself in the face of these systems?

Despite being deeply informative, my fieldwork was not without its challenges. Beyond the persistent issues posed by my positionality, studying a community of which I was already a part came with advantages and disadvantages. In some essential ways, being a slam poet enabled my access to many of the cultural codes and sub-communities at play within the larger scene. But this intimacy no doubt served to obscure even as it illuminated. As I sought to write an auto-ethnography rooted in critique, I have often reflected on the difficulty of writing about people who have become friends and mentors whom I deeply admire and appreciate in ways that far transcend these pages. It is a difficult balance to achieve, to do justice to them and this work. I have positioned myself as an object of critique to allow a rigorosity that I would be tentative to apply to others. Even so, I hope that this work can be revealing for those within the community and foster some much needed dialogue and reflection. Even after months of field work and many more months of reflection and analysis, I must admit I do still feel grateful and joyful this world exists. Flawed as it may be; it has grown into a home.

Slam 101

There are a few clear and certain boundaries of what constitute a "poetry slam". This is not to say that there is a clear delineation between "slam poems" and other types of poetry. Indeed, I can already imagine the endless line of smoldering poetic torches and pitchforks at the mere whiff of that

implication. Rather, given the myriad of work brought into the specific space of the poetry slam, there are a few key ways to know that this venue with the shouting, laughter and hopefully well-deserved tears is a poetry slam rather than another type of performance venue. It is not the call and response as if between pastor and choir, it is not the hollering at the edge of metaphors, it is not the audible ache from the audience's gut: it is the numbers.

Slam poetry is competitive poetry. Each poem is performed and judged on a numerical scale from 0 to 10. Depending on the venue or context there are at minimum three judges, at maximum five judges. When there are five judges the lowest score and the highest score are excluded as outliers. Whether as groups or as individuals, whether for the good of the team or for personal glory, a poetry slam pits poets against each other and culminates with a victor. Victory can mean everything from access to another slam, membership on a team bound for the prestigious poetry slam nationals or as a stepping stone into other projects. One thing is certain; victory means more time to be heard.

At every slam, regardless if it is between teams or individuals, the judges are always arbitrarily selected untrained members of the audience. Each MC uses a different spiel to introduce the competition or 'bout'. However every speech hovers around the same central theme: each judge should evaluate each poem based on whatever criteria they want. This can range from how deep the belly laugh or how precise the diction. Each judge, moment and venue is different. Hence, poets find themselves in a haphazard competition fashioned out of the game of moving strangers to tears, laughter or communal indignation. To be sure, each venue has its own culture and particular priorities that reflect back which people come to the space and therefore influence the potential field of judges. However, the judging is inevitably as haphazard as each individual tied to a beating heart and skin.

If this appears confusing, ridiculous or absurd to the reader unfamiliar with slam, it is because it is. It is the common trope, to the point of cliché, within the slam community to call slam one of the most arbitrary and unpredictable competitions available. Luminaries of the genre often referred to it as

nothing but a gimmick for the sole purpose to bring people together to hear poems.

Slam poetry was born out of the working class neighborhoods of Chicago to bring those people into the room. Its founder, Mark Smith, was a construction worker. Smith's roots, and the authenticity they afford him, are repeated so often within slam poetry communities that this recitation may as well be an opening prayer. Of the many beliefs swirling around the genre, one of the dominant and most flattering is that slam is the democratization of poetry. It was born with an air of rebellion against the towering academic elites. Slam poetry seeks, or at least believes that it seeks, to take poetry out of the hands of stuffy academics and return it to the daily grind of the street and the working-class struggle. This rhetorical flare is brought to reality as "the people" are turned into the people in the room.

Overview

Slam poetry offers a worthwhile space for analysis and case studies which reveal larger dynamics for a few key reasons. As a community defined by the clearly delineated and stylized public performance of identity, particularly within a form which necessitates that the author of the work be the one performing it, perceptions of poets' work are telling about broader perceptions related to identity. This may be especially true of a community seeking to undermine societal hierarchies while at the same time still subsumed by mass ideological movements. Slam straddles the brackish space between activism and artistic expression. This position allows it to be a conduit into analyses of many intersecting mindsets.

Fundamentally, this ethnography is about issues of identity and power and would be woefully incomplete if it did not engage with the literature and lineage that have asked these same questions before. The theoretical backbone of my work is provided by bell hooks, particularly her books, Feminist Theory; from Margin to Center, Black Looks, and Rock my Soul. Hooks' insightful dissection of dynamics of power was central to my work and allowed me to see how slam as a form enacts a

patriarchal and white supremacist form of power. Coming with a systemic and holistic understanding of our 'White supremacist capitalist patriarchy' supported the depth of my analysis. By understanding the nature of power used within systems of oppression, I could focus on the enactment of white supremacist patriarchal power rather than on the bodies enacting it. This allows an analysis untied from an essentialist perspective that allows only a few types of oppression and opens analysis to broader understandings of oppression.

The first chapter focuses on the boundaries of the community. Beginning with my arrival at the Nuyorican, it seeks to offer an analysis of the process of initiation and entry into the culture. This chapter draws heavily on auto-ethnography and seeks to engage my arrival as a text for dissection. Sarah Thornton's idea of 'Sub-Cultural Capital' was instrumental in examining how those boundaries functioned and how power was created and maintained within the scene. Victor Turner's Dramas, Fields and Metaphors offer a rich theoretical texture in which to understand the initiation rites of slam and the liminality created and provided in the space of the stage.

The second chapter focuses on patriarchy's role within the scene. It begins with the exploration of patriarchy as played out between individuals in direct antagonism, then interrogates the many dynamics of appropriation at play. Beyond bell hooks' illuminating presence, Wendy Brown and Gayatri Spivak provide a theoretical framework. Wendy Brown's, "Finding the Man in the State" allowed me to analyze 'masculinist' forms of power as disconnected from male-bodied agents. Brown's thesis syncs well with the functions performed venues in the slam scene. Her work facilitated an analysis beyond the simplistic understanding of patriarchy as the domination of female-bodied, female-identified people by male-bodied, male-identified people to a larger system of values. Spivak's seminal work, "Can the Subaltern Speak" allowed me to tease through the many issues of representation posed by the competition between women telling their own stories and men telling women's stories. This process of appropriation is a constant and virulent one which needed to be examined and illuminated.

In examining the constructions and pitfalls of alternative masculinities through slam poetry, R.W. Connell's work, particularly Masculinities and Gender and Power have been invaluable. Connell's conception of 'hegemonic masculinity' and interrogation of rebellions against it offer a necessary backdrop to the similar process happening within slam.

The third chapter focuses on white supremacy within the scene. I analyze a moment during my fieldwork which revealed much of the racial tension and the logics around race at play in the scene. I explore the racialized nature geography within the scene, particularly between the Nuyorican Poets' Café and the Bowery Poetry Club. Again, bell hooks was instructive. Peggy McIntosh's unpacking the invisible backpack allowed me to shift the analysis toward an understand engaging with white privilege rather than simply the disadvantages to people of color. John Hartigan, Jr.'s Race in the 21st Century helped me to understand the many often competing and overlapping logics at play within the community about race and its role. Hartigan was particularly useful for understanding the dominance and role of 'colorblind ideology.' Omi and Winant's seminal work Racial Formations in the United States offered a nuanced and deeply useful understanding of often contested terms like 'racism' and 'racial projects'. Their work was also helpful in analyzing colorblindness with its myriad implications. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's work "African-American women's History and the Meta-Language of Race" gave me a framework through which to understand and dissect the coded language employed to discuss race and racialized spaces. The idea of race as a 'global sing' which infiltrates our very language helped me to understand the undercurrents of racial dynamics at play. In examining the racialized geography of the space, Tim Cresswell's "In Place/Out of Place" facilitated an understanding of how unspoken expectations can become 'common sense' and exert great power. In engaging with anti-racist work through slam, George Lipsitz's book The Possessive Investment in Whiteness provided a framework to understand effective and ineffective anti-racist actions. Cheryl Harris' work "Whiteness as Property" enabled me to analyze many of the ways whiteness intervenes to aid white poets,

1.
Arrival Story to Alphabet City

I am dripping sweat through the powder blue collar of my day job, rounding the corner of East 3rd Street and Avenue C to reveal the towering projects still casting their unapologetic shadow over The Nuyorican Poets Cafe. This block long ascent, framed by a community garden marked with overgrown rusted bikes turned modern art and the persistent sprawl of upscale bars, does not paint the Nuyorican as intimidatingly as its history would afford.

Founded in 1973 in Miguel Algarin's living room, the Nuyorican originated as a safe space carved out of the chaos of alphabet city for Puerto Ricans living in New York (hence Nuyorican) to make poetry and spoken word and to accidentally innovate an art form. Since its humble beginnings, the Nuyorican has gone through many incarnations (including a long period without budget for a roof or heating bills) until it rose to be the artistic juggernaut it is today. The Nuyo introduced slam poetry to New York City in 1988 under the auspices of Bob Holman's charismatic and charmingly raucous leadership. This first slam was attended by a blindsided audience of 6 people, described by Cristin O'Keeffe Aptowicz as, "totally confused by the numbers being thrown at poems" (Aptowicz 2007, 47). The other two venues in NYC, the Louder Arts Project and the Bowery Poetry Club originated from the Nuyorican. The Nuyorican was the progenitor of slam in NYC. Depending whom you ask, the Nuyorican is still the epitome of slam. The Nuyorican launched the careers of some of the most successful poets to have come out of slam poetry; Saul Williams, Beau Sia and Maggie Estep to name a few. While the commercial climate surrounding slam has shifted dramatically since the 1990s, when poets were realistically daydreaming of book and CD deals, widespread recognition and later, a spot on

the HBO program DEF Poetry², the Nuyorican is still seen as a space where poets are forged and flung into the larger world. More recently, the Nuyorican team has come in second in the national poetry slam for the past two years and is widely regarded as a force to be reckoned with.

So, needless to say, I was nervous.

Still smelling slightly of mangoes and over-ripe bananas from the day at work, I met a friend of mine, Jackie, a poet I knew from the college circuit. She hollered at me out the window of Mama's, a favorite watering hole a block away from the Nuyo. It is not even six and we have prepared to camp out on the Nuyorican line for the nine o'clock opening. Each venue has a separate process for how to enter a slam; entry into the Wednesday night open slam is first come, first served. Not only does this mean that if you're late, you may not get a slot, but it also allows those who come earliest to choose their slot in the rotation. This is important given score creep, which is particularly dramatic at the Nuyorican. Score creep is the phenomenon by which over the course of a slam, the scores at the end of the night are significantly higher than those at the beginning. Different hosts explain score creep through a variety of jokes; that the judges are a few too many beers deep, the girl or boy from across the room is flirting back and the judge loses track, etc. Slam strategy 101 dictates that usually a later slot within the rotation gives you a better chance to advance. At the Nuyo, it is generally understood that the first five poets almost certainly will not move on to the second round. Score creep is so steep that often a poet must receive a perfect 10 from all three judges to be viable for the second round.

Since having a viable shot at numeric success requires many hours of waiting, the line for the Nuyorican is a melding social space unto itself. The Nuyorican line was a common moment shared across many others' arrival stories. Henry, a poet who has become established in the last 5 years within the scene, described coming to the Nuyorican every Wednesday for almost a year. After graduating

2 Def Poetry Jam was a television show which ran from 2002-2006 and showcased spoken word on HBO. Funded by Russell Simmons and hosted by Hip-Hop legend Mos Def, Def Jam allowed slam poets national exposure and was a major stepping stone for some to go onto greater fame and other projects.

from SUNY Geneseo and gotten involved in the college scene, he was eager to come to New York City to dive into the scene here. He described a process of feeling the seasons by the time he spent outside editing poems on the Nuyorican line (Henry 2011). The Nuyorican was his entry point because it was far and away the most famous of the New York venues.

Michaela, a white female poet who had competed nationally with the Nuyorican team in 2010 was eager to identify herself as a Nuyorican poet. Coming from University of Pennsylvania and having gained widespread recognition for her accomplishments in the college circuit, she felt she had a responsibility to enter the scene through the progenitor of slam in NYC. She described “covering (Maggie Estep's Poem) Sex Goddess of the Western Hemisphere all around campus” (Michaela 2011). For her, being in touch with the roots of slam poetry were essential so she focused on the Nuyorican and built it into her home venue. The idea of a 'home venue' is one that has lost traction in recent years, but is still prevalent within the scene.

Quite a few poets talked about forming a lasting sense of friendship and solidarity with other poets, with whom they still collaborate today, out of the Nuyorican line. Hours spent waiting in sweltering heat or unforgiving winter cold have a way of fostering conversation. On that Wednesday in June, it was our sweat sizzling off the pavement that broke our silence.

As more poets trickled in, we begin to talk what can best be characterized as “slam shop.” This process is emblematic of one of the many contradictions within the slam poetry scene; as a poet trades knowledge or tips they are emboldening and aiding our eventual competitors. Much of the tension that arises is from the attempt to foster a warm community, often described in terms of a “slam family”, within the framework of individual competition. This guiding metaphor of the slam family will be explored in depth in chapter 2 in conversation with patriarchy within the scene.

There were a few totally new poets on the line; a young black man from Brooklyn who only wanted to talk about Nas, a middle-aged white woman who had been writing for years but never

performed. The eclectic mix was refreshing after becoming accustomed to many of the common faces on the college circuit. For those fully new to the scene, basic tenets of strategy such as how best to conquer or benefit from score creep dominate shop talk.

After small talk at the front of the line, I recognized a poet I had seen perform earlier but never met. I had appreciated his use of cohesive and vivid metaphor and I felt the need to break ground. Capitalizing on the social conventions of the line, I introduced myself to James. James is a young black poet from East New York. He had come into the New York scene through Urban Word, the city wide youth poetry program. When we met he was wearing a t-shirt that simply read, “Urban Word is a movement.” When we spoke later, he described Urban Word as, ‘the first time he was inspired by slam poetry’ (James 2011). His best friend had been on the 2011 Urban Word team so he had been exposed to the competition and the culture. The Urban Word Team is coached by Mahogany Browne, the Slam Master of the Nuyorican, coach of the adult team and arguable one of the most influential people in the New York slam scene. James described his entrance into the scene as one marked by a frustration with his age. By the time he knew about Urban Word, he was already 20 and technically ineligible for the competition. He attended FIT which did not have a team for the college competition. After his many attempts to build a team were frustrated, he consulted with Mahogany Browne as to how he could slam. She suggested that he dive into the adult scene. After trepidation over what he called, “A desire to work more on my craft in the college environment” (James 2011). With Mahogany's guidance and sponsorship, James had already garnered widespread respect from many in the adult scene by the age of 20. James expressed a sentiment well known to many young poets entering the scene, “The competition for me is very strange, because nine times out of ten I am competing against poets I admire and look-up to” (James 2011). Despite his hesitation, James had risen quickly within the scene. He was an openly accepted member of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe contingent and he was on the Intangible Collective team bound for Nationals at the end of the summer.

There is no question in my mind that I was drawn to him from across the line because of his position within the slam hierarchy and his quick ascension to respect. After brief introductions, I turn to gentle name dropping to establish enough insider knowledge to justify the conversation beyond basic pleasantries. Mentioning a relationship with the host for the night, Nate, gives me the standing to dive into a conversation:

He asks, “Your favorite poet?”

I respond, “Page or slam?”

“hmmm, slam?”

“Depends on the day, today, Saul I figure”

“No doubt, no doubt, I'd go Jon or Adam, just the metaphors man.”

Our conversation is telling in a few ways. We only refer to the poets in question by first name. This serves two functions; first, it establishes a personal tone and dynamic with the absent, admired poet. The New York City scene is small enough that most poets know each other. This familiarity serves as an affirmation of sub-cultural knowledge and connections. Second, in obscuring the poet's full name it allows for another layer of test; for a poet to be recognizable by only their first name requires a potentially daunting amount of knowledge. In the moment, I did not even reflect on it, assuming he would understand me. The implicit test within that assumption is that misunderstanding would diminish his insider status.

The conversation then evolves into dissecting our favorite lines, quoting them back and forth as both fuel and fodder. Also, we operate under the assumption that slam and page poems are distinct forms. By no means a universal understanding throughout the community. Later our conversation does delve into page poetry;

He asks, “And page?”

I respond, “Any day, (Yusef) Komunyakaa”

“wooord. My man. [gives me dap] Neon Vernacular is my bible.

The way that man flips lines, his work is so tight. Not one stray word”

The dap (which is a physical sign of respect, which can range from a high-five to a hand shake) was earned by my 'correct' choice of poet. Seeing eye-to-eye on those whom we admired connected us. That Yusef Komunyakha, a prolific and profound page poet who occasionally reads his work but certainly does not slam it, was our point of connection undermines that there is a harsh division between page and performance poetry. Despite this connection, it is nonetheless important that we do not discuss what our poems for the night are about. This decision is tactical and guarded: if a competitor knew the subject matter you were going to use, they could potentially counter your poem with another poem that either tackles that issue before you can, or if they feel very confident, outdoes your poem in any number of ways.

For more seasoned members of the community (the bounds of which are the central question of this chapter) conversation is a delicate game of testing boundaries. Each comment can be a new footstep on wooden planks as if walking across the fragile rope bridge to test if it can hold your weight across the canyon, or if the other's authenticity is just another mirage. There is an abiding and overarching hierarchy based on perception of connection and familiarity with the scene.

Slam can be considered a sub-culture for a few meaningful reasons. Most centrally, many in the community talk about it this way. While they rarely would use the term 'sub-culture' people certainly talk about a 'culture' in slam that is distinct and in opposition to a mainstream 'culture'. Further, as demonstrated through my conversation with James, having knowledge of the scene facilitates entry into the social system. Sarah Thornton's conception of sub-cultural capital is informative in a number of ways. Thornton coined the term “sub-cultural capital” in her work Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital. Thornton is in direct ideological conversation with Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital. Rather than a focus on a cultural capital that leads to material gain, Thornton is exploring a sub-

cultural capital formulated in a search for authenticity, in the search for a sense of self (Thornton 1996). Thornton's case study is the exploration of club cultures in England; she is working against the backdrop of society-wide condescension (Thornton 1996). The relationship between slam poetry and society's perception of slam poetry is not so simple. Despite all of its bluster as the rebellion against the poetry of the ivory tower, slam poetry often exists in a space of begrudging respect as it has managed to resurrect poetry as relevant in the nonacademic public eye. Slam poetry's relationship with "mainstream" society highlights some of the problems and pitfalls of Thornton's conception of sub-cultural capital. The idea of a purely hierarchical sense in which types of cultural capital are most useful is an oversimplification. Rather, types of cultural capital are in conversation with each other within a field. This is not to say that Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital is entirely irrelevant; without a doubt certain types of cultural capital facilitate access to certain types of employment and material gain. However, depending on the type of sub-cultural capital, access to these types of knowledge comes with a variety of material benefits.

In her work Goth, Wannabes and Christians, Amy Wilkins explores the necessity of boundaries and their maintenance to a subculture's existence. She writes, "For individuals, boundaries define who they think they are. Boundaries create not only insiders and outsiders, but also hierarchies among groups." (Wilkins 2008,7). My conversations on the Nuyo line with James, as well as other interactions I had on the line and within the venue, are a process of establishing boundaries. The criteria for entrance into the community are the same as for ascension within it. These boundaries are constantly shifting and being reinforced. Once the first crossing has happened, though, entrance into new sections of the community is easier.

It is through the process of policing these boundaries that slam and slam venues become valued and desired spaces. As Wilkins writes, "In drawing boundaries groups make claims about the value of their cultural capital" (Wilkins 2008, 7). In erecting these boundaries, does slam poetry run the risk of

replicating the exclusivity of the ivory tower it is ostensibly rebelling against? Clearly the type of culture that is valued is different with in academia and in slam. Further, having a sense of cohesive community often requires excluding some aspiring members. But, at what point do the rebels replicate their opponents, simply for a lack of other ways to live?

During more slam shop talk I learn James had new work to test and I explain I am breaking ground here but came from success on the college circuit. This last bit of conversation also serves to establish our power vis-à-vis each other. I am leveraging my successes in the college circuit in an attempt to entice James to listen to my work when I perform, while James is mitigating my expectations with this disclaimer that he is simply "testing new work."

The line is finally moving, and we enter the red bricks of the esteemed Nuyorican. I duck under the blue awning, pass seven dollars and pleasantries to Julio and step through the door. To my right is the long oak bar and Pepe's unapologetic tone from behind it. The room opens up into a wide space with tables and chairs packed around each other like refugees awaiting the last boat home. The walls breathe. I ignore the field of potential conversations swirling around me and rush to the front of the room. The stage sags into my boot prints as I hop on to sign my name on the list. I've secured spot 17, good positioning to score well and move on to the next round. Looking over the names on the list, I notice they are oddly arranged and written before I had arrived. It dawns on me: the Nuyorican team members are taking part in this open slam. Given that the Nuyorican draws so many new poets, often the quality of the writing and performance on a Wednesday night is not as polished as would be expected in other adult venues. It is common for a poet to forget a poem mid-performance or go over the time limit without ever knowing one existed. I had foolishly hoped that the inexperience of the other poets would allow me a leg up in the competition. However, with the tight and keen-to-win Nuyorican team in the mix, this slam would be different.

As I step off stage, I run into Jackson from the hotel room of the opening anecdote, a member of

the Nuyorican team who I know from the college circuit for his work coaching the NYU team. He is an imposing physical presence, a large white man with unruly curly hair and a noticeable swing to his gait. Originally from Long Island, Jackson came into the New York community through the college slam scene. He pioneered SUNY New Paltz's status as a powerhouse on the collegiate level and is a prominent member of the Intangible collective, a collective of poets primarily hailing from school in the SUNY system. Jackson is controversial within the slam scene for his unapologetic focus on point value and victory. He has been heavily involved with the college scene and has encouraged and introduced many young poets to the larger scene. Some feel that he is training these poets with an unhealthy focus on competition while others believe he is providing a valuable service. We exchange light pleasantries.

Jackson, "So you slamming?"

Me, "Yeah, you guys [the Nuyo team] are too, yeah? Testing new shit?"

Jackson, "You know, Mo's [Mahogany Browne] been working us pretty hard. And we're gonna come with the fire. Don't you doubt that."

Me, "I'm sure you will."

My interactions with him had always been characterized by the same curt conversations based around loosely veiled threats and the promise of impending dominance. We part ways and spread across the room to our respective camps.

The physical arrangement of the room is deeply relevant and reflects the hierarchies made in the space. The space is open and arranged into tables with seats around them. Rather than a configuration of rows, this arrangement allows the crowd, mixed with both audience members and performers, to clearly establish relatively cohesive groups. The social network of the space is reflected in the physical layout; I set up with my friends, both those who came with me and those made on the line, spread across two tables in the back. James moves across the room to sit across the room with the Nuyorican

team. James' status in the community is both reflected and reinforced by his ability to effortlessly join the Nuyorican team.

In line with the ideal of democratizing poetry, slam poetry is deeply interactive. In many 'opening spiels' or introductions hosts make a similar joke, "Judges, your job is not to be influenced by the audience. Audience, your job is to influence the judges." This joke operates from the truth that judges are often and inevitably influenced by the response of the audiences. Thus, it is a central part of slam strategy to have people already enthusiastic about you and your work in the audience.

The Nuyorican team sets up across two tables in the very front of the room. In this space, their reactions to each of the performances are visible to the rest of the room. For those who are familiar with the scene, these are people who are well known and respected for their work. For those who are not – often the judges – their social power and influence is cultivated in a number of different ways. First is their unity and familiarity with each other. When each member of their team performs in the slam, they are certain to have a block of the audience which will be unwavering in their support. Given that the Nuyorican team members will come with poems that are more highly polished than the work of the typical performer, these poets are quickly established as dominant forces within the room. Both as a mechanism of support and as a signal to the rest of the crowd, members or friends of a specific team are often greeted with what can best be named a 'call sign.' When a member of the Nuyorican team would mount the stage, other members would shout "warning" as a literal warning of the skill that is about to be demonstrated. This reinforces the bounds of their smaller community within the larger slam community, and causes judges to take note and expect a good performance. This expectation often results in higher scores. Within this context, the Nuyorican team also comes with a home court advantage. This most visibly manifests in their familiarity with Nate.

In many ways, Nate is the gatekeeper of the Nuyorican. This is not simply hyperbole, but often how he is referred to in introductions. In some ways, this honorific is an oversimplification. Nate is the

host, but he does not expressly control who can perform and who doesn't. Rather, the list is first come, first served and Nate does maintain this as the mechanism for entrance. In rare occasions, Nate has put people on the list who were not on line, but this has only been when they were nationally recognized touring poets who were only in town briefly. But as the host, Nate is the public face of the Nuyorican for Wednesday nights. His role as host gives him social power, which is then shared and transferred with those who are familiar with him. I unequivocally use this association and my friendship with Nate as a means to demonstrate my 'insider status' both to the audience and to other poets.

Opening with the same 'Slam Spiel' that Nate has instinctively memorized, he sets the raucous tone for the night. The Nuyorican exemplifies the interactive nature of slam, with each new joke or hard-hitting line in the opening receiving uproarious applause. Notebooks bared, seats locked into place, elbows ground into the accidentally aged wooden tables, we are ready for the slam to begin.

James opens the slam as the sacrificial poet. The first poet is sacrificial because of the assumption that by beginning the slam, his or her scores will be unnaturally low for the slam. Sacrificial poets are not technically competing in the slam. This poet's job is to 'calibrate' the slam and the judges, as Nate would explain, "If the poem after is better, higher score, if it's worse, lower score." Beyond the obvious oversimplification of 'better vs. worse' for poetry, in the world of quantified value this is how things are calculated. It is important to understand, however, that being a sacrificial poet is a type of honor. There is no standardized or public system to choose the sacrificial poet. Rather, the slam master at the venue/for the night simply chooses one or two poets he/she knows and respects. Thus, being sacrificial poet comes as a mark of respect, even as they are set up to fail.

As James walks to the stage, the two tables monopolized by the Nuyorican team begin a sustained, encouraging holler. To distinguish the Nuyorican shouts of encouragement from the general milieu of the room, members of the team began to shout their call sign, "Warning" as James

mounted the stage. James performs a poem on a childhood friendship that had deteriorated because of racial divisions; he is slightly shaky and still reading from the page. Being the sacrificial poet he had little chance of having scores that maintained their competitive edge. Nonetheless, he received high scores. He was visibly deflated and, as per our conversation after the fact, immensely frustrated.

The night wore on through a range of work, members of the Nuyorican team presenting highly choreographed and polished pieces and some poets performing for the first time. Maintaining the air of community while tabulating scores in my head, I wait through the poets to my impending performance slot. The muscles in my stomach and back constrict. As Nate calls my name, I begin to hear the applause from around the room. It is this moment when the investments made earlier, in bringing friends, in making friends, in establishing a name on the college circuit, pay off. I can hear my friends shouting from our corner. As I step onto the stage I hear Jackson holler, “WeSlam”, the adopted call sign of Wesleyan’s slam team from the college circuit. Despite the fact that few of the audience will know what “WeSlam” means, simply having a call sign is an indicator to listen.

I step to the mic, absorb the layout of the room, where the judges are, where my allies are, and begin my poem “Next Year in Gaza” an energetic poem about my perspective on the Israel-Palestine conflict. I intently turn my eyes to the expectant clump of the Nuyorican team, and begin to pour my poem from my memory. These moments slow time. Almost out of body, I become nothing but the roaring crescendo flung against the projected image of my upbringing. As I peak, I can see head nods from the powers that be in the room. Nate is in the back bobbing to my snare-less rhythm, the Nuyorican team is groaning as I describe, “scraping the ground with rotting fingernails for the last calorie.” I reveal the description is both Warsaw and Gaza, and am greeted with resounding choruses of “yes” and clapping. Driving toward the end, my voice cracks into a growl as I ache out my resounding and resolving question, “Someone tell me/ why we defile our dead/ by digging mass graves again?” I land on, “And I am angry/ you use mine” and step off stage into a standing section of the crowd. As I

pass the Nuyorican contingent, the team stands up and each member breaks out to hug me, hand patting my back. Jackson stands and clasps my hand, simply to look at me and say, “Impressive.” This poem is always divisive; I am taking a stark and potentially unpopular position on the situation in Palestine. I can see some offended faces and furrowed brows from audience members. But, what is most essential is that I have received respect from members of the community who have already established their positions of authority. Further, this public display of respect happened before the judges gave me my scores. I wade back to my seat and am greeted with 10s from each judge, culminating in a perfect 30 for my first poem.

This process of entering a new space, in attempting to gain entry to the community there, is best understood as an initiation rite. The form for initiation rites explored by Victor Turner offers a worthwhile conceptual frame. Turner describes three phases of initiation rites which facilitate an individual’s entrance into full personhood within a community (Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 1975). These phases are pre-liminal or separation, liminal or transition, post-liminal, or reincorporation (Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 1975). Superficially, these phases fit into the story of my arrival, entrance into the liminal space of performance and then re-incorporation into the community after having transitioned and gained respect. However, the boundaries between the phases must be understood as porous. As I have explored, the social relationships established before entering the performance are integral to the successes' of that performance. Within the context of slam, there is an aspect of judgment as one enters the initiation rite. A smooth reintegration into the community, particularly into a position of respect, is by no means guaranteed. This can be aided by solid established alliances made before entering the liminal stage. It may be necessary then to add an additional phase in the process: preparation for liminality. This would need to be before the process of separation, within this context, moving out of the audience onto the stage.

Turner explains that liminal spaces often come with sensory codes, “for instance, different types

of incense burned at different times in the performance communicate different meanings, gestures and facial expressions are assigned meanings with reference to emotions and ideas to be communicated, soft and loud sounds of conventional meanings, etc” (Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* 1988, 23). As three-dimensional poetry, slam is rife with ‘sensory codes.’ Many slam poems (including “Next Year in Gaza”) follow a similar arc in terms of volume and emotional intensity. They will start out intensely, but quiet as context is provided, then rise to a crescendo at the emotional peak of the poem, then crash to a slow and quieter finishing few lines. This arc comes with many physical markers as well, ranging from flailing arms or contorted faces to calculated choreography. Many audience members seeing slam for the first time are overwhelmed with the sensory overload and often these physical or vocal markers serve as anchor points through the emotional experience of the poem. Much the same way that Turner’s “incense burned at a certain time” would connote a different meaning, a low growl or a loud bellow indicates meanings outside of and beyond the words being spoken.

Beyond a period of transition into acceptance within a certain community, liminal spaces allow for social critique and reflection. “In all ritualized movement there is at least a moment when those being moved in accordance with the cultural script were liberated from normative demands, when they were, indeed, betwixt and between successive lodgments in jural political systems. In this gap between ordered worlds almost anything may happen” (Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 1975, 13). It is in this ‘gap’ outside of ‘ordered worlds’ that enables liminality to facilitate social critique and re-imagining. As with most applications of theory to field work, in some essential ways performing a slam poem could qualify as a liminal space and in some essential ways it could not. Slam is often touted as, and often does serve as, a platform for political or personal expression that would be impossible without the medium. These moments of cathartic expression range from a survivor of sexual assault using the space to talk about their experience to an impassioned plea against racism. These performances, with their dramatic flair and intrusive subject matter, would be transgressions in other

circumstances of daily life. However, within the prescribed context of the slam, it is certainly within expectations and parameters. This does not preclude the space from being liminal. Indeed, many rites of initiation function within prescribed forms and within a prescribed time frame. Slam's explicit rules offer some insight into the desired form: no props, no musical accompaniment, the poem must be original and under 3:10 in length. Each of these technical parameters influences the final work. However, these rules are not what challenge that slam poetry offers a liminal space. Rather, it is the unspoken boundaries, the implicit parameters that curtail the possibilities of social critique facilitated by the liminality available within the space.

Turner describes liminal spaces as outside of social hierarchies, "In this interim of 'liminality,' the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one's own social position but also from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements" (Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 1975, 14) Turner's conception of liminality being a space outside of social constructions of hierarchy, particularly those informed by race, gender, sexual orientation or other constrictive identities, would make performing a poem decidedly not liminal. This is not to say that this space doesn't offer the possibility of social critique or enable those who are often voiceless to scream, but rather that the actor remains situated within hierarchies. The presence of the "true author", that the "I" of the performed work is the body on stage, inevitably influences and inform perceptions of the work. The judges and audience members all come with their presumptions and conditioning which cannot be erased nor ignored. Rather, the value of social critique found in slam is in validating the voices of those who are often marginalized. One of slam poetry's strengths as a project for critique is the graceful melding of personal experiences with larger political narratives. This defies the societal premium on 'expertise', so often the purview of academics or officials who are not directly affected by the issues, in lieu of an honoring and appreciation of personal story within a larger context. In this central way, slam does offer a space for revolt against social norms in so far as it would honor the

experiences of a person of color who has lived in abused communities of color more than the abstracted pontification of an academic on those same communities. However, as will be explored in depth in the following chapters, stories of oppression are often effectively appropriated by members of the dominant group for material gain.

The liminality provided by the stage is by no means outside of cultural norms. Rather, it is a new cultural space defined and bounded by a different set of norms. These shift slightly from venue to venue, according to institutional priorities and the tone set in the space. But, given the universality of the scoring structure, some of these priorities remain prevalent across many venues.

The poem I performed at the Nuyorican, “Next Year in Gaza” offers a useful case study into some of the common slam tropes and the ways these tropes restrict social critique. This poem follows slam form to remain consistently viable, but with enough self-awareness that I still feel comfortable performing it.

Next Year in Gaza

In third grade,
our Rabbi started slipping us propaganda
like pills laced with promises.

Crushed hate into our breakfast cereal
called it history.
Called it heritage.

pushed us,
cowering into the corner under emotional bludgeon

First, he showed us ovens, barbed wire, and eyes
gaunt and gouged as they watched their peoples' souls scorched gray against twilight.

Then, he showed us “our” land, 'promised',

Impressed on our still molten minds,
A home hidden from false showers,

Then the Arabs attacked.
In *his* words, 'Unprovoked'

“Simply”, he explained “Because we are Jews.”
And everyone knows, “Muslims hate Jews.”

“The land was barren”
he said,
“before We graced it.”

When I asked,
“why the bodies in the street?”

He says,
“The problem is, the Muslims teach *their* children to hate,
didn't *you* see them on the news,
brown bodies shrieking,
they must have lost their minds.”

At 13,
As the god of Abraham decided I had become a man, my Rabbi holds my cheeks, kisses my forehead
with twisted blessing and asks, “what does *this* mean?”
I Say “it means the Jews have survived”
He adds, “and that we will never let anything like what happened to *us* happen to anyone else *again*”

So I ask you,

Do a people grouped by religion,
shoulder blades to the crumbling wall,
scarred by scorch marks

calves split on the shattered glass
and *spirits* cased in concrete,
whoring for the last piece of bread.
scraping the ground with rotting fingernails for the last calorie

Do *these* souls have no right to sharpen those fingernails and swing at the sky?

Did David not hold a rock in a sling shot?

This is Warsaw,
1943,
Jewish resistance forces rusted bullets through Nazi skulls,
(pushed the devil back) for five months
hold the line drawn in blood and bone fragment.

This is Gaza,
Yesterday,
as a woman,

pregnant with child not deserving the horror of this world,
bleeds into backseat upholstery
careening down rubble strewn streets.
Seeking respect in stitches,
Only to find cement and steel in Jewish eyes,
tell her to turn back,
so her baby will taste blood before air.

Someone tell me,
Why out of the ashes of one Genocide, we *grow* another?

Someone Tell me,
why we defile our dead by *digging* mass graves again

my god will not let this stand
and she's angry you use her name
and i'm angry you use mine

The piece is in distinct sections: the first begins talking about the propaganda I grew up with as a Jewish child. This section is from the beginning with the line, “In third grade, our Rabbi starting slipping us propaganda like pills laced with promises/crushed hate into our breakfast cereal.” This section relies heavily on the performance technique of changing my voice to indicate my rabbi as a character. My rabbi is a composite character, a combination of many different teachers and influences into one cohesive character to provide a foil and a face for this process of indoctrination. This section is essential both as a means of setting the context for Zionist propaganda for non-Zionists in the audience, and as a means of accessibility for those raised Zionist. This section concludes with my 'rabbi's' admonishment that, “we will never/let anything/like what happened to us/happen to anyone else again.”

Using the beginning section of a poem to establish necessary context is common within the arc of slam poems. This allows the poem to be accessible to the uninformed listener and therefore viable for the huge variety of people who may be judges. This process of contextualization necessarily frames the rest of the poem within the poet's terms. As with any political statement, the framework within which it is presented must influence the possible answers to the problem posed. Further, given the time limit of the performance, the context is almost inevitably incomplete.

The next section is framed by: “so I ask you” and ending with, “Did David not hold a rock in a slingshot?” This description is an intentionally vague and graphic description of a suffering people, to facilitate the reveal in the next section that I have been describing both the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943 and the Gaza Strip today. The poem culminates explicitly asking, “someone tell me/ why about of the ashes of one genocide/we grow another”, finally ending at a pinnacle of anger with the line, “My god will not let this stand/ and she is angry you use her name/And I am angry/you use/mine.” This poem is written to speak to other Jews about the hypocrisy of supporting Israel's apartheid policies. The conditioning we are raised in has four essential elements: Nazis were monsters who tried to kill us for no reason, we are victims but survivors, we deserve to survive, Muslims/Arabs are monsters who try to kill us for no reason. Thus, the poem seeks to leverage this programming to illuminate its inconsistency. By positioning the temporally distinct 'Jews as victims' and 'Gazans as victims' in the same description, thus implicitly comparing the current occupation to Nazi aggression, I would hope to cross the wires of that programming. I know of few devoted Jewish Zionists who would say that the Warsaw Ghetto uprising on 1943 was not justified, but many who speak against Gazan resistance. Ideally, this confusion provokes thought rather than just anger.

'Next Year In Gaza' follows many common slam tropes that make it consistently viable, particularly at the Nuyorican. It follows a clear narrative, it allows the poet to be righteously indignant, it plays up some type of identity politics, it espouses a political message that is left of center while remaining comfortably ambiguous and it contains a misdirection and then revelation in meaning. Righteous indignation is a widely common facet of 'successful' slam poems. 'Gaza' allows me, a white man with class privilege, to have something that I can 'authentically' yell about on stage.

In analyzing this poem I must discuss the propensity toward drama and violence within slam poems. One of the critiques from larger society lodged against slam poetry's artistic merit is that consumers of the genre care more about the subject matter of the poem than the construction or beauty

of the poem itself (Aptowicz 2007). This is a widely accepted notion within the slam poetry community. More than once someone has told me I will win a slam because “Gaza is more intense than a break-up.” I would defend slam poetry’s artistic merit in that part of its aesthetic priorities are to engage with real world issues in a meaningful way, rather than pursue some abstracted ‘objective beauty.’ However, this focus on cataclysmic drama, particularly within the context of competition, can be seriously limiting. One of the reasons “Gaza” remains consistently viable across slams is its reliance on violent imagery. Within the slam scene, some would identify this as ‘tragedy porn.’ This raises two essential questions: What are the implications of using this imagery within my poem? And, how does the preference toward this violent style impede or facilitate dialogue? The former is best to answer in a larger context of questions of authenticity; the latter comes with clear implications for the possibility of liminality in slam performances. In one line of thinking, this imagery is evocative and moving, which would allow the otherwise passive listener to become engaged with the topic. Practically, however, many poems employ these images and consumers of slam often describe walking away from events feeling emotionally drained and overwhelmed. Poems are often forced into narrower, less nuanced and more gut-wrenching points to win the judges’ immediate favor. This impedes the nuanced dialogue necessary to tackle many of the issues facing our world today. Rather, it prioritizes righteous indignation over constructive dialogue. I do believe firmly that in some situations, the conflict in Israel-Palestine being one of them, righteous indignation is an appropriate response. The issue is that slam does not allow the space beyond this initial catharsis. There is a premium on answers – those which can be expressed and digested in under three minutes and ten seconds which leave the audience feeling joyfully righteously indignant toward a clearly identified evil. What is often most needed are questions.

To be fair, I wrote this poem out of a sincere desire to express my opinion in a provocative way, but after many successive performances of the same story, it has become a tool of competition rather than a piece of work that still excites me to perform. While I don't focus on my religious politics within

the piece, there is an air of 'defending my form of Jewishness' within the poem, particularly with the ending lines of, "my god will not let this stand/and she is angry you use her name/I am angry you use mine." At a venue like the Nuyorican, which privileges and stresses narratives of defense of identity groups, this poem that provides a Jewish voice to speak against 'Jewish' crimes (the distinction between Jewish and Zionist is an important one to me but in public perception they are often conflated), plays well. It allows me to defend 'my people' but also attack their crimes. The political message of the poem has always been an interesting point of contention for me. When I originally wrote the poem, I meant the lines, "do these souls have no right/ to sharpen those fingernails and swing at the sky?/Did David not hold a rock in a slingshot?" to be an emotional and moral justification for resistance against IDF invasion and occupation. Tactically, I feel that, often, violent or military actions are unwise, but in certain circumstances I think that Gazan self-defense is justified. This is not at all what has been consistently understood as the message of this poem. As a virtue and pitfall of the form, people much more often take whichever potential variation on the meaning most comfortably fits with their pre-existing politics. Zionist friends take the poem to mean that everyone involved should take part in "reasonable, responsible discourse" (which often includes the maintenance of the Israeli state and the current power relations), while devoutly pro-Palestinian friends believe I am advocating the total abolition of Israel and everyone within it. Given this ambiguity, a wide range of judges and audience members become engaged and appreciate the poem. But it raised the questions of whether I am engaging in meaningful critique within the world or just allowing a wide range of people to gain access to the emotion of the poem without causing them to question their stance. This is not to say that this work isn't polarizing and doesn't lead to the occasional verbal spat after a slam, but it is more inclusive in its ambiguity.

Further, I believe there are still persistent questions of authenticity for my performance of this poem. While I position myself within my Jewish identity to have a context from which to critique, I

wonder about the implications of using violent imagery. I have never seen war. I have never feared shells coming into my house. I have never lost sleep afraid soldiers may kick down my door and kill my family. I am not Palestinian, nor am I Israeli. I feel implicated in the issues in Palestine because of my Jewish roots and because I am an American Jew and so much of the violence is facilitated by American aid to Israel. However, I would not consider myself in the directly affected group; I can easily choose when to engage with this issue as an abstract idea, rather than a daily pressing reality.

Recently at a poetry slam a friend performed a poem entitled, “From Osama Bin Laden’s Daughter to Malia Obama,” highlighting the effect war has on the innocents. The poem employed graphic war imagery. I would never have thought of this poem as a potential trigger for audience members who could potentially be re-traumatized by the poem. However, in a moment revealing my near infinite ignorance, a poet from Lebanon was deeply affected and offended by the poem. In her words, “has she [the poet performing] ever seen a bullet?” This must raise the questions of harm done through performances which rely on vivid and intense imagery. To be fair, many issues require strong words and it could be considered an injustice to not describe a horrific situation realistically, but the political work and the intentions behind it become incomprehensibly mired within the context of a competition.

The confluence of all these factors, combined with the alliances I had built before stepping on stage into the liminal phase, smoothly facilitated my ascension to a position of respect within the Nuyorican Poet’s Café community. The radical shift in Jackson’s tone toward me is worth noting. He came to me after the slam to say,

“Check my Facebook status”

“Why’s that?”

“I said, ‘I’ll never make fun of Wesleyan slam again after Nick beat me at my home venue.’”

This brief interaction is telling in a few key ways: first, we see the centrality of Facebook as a

mechanism to give public respect. Facebook is often employed as the new commons. As a space it allows our interactions within the Nuyorican to be broadcast to the citywide scene. Second, my entrance into a position of standing is explicitly tied to point values. This was the language in which Jackson could give me respect. He went on to invite me to drinks after the slam as well as to treat me with respect publicly from then on out. I had earned a nod and hand gesture of approval from him when entering a new space. Within the highly performative and public world of slam's hierarchy and social power, it opened some doors while closing others.

For the duration of my fieldwork, it would be this moment that legitimized me in the eyes of Jackson and the larger Nuyorican team and community. When I would perform poems later, I garnered respect drawn from this proving experience. Other poets would stop their conversations and listen because I had proven myself before. On more than one occasion, I'd be introduced to someone new within the Nuyorican circle as, "the scary Gaza poem." In a direct way, this moment can be understood as an initiation rite into the slam community (as porous and problematic a construction as it is). It created a sense of me as a person and my poetic style focusing on political themes and my ability to use bombastic performance. It was through my command of slam tropes, an audience's attention and judges' respect that I became realized as a full participating person in the eyes of the Nuyorican poets rather than just an outside observer.

While the Nuyorican Poet's Café is the most well-known of the New York venues and the progenitor of the other venues in New York City, it does not establish a monolithic set of priorities across the scene. Rather, each venue has built its own internal culture. While the judges are always arbitrary members of the audience, the cultures of each venue are reflected in the crowds they pull, which in turn influences the pool of potential judges. As each venue applies its own criteria in judging, some value a poem's ability to score well less, instead focusing on the writing of the poem or its comedic value. At this juncture, it is necessary to warn against the possibility of oversimplification. In

the earlier days of slam in New York City, the venues painted themselves as starkly different, often still embroiled in the feuds that led to their founding. However, as time has passed and grudges have melted into memory, these distinctions have become less meaningful. It is now very common for a poet to perform at all three venues and try to be on all three national teams. While each venue maintains its character, informed by its reputation, the crowd it pulls and the physical layout of the space, these distinctions are more like gentle road signs than concrete barriers.

Beyond the Nuyorican Poet's Café there are two other venues in New York City I studied: The Bowery Poetry Club and The Louder Arts Project. The Bowery Poetry club was born out of the split between Miguel Algarin and Bob Holman at the Nuyorican. Algarin had become concerned that Holman's bombastic style and poetry slam in general had come to eclipse the larger goal of the Nuyorican Poet's Café. This split is rife with racial undertones which are explored in Chapter 3 when discussion the racialized nature of space within the scene. Holman had split from the Nuyorican earlier but went on to found the Bowery Poetry Club in 2002 with Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz (Aptowicz 2007). Both Holman and Aptowicz approach slam poetry from the perspective of entertainment, often focusing on funny and light-hearted work (though certainly not ignoring weightier topics). This energy was infused into the founding of the Bowery Poetry Club and I believe has been maintained through the years. When I would ask poets how they saw the Bowery as a venue, there were a few themes that came up consistently- "funny, nerdy, the place to do your secret poem about Star Trek to understanding fans." Again, these descriptions were not universally true but offer a worthwhile baseline for understanding the venue.

Further, the structure of the slams influences the social structure of the venue. Unlike the Nuyorican, which is first come, first served to gain entrance to a slam, the performance order at the Bowery is set by a lottery. Thus, there is not the same social space of the line as poets wait to win a spot. The Bowery operates on a points system; if a poet scores well in a bout, he or she receives a

certain number of points. After accruing enough points, a poet qualifies for that quarter's semi-finals bout, then they can advance to finals and then to a spot on the team. To have viability to move on, a poet must consistently attend the slams at the Bowery. This builds a sense of community and continuity among the poets. This community coalesces around the bar in the back of the room while the non-poet audience members sit separately in the front of the room. This physical divide facilitates the sharing of social power between poets to bolster each other's scores.

My entrance into the Bowery Poetry Club was facilitated by a long period of 'preparation' phase. Aided by the friends and allies I had already made through the college circuit, there were well-respected poets who could introduce me to others in the space. Their 'sponsorship' was essential in gaining access. When I did perform a poem at the Bowery, these alliances helped me garner the attention from "the Bar."

When I performed my first poem at the Bowery Poetry Club, it was with little fanfare. During the bulk of my fieldwork, the Bowery didn't hold slams, so I performed during the open mic. By the time I performed at the Bowery, I had already garnered respect through other performances and my growing network of relationships. In order to fit with the Bowery's penchant for comedy, I decided to do a funny poem about my ideal within a romantic relationship. This poem won me the support of the consistent host of the Bowery, which in turn opened a number of other relationships with poets. Consistent attendance and hours spent with the poets at the bar was more of a marker of inclusion within the Bowery community than a particularly victorious performance.

This is a marked difference from the Nuyorican. Given the Nuyorican's popularity, there is often a new crowd each Wednesday and Friday nights. Conversely, The Bowery is held together through a consistent crowd of regulars who form a community. This is further facilitated by the Bowery's policy of employing artists. Thus, it is common for Elliel, the bartender, to run on stage to perform a poem before hurrying back to the bar.

The Louder Arts Project was founded by members of the 1998 Championship Nuyorican Slam Poetry Team (Aptowicz 2007). After feeling repeatedly disrespected by the Nuyorican as a venue, and led by Nuyorican team member Guy LeCharlez Gonzales, they split off to form their own venue and Louder Arts was born in the fall of 1999. Gonzales was dedicated to building a venue which honored the poets. This tone, along with the tone set by Roger Bonair-Agard and Lynn Procope, both well-known and renowned poets who had been with Louder Arts since its inception, created a venue that focused on “craft.” In the oversimplified form, Louder Arts is the venue which cares most intensely about the writing of the poem and less about the performance. This is not to say that Louder is a quiet space (the irony of that would be too much to bear) but rather than the criteria are different. Louder is smaller and more intimate than the other venues, and is populated by a consistent crowd of high-caliber poets. James Merenda, current slam master of Louder Arts (though not during my fieldwork), described the difference to me: “There is a hierarchy at Louder, just like there is at every venue, but at Louder I sincerely believe there is a meritocracy. We are looking for the good writing. If you come with that, you'll have respect” (Merenda 2011).

It was in search of this respect that I entered Louder Arts. Louder created a different kind of nervousness than the Nuyorican. Rather than having a raucous crowd to engage, I would have to impress the critical ears of the poets in the back of the room. Given this very different challenge, I introduced myself to the venue through a very different poem.

When I arrived at Louder Arts on that Monday evening, walking the block from Union Square to East 13thrd Street, I found each strike of my footsteps up the rickety stairs to the second-floor bar echoing my fears. I had two poems crumpled into my back pocket, neither a poem that I would traditionally slam. Both had been intended for the page and I believe were tighter and more refined writing than much of my other work. I felt that at Louder Arts, I could not hide behind a powerful performance and instead should rely on a well written poem. The room is a mix of established poets

and small groups of poetry consumers who are familiar with the scene. Overall, the crowd is whiter than on a typical night at the Nuyorican, but this is certainly not always true, particularly considering Lynn Procope's and Roger Bonair-Agard's (both of whom are Trinidadian) continued influence on the space.

As I enter the space, I move quickly to talk with James Merenda posted in the back of the room; he is sitting behind a table overflowing with homemade chapbooks and ragged stray poems. When he has a moment, I pull my own ragged fragments of work from my back pockets to gain his advice on which poem to perform. Furthering my 'preparation phase' I ask another poet, one who is less a friend and more an artist I admire, for her advice. She reads both of my poems quickly and simply holds one up, looks back at me and says, "This is a damn good short poem", hands it back to me and heads back to the bar. This serves two purposes; most viscerally it mitigates some of my stress hearing approval of the work, but it also cements them as allies as I step into the liminal phase of performance.

From behind the mic, the room is a flurry of light chatter and expectant eyes. I glance to the back of the room and begin to read my poem. It is a short moment as I feel out each word. The ending reveals the ultimate function of the anecdote.

In this context, the scores are almost irrelevant to me. Rather, I am working within a different hierarchy. As I sift to the back of the room, I am congratulated by the friends I've already made, which signals the beginning of respect to be given by the rest of the community.

A close analysis of this poem, which is entitled, Shanice, should be revealing as to some of the aesthetic priorities at Louder Arts.

Shanice

I remember you as concussive
syllables
movements

rise of cheek muscle

Bopping Tupac
burning pasta
in the only pot I had.

They saunter
palms pressed as defiant deadbolt
hips unabashed

the crowbar of a collared throat,

“Slut”

Swing of teenage impulse,
fury
into right angle of cop's jaw

The irony:

“But, they don't have proof”

as white boy explains:

“It does not matter”

There are a few key aspects of this poem that are noteworthy. Firstly, it defies slam conventions in a number of ways: it is notably shorter than most poems nor does it follow the same arc (not providing the same “sensory codes” as other poems would). Given its length, the audience is not offered very much explicit context. Rather, this poem was an exercise in expressing a story completely in as few words as possible. It is nonetheless important to note that this work still engages with a traditional slam topic, which is to say it is engaging with a form of oppression and espousing a political point of view that is left of center. After my performance of “Shanice” other poets asked for the written copy of the poem. After a few readings, many came to appreciate this work. Louder Arts functions within an interesting space of contradiction insofar as entrance into the community is found through a balance of sub-cultural capital and traditional cultural capital. There are many more MFA candidates in the room at Louder Arts than one would expect in other venues. This is not to make the distinction

between spoken and page poetry akin to that between subculture and dominant culture, but rather that the aesthetic priorities of the space are constantly in conversation between these two forms.

Communities are porous and shifting groups. Their bounds become broken and fractured, their members drift apart. Those inside a community will be defined by those from whom they are separate. As problematic as the construction of community may be, it is a real construction in the daily lives of many of the New York City poets. Even after the process of entrance is complete, each member is constantly updating and renewing their public identity through new work they are producing and performing. While these performances are not as pivotal as the moment of initiation, each continues to refine and reflect the poets as they grow. Each facet of the community is held together through certain shared criteria of 'quality' and success. These shift from venue to venue, poet to poet, from each haphazardly chosen judge to judge. But, overall, despite the internal bickering, the feuds between poets, between venues, between styles, this remains a cohesive community.

2.

Points, Patriarchy and Paternalism

Any interrogation of patriarchy must first illuminate its pervasive and hegemonic nature. Patriarchy does not only manifest in domination and disrespect from male-bodied, male-identified individuals to female-bodied, female-identified individuals. Rather, moving beyond the individualizing politics of personal interaction, patriarchy informs and creates institutions that form and augment male and masculinist power. In no way does this perspective diminish the reality of violence in interpersonal dynamics. Ideally, understanding both individual and structural violence in concert and conversation can give a holistic understanding of patriarchy as it adapts and festers.

Within the New York City slam poetry community, patriarchy manifests on many levels. Some are overt in individual's actions: disrespect toward women and undermining women in power. Others are insidious and systemic: how power is cultivated and maintained, coupled with the core assumptions in the structural facets of the community and the genre. By and large, there are more men represented on national slam teams and more men who have reached the upper echelons of influence. While this is noteworthy, we must look at the structural roots to answer the question of how patriarchy functions.

This is not intended to be an overwhelmingly damning analysis of the slam community. While it would be foolish to paint the community as a place free of patriarchy, slam does offer an outlet, an arena and a possibility for contested space within our patriarchal world. Thus, the challenge of this chapter is to balance rigorous analysis with an understanding of the deeply effective anti-sexist work that happens within slam and is enabled by the form.

Further, at this juncture, my positionality bears brief repeating. Beyond my position as a white man coming from class privilege, which in no way should be down-played, is my position within the community that I am analyzing. My interpersonal relationships can often obscure as they illuminate, allowing me deeper insight into situations while simultaneously curtailing or directing my analysis. Further, this chapter has forced some necessary and painful self-reflection for me as a man constantly

struggling with his complicity in patriarchy. Despite my best efforts at honesty, I have enough self-awareness to know that I will fall short of my goal. I believe it best to offer this humbly and accept that self-reflection and analysis are never complete.

In the spirit of a systemic view of patriarchy, the first facet of the slam community that must be explored is the creation and maintenance of hierarchy. I believe it an oversimplification to argue that any hierarchy is patriarchal and vice-versa. It is not merely the existence of hierarchy but the way power functions within the scene that creates that hierarchy. Bell hooks eloquently explores the conflicted relationship that movements for women's liberation have had with 'power':

“In this society, power is commonly equated with domination and control over people or things. Women active in feminist movements have ambivalent responses to the issue of power. On the one hand, stressing women's powerlessness and condemning male exercise of power as domination, and on the other hand, they raise the banner of ‘women power,’ demanding equal rights” (hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* 1984,84).

This contradiction requires us to ask, how can a type of woman's power be carved outside of a patriarchal framework of domination? Given the competitive form of slam, one poet's victory would allow them to advance to another round, to a slam team or to national prominence. This victory requires the domination and silencing of another poet. Within this zero-sum framework, success equals domination.

This being said, while scores are the dominant mechanism to rise within the hierarchy, they are far from the only means. There are two inextricable mechanisms of achieving status: scoring well, and social connections fostered by respect for your work. At its core, the currency of power within the community is respect. That respect can be built from an artistic appreciation for a poet's work or from their ability to 'play the game'. Respect does come with material consequences. It is through these networks that poets gain access to feature slots as well as to opportunities outside the immediate realm of slam. As explored in chapter one, these systems are inevitably intertwined as a poet's network of allies can aid his or her scores. The degree of faith and worth placed in scores varies from venue to

venue and poet to poet. Since the judges are chosen deliberately for their lack of experience, often poets in the audience will disagree with the judges' scores. Depending on the circle and context, poets view the scoring either as 'simply a gimmick' or as central to the artistic medium. The relationship of many slam poets to scoring is a deeply conflicted one. Many poets say that the process of competition is a necessary evil to allow them to perform their work to consistent crowds and to keep poetry relevant. Raphael, a nationally renowned poet, said it well:

“I've never been on final stage (at the national poetry slam). I've never had an indie (individual) title, I've never won a grand slam championship for the 7 or 8 teams I've been on. I toured around the country. I have taught in hundreds of schools, dozens of institutional settings, I put myself through college doing it. I got a grants to do a play and got work-study while I was in college...I've gotten published, I'm publishing a book. I met some of the best friends of my life, I met my wife, I've been rejuvenated as an artist consistently” (Raphael 2011).

Raphael was able to accomplish these things not through the power wrought by his ability to score but rather through the respect he and his work garnered in the community. His social power then translated into material benefit and that benefit in turn builds his social power and status within the community. These different axes of power are supported by two contradictory and co-existing views of slam, that winning slams is a path to a viable career vs. that slam is a mechanism for further projects outside of slam. Despite a generally-held perception of scoring poems as 'a game', the implications and effects of this game are still debated. To achieve the benefits he has, Raphael had to have some ability to score well. He glosses over the point of, “7 or 8 teams” to highlight other aspects of his career. However, it is impossible to know how these teams and his success gave him exposure that led to these larger accomplishments.

While the hierarchical axis of 'respect' is not as directly related to dominance as victory within a zero-sum competition, it is not free from dynamics of patriarchy. Firstly, it is impossible to fully untangle 'respect' from 'victory'. While not wholly synonymous, they are connected. Further, as will be explored later in depth, the distribution of 'respect' comes with its patriarchal bias as well. Men are able

to access a wider variety of subject matter, rewarded more highly for engaging with that subject matter and more often able to excel.

How can this hierarchy and competition exist within a community that prides itself on mutual support and a loving environment? In order to accomplish such a feat, we poets turn to our most potent tool: metaphor. There is an overarching rhetoric of 'family' within the slam community. This comes with myriad expressions and implications. This metaphor is employed at specific moments often with specific aims. The concept of family is commonly heard when the community is healing from a loss, as a mechanism to launch an internal critique and as a means of explaining internal hierarchies while maintaining the tones of love and camaraderie. At poetry slam nationals, the host on final stage evoked 'our family' when asking for a moment of silence for a poet who recently had passed. Many of the essential conflicts of slam arise from the contradiction of a competitive art form with the intense connections held among poets who, in a complex, interconnected web, constitute the community. The rhetoric of family seeks to allow these facets to co-exist.

To those familiar with the family from the position of social critique, it may seem an odd institution to evoke as a fig-leaf for hierarchy. Indeed, there is a wealth of scholarship that dislodges “the family” from its ahistorical, idealized position to situate it as a historically constructed institution dedicated to the control of bodies and labor. The 'traditional' or hegemonic family is defined by a male 'head' engaged in 'productive' labor outside the home to provide for the children and the subordinated wife engaged in domestic labor (Engels 1884). This domestic labor was traded for the protection, both material and physical, of the male head of the household, “Thus, male household authority would appear to be rooted in its provision of protection from institutionalized male violence” (Brown 1992, 199). The protective role of the family, even as it is internally oppressive, is essential in understanding how the rhetoric is employed within the slam poetry scene. As the competitive frame of slam can be understood as an expression of competing claims to patriarchal power, this competitive frame would be

the institutionalized violence Brown explores. The family protects the individual from this violence even as it is formed out of that same violence. Family as protector softens the constant churn of competition which is the engine for the slam scene.

While I do believe it is fair to categorize the competition of slam as an expression of patriarchal values and power, it would be deeply unfair and misleading to oversimplify slam into only that competition. Further, there is insight to be found in a definition of agency which can acknowledge both societal constraints and power within those constraints (Mahmood 2005). Within the framework of slam, there are many women rising to roles of power and working tirelessly, and with some success, to attack and undermine patriarchy.

Indeed, the period of my fieldwork offered an intriguing time for the New York City slam scene when the slam masters of the three major venues were all women. Generally speaking, slam masters exert influence by bringing featured poets to their venue, setting the tone for their slam series, sometimes hosting, coordinating and coaching teams once formed and being involved in behind-the-scenes logistics. Being a featured poet is often the goal of poets beyond the immediate victory within a slam. Thus, to varying degrees, slam masters control markers of success for other poets. Each venue has its own governing structure which amplifies or mitigates the power of the slam master. In the case of the Nuyorican, Mahogany Browne has near absolute power over who can enter the space, featured poets, and who competes against whom in run-offs. However, Ashley at Bowery, and Rebecca at Louder Arts (Rebecca was slam master for the duration of my fieldwork but is no longer) work within committee structures where others have input into decision making. Each of the slam masters exerts power in her own way, as Ashley explained,

“Historically in the last few years the venues have been run by women...in NYC's most successful string of years in terms of the National Poetry Slam. At the same time, we all go about it so differently. When Mo (Mahogany Brown) says, ‘Do Push ups,’ You're actually gonna have to do push ups, she's not fucking around. When Rachel (McKibbens, former slam master of Louder Arts) says, ‘No, this poem is not going to nationals’, you just don't argue. It's not

going to nationals. I guess I would say they're mothering in that way, they're just like, No, Mom's rule is the last rule. Period” (Ashley 2011)

Two things immediately require analysis in Ashley's description. The first is the value placed on success at the nation poetry slam. Ashley quickly validates women's leadership roles by affirming their ability to lead teams to victory. Ultimately, results are fundamentally valued. Second, Ashley describes Mahogany Brown's and Rachel McKibbens' power in maternal terms. It is interesting that it is only through maternal power that female authority can be conceived and legitimized/justified. The role of the 'nurturer' plays out in their work as coach, an essentially conflicted role between 'nurturing' poets to produce work but then ranking that work and inevitably silencing some. Coding this power in 'maternal terms' achieves two things; it allows for a way to understand female power within a patriarchal framework and obscures the power relationships at play returning to essential aspect of the over-arching metaphor of family.

Speaking more generally, Ashley said, “I tend to highlight female voices because, in my opinion, women tend to shy away from slam, more than men do... Women, if they try it and don't do well, they'll be like, hmmm, I'll wait...” (Ashley 2011). It is clear that Ashley sees sexism working through the slam community and influencing women's participation in it. Her comments are also tied to her own experience of feeling intimidated as a woman by slam and hesitant to join the competition (Ashley 2011).

Even after rising to her position of influence and power within New York City slam, both in terms of respect for her poetics as well as her official position as slam master, Ashley still dealt with disrespect from male members of the community,

“There is a constant battle with poets from across the United States... [They] want to feature at The Bowery Poetry Club. I have been slam master for six years. People still contact Anderson, or they talk to Simon now that Simon is hosting. The slam master is the perceived CEO, who couldn't possibly be a woman. I know it happens to Mo all the time, it happens to Rebecca all the time, people go to Raphael or they go to Nate and not the people who actually do the work. That gets me really hyped up” (Ashley 2011)

In this moment it feels appropriate to defer to Ashley's analysis: still inevitably within a society defined by males in leadership roles, it is difficult for poets to conceive of female leaders. Even with slam's claims to be an alternative space, this patriarchal conception of power remains.

Raphael, spoke about this as well,

“I've never been in a curatorial or management position at Louder Arts.(...) There was a month where I got like three requests for features for poets and was included on some bulk e-mails back and forth between people [that] were addressed to the management at Louder Arts. My wife is curator and slam master of Louder Arts” (Raphael 2011).

Again, Raphael's analysis of the situation is informative,

“...There is an automatic assumption that a woman cannot be in a position of authority... she has to be co-signed on by her also-in-authority companion” (Raphael 2011). Raphael echoes Ashley's analysis that society-wide assumptions do not simply vanish as poets enter the left-leaning slam scene. Rather, these assumptions are built through years of conditioning from a patriarchal society and are not easily uprooted.

Raphael goes on to analyze his response to these assumptions and the further revelation they offer. “When I made a Facebook post about it, I got all sorts of dap (respect) for calling shit out. If Em had done that people would be like, 'why are you being so sensitive, why are you being so bitchy, it's because Raphael's been around’” (Raphael 2011). In Raphael anecdote, his analysis of the response is telling. Raphael is awarded for his self-awareness and for attempting to shed some of the power that his male privilege has given him. Ironically, the act of attempting to critique the situation elevates Raphael's influence as he is seen as insightful and therefore worthy of his position. Indeed, the double standard of respect toward dissent and critique is common in the community, and is a larger theme that will be explored later in this chapter.

Raphael's analysis of the perceived need for a male 'co-signer' on female authority applies to Mahogany Browne's position: her male romantic and logistical partner, Nate often receives e-mails to book gigs. While Nate is the host of the Wednesday Night slam at the Nuyorican and works closely

with Mahogany, he is nonetheless not the authority on booking features. But, deference to male leadership runs deep and he is still regarded as such.

The disregard and disrespect for a female slam master's authority ranges beyond vying for features spots. Mahogany describes a moment early in her coaching career when, “I had to drop two people, they were like sexist assholes. Like, 'I'm not listening to you'...basically said it. Like, 'What're you gonna do? Kick me off?' and I was, like, actually yes” (Browne 2011). The misogyny seems apparent, abundant and without remorse.

In a dramatic anecdote, Ashley described being yelled at for attempting to exert authority over a poet.

“A young slammer, came in with all his buddies, and he was seated next to a judge, and I didn't notice it, but someone else... pointed it out....
I said 'Are you friends with that person?' He instantly became outrageously irate... He started screaming at me, 'Who the fuck are you to accuse me, I've never cheated at anything in my life.' And I immediately went into calm down mode, 'I'm not accusing you of anything, I'm asking you, because if you had it's my job to remove you or remove the judge and you're not answering me you're just yelling at me.' He kept losing his shit, he cursed me, finally other people came up, he calmed down, we ended on good terms, he left. (I learned) from the person who had the conversation with the judge that the judge did know him. So... so that was alright, chalk that up to I'm gonna keep my eye on you now. Twenty minutes later he comes storming back in on tirade number two. He was a young, Italian American male and told us that we were prejudiced against him because he was poor, nothing to do with the conversation. He says, 'I paid 7 dollars to get in here and you treat me like this'” (Ashley 2011).

Again, Ashley's analysis is instructive. “I started to realize in the following days.... He would have instantly been defused just by the fact that a man was asking him a question. He thought I was just little score keeper girl at the back of the room” (Ashley 2011). This whole anecdote further speaks to the deeply held and conditioned belief that women cannot be in positions of authority. The poet in the anecdote's ferocious response to the suggestion of cheating further suggests a resistance to any challenge to his male authority by a woman.

The work of slam masters further blurs the distinction between domestic and public labor. When I spoke with Ashley and Mahogany Browne, both voiced their frustration at having their labor be

under-appreciated. Both are not paid for their work and dedicate lots of time to the background logistical details that are required for a slam series to run. This categorization as domestic labor becomes blurry when considering that it is through this logistical work that much of their power is forged; because they are doing the accounting to book features, they have sway on who will come perform. Thus, the work is invisible but the power gained from the work is hyper-visible.

For some people, the misogyny is made invisible within the slam community. Partly this is from the perception that, since women are in bureaucratic positions of power, women as a whole are empowered within the community. This perception of power as being simply which bodies are in charge is dangerously narrow. Even as women occupy positions of power, they are still doing so within a patriarchal structure. During our interview Jackson said, “There is a great, powerful feminist majority in slam. Especially in NYC where all the slam masters are women” (Jackson 2011). Jackson expresses a frustration on a number of occasions about responses to perceived misogyny. “Misogyny is one we'll see, sometimes accurately, sometimes really not with a lot of witch-trial-like behavior by the community. ...I think we're quick to make harsh decisions in this community because of our political leanings” (Jackson 2011). Beyond the obvious ways in which Jackson's male privilege may blind him to the continuation of misogyny, what is most interesting is his conception of the community as insulated from the outside world. In this context, the community's 'alternative' status is defined by its political ideas. Jackson's focus on 'our political leanings' seems to indicate he sees a bias toward attacking or victimizing historically powerful groups as a function of a leftist orientation. In Jackson's mind, there are powerful women and their allies in slam who can (and do) overzealously defend against misogyny. While these people are not exclusively women, he does seem to focus on the role of women in 'slander' against men. This perception is inextricable from his role in two high-profile cases of allegedly abusive relationships within the community. This is a flip in a narrative of oppression, that the historical oppressor is sometimes oppressed by the overzealous defensive actions of the oppressed.

In another interview, Joseph, a white male poet who has seen success across venues in New York, was equally emphatic. “It (misogyny) happens, but the poets don't fucking stand for it...the people who do it are not a part of this community...when it comes to misogyny people call each other out. (Joseph 2011) Joseph seemed to conceive of the slam community as a cohesive and bounded entity, as can be seen by understanding that some people are actively ostracized for their behavior. While he gives the impression that he would disagree with Jackson’s view that the response to misogyny is overzealous, instead he sees a self-correcting mechanism that is effective. Further, the role of matriarchs is still seen as central. “Poetry slam is dominated by men around the country. That is less true in this city, and I think that has to do with that for the last six years all our slam masters have been women” (Joseph 2011).

Beyond the individual acts of aggression that define patriarchy, we must peel back this superficial analysis to examine how power is enacted from an institutional level. This interrogation is born out of a few key conversations I had over the course of my fieldwork. Speaking primarily with female poets, when the discussion came to issues of patriarchy within the scene, the broader question arose of why men dominated the scene. The identification of female leaders' power as maternal required the question of how power exists that is paternal and if women could enact masculinist power as well as men. These conversations ended a myriad of ways, some overwhelmed with the prospect of disconnecting men from masculinist power while others found the idea helpful in explaining many of the structures around them.

To facilitate this analysis, it is useful to employ another analogy of an institution dedicated to control, 'The State.' Wendy Brown's “Finding the Man in the State” offers insight into the conflicted relationship many feminist movements have had with 'power' and particularly state power. Brown posits that the state enacts 'masculinist power' through the use of violence as well as paternalistic power through social service provision. Just as masculinist power is multi-faceted, so is the power of the state.

With the essential caveat of acknowledging massive differences in scale, the analogy of venue to state is one that holds up remarkably well. Both institutions hold the monopoly on the legitimate use of force; the state through its military and police, the venue through its ability to ban members of the community if they are felt to have transgressed. Both go to war with each other; between venues this has recently been constrained to the arena of slam competitions. The battle reverberates, though, with consequences beyond the bout or arena. Each venue establishes its own bureaucratic system for entrance into its team. Each venue determines and controls the basic structural tenets of entrance into its team. While noticeably different from the maintenance of welfare, venues do control access to feature slots which translate into financial gain. Further, much like the state, venues are not monolithic entities with singular agendas: “Any attempt to reduce or define state power as such... obscures that, for example, social workers, the Pentagon, and the police are not simply different faces of the state in woman's life but different kinds of power” (Brown 1992). This necessity rings true with venues as well; teams are separate entities from logistical workings which are in turn, separate from allocating feature slots. Though there may be overlap between people in these roles, each part functions differently.

Central, however, is disconnecting masculinist power from male bodies. “the elements of the state identifiable as masculinist correspond not to some property contained within man but to the conventions of power and privilege constitutive of gender within an order of male dominance” (Brown 1992,188). The implications are clear, that even without males in the positions of power, such as in the case of female slam masters, institutions can still enact masculinist forms of power.

However, so as not to let the implications of Brown's argument and my analogy run wild, there are a few points that need to be made. First, while I am deeply sympathetic toward Brown's point vis-a-vis the state, the difference in scale may allow for some cracks in masculinist power emanating from venues. While the impact of institutional culture upon the individuals, either as subjects or objects, is vast, it is dangerous to paint that culture as all-encompassing and to allow no space for agency. Within

the small frame of a venue, resistance may be more possible. A moment for this fissure is in the 'bureaucratic power' of the venue. Rather than an expression of “regimes of predictability, calculability and control” (Brown 1992, 201) as in the state the haphazard nature of slam means these bureaucratic systems cannot be understood as data-driven and calculating as those of the state. While a venue’s tone may influence the values and preferences of the audience it pulls, it is by no means creating 'predictable' results. If paternalistic power is defined as a providing power which denies agency, which transforms people from subjects to objects within a calculated system, then the realm of maternalistic power could therefore be that which provides and promotes agency. Within the fluidity of slam, the role of mentor often works to provide shelter and promote a poet's own work. Thus, there is a space to carve out a 'matriarchal' type of power. I am wary of a theoretical framework which would strip women of agency, and therefore belittle their power, even after they have overcome many barriers to ascend to their positions. Though it may be within a flawed system, these issues require ambiguities and cannot but fully explained in terms of outside theory.

An anecdote on Mahogany Brown's role is instructive. In conjunction with her position as Slam Master, Mahogany is an active voice for women's empowerment within the scene. She published an anthology, “His Rib”, featuring only female poets and is often vocal on issues of gender and racial oppression. Given her many roles, women often e-mail her asking her to deal with a particular man who is exerting male privilege in a way deemed destructive that makes other members of the community feel uncomfortable. Mahogany's response to this was that unless the poets themselves individually had experience with an issue, she could not help remedy it. But, in some limited ways, she could speak to the offending man about his behavior. This attempt at internal recourse raises some questions: Are female members of the community reaching out to Mahogany in an attempt to seek paternalistic-type protection? Does Mahogany's response constitute paternalism? Or, would this instead be an example of communal empowerment and networks of support being built among women? These

questions come with no easy answers; rather they must begin a process of ongoing self-reflection.

Co-Opting of Women's stories:

In a competitive form in which evocative subject matter often leads to quantitative and eventually material gain, it is no surprise that stories of oppression are traded at a premium. The merits of slam poetry as a political project are debatable, but I would argue that what slam poetry does impressively well is honor stories of oppression. Within our society it has become a trope of dismissal, often from the mouths of the powerful, to say that talking about systemic oppression reinforces systemic oppression. Therefore, to move forward as a society we must stop talking about these issues. This argument is often used to silence oppressed voices that speak about their own experiences and that try to identify otherwise invisible oppression so it can be dismantled.

In honoring these stories, slam does offer a space for women's voices. In the hegemonic societal discourse, women's stories and experiences are often ignored, belittled and written off. As Wendy Brown explains, “Dominant discourse renders others silent or freakish in speech by inscribing point-of-viewless in their terms of analysis and adjudications of value” (Brown 1992, 188). Slam combats this trend in so far as it values personal stories and contextualizing those experiences into a larger political narrative. As was explored in chapter 1, stories of oppression and liberation voiced from an authentic place of anger or survival are powerful. In some ways, this is a deeply positive effect of the form. Much of the catharsis from performance comes from the feeling of decisively being heard. On a personal level, many poets have spoken with me about the feeling of power and voice they first grasped by being on stage. This feeling of validation on stage can be a central moment of empowerment. But if there is going to be any meaningful systemic change, the voices of oppressed people must be heard.

This apparent shift in the otherwise pervasive patriarchy leaves members of the dominant group without authentic access to these stories. In a move that reinforces damaging dynamics, poets sometime

seize those stories of oppression in a problematic way. As Raphael put it, “One of the most hilarious expressions of white privilege ... is a white (male) poet who doesn't feel they get good enough scores bitching that they wish they were black, or openly gay, or female because they feel like they'd be more successful in slam” (Raphael 2011). This reaction is one that I observed a few times during my field work. In the very brief semi-reversal of power roles, poets coming from privilege wish they could access the sub-cultural capital or authenticity that speaking from an oppressed person's point of view would afford them. However, As Raphael goes on to point out, “yeah, you wish you were black until you needed to get a bank loan or drive anywhere. You wish you were gay until you need to hold hands with the person you love in public” (Raphael 2011). It is clear that the hope of accessing this form of power in the short-term is inevitably divorced from a visceral and human understanding of how that power plays out in larger systems and how it structurally disadvantages some.

Questions of appropriation result in a constant debate about the shifting boundary of “authenticity”. Given the presence of the 'true author' on stage and the intimacy of live performance, unless otherwise specified, it is often assumed that the “I” spoken in a poem correlates to the body speaking. As Ashley puts it, “Because we don't walk around saying we're actors, we're poets.”(Ashley 2011) By no means are these bounds of authorship, authenticity and access universally recognized. Perceptions of which stories or experiences are “appropriate” to tell are as varied as poets. In my mind, each poem must be examined individually. Some poems strike me as clearly exploitative, while others could, depending on the poet's position vis-a-vis the poem, may be an authentic expression of pain or longing.

The most common transgression of authenticity that was discussed with me was the co-opting of women's stories by men. While the definition of 'women's stories' is by no means unyielding, for this purpose, these stories will be defined as those that portray the story of a woman from the point of view of someone who is not a woman. Miranda discusses this practice, “I'm watching a man up there telling

a really graphic story about rape saying, 'I'm a woman for this poem right now and I'm being raped right now and here are all the graphic details'" (Miranda 2011). From the onset, there are many deeply problematic aspects of this common practice. Taken outside of the competitive framework of slam, this type of representation by the dominant group of the subaltern group is rife with representational pitfalls. As Gatratri Spivak explores in her seminal work, "Can the Sub-Altern Speak", "With no possibility of nostalgia for that lost origin, the historian must suspend (as far as possible) the clamor of his or her own consciousness, so that the elaboration of the insurgency, packaged with an insurgent-consciousness, does not turn into an 'object of investigation' or, worse yet, a model for imitation" (Spivak 1988, 5). In this warning, Spivak discusses the barriers to understanding a subaltern from a historical perspective. Within the context of slam, the boundary is not temporal but rather experiential; it is effectively impossible for someone from the dominant position to understand the struggle or 'insurgency' of someone in a subaltern position. Further, Spivak's call to "suspend the clamor" must be met with a degree of self-awareness on the part of the dominant group that there are simply some types of knowledge that we cannot access. The example Miranda provides of a man 'mimicking' an experience of rape is exploitative and turns a human experience into a grotesque 'object of investigation'. Understood within the competitive context of slam the exploitative benefit becomes clear; these stories of trauma, which serve to simultaneously provide the poet with emotionally evocative subject matter as well as to paint the poet as sensitive, tend to be rewarded by audience members and in scores.

Beyond these pitfalls, Miranda goes on to explain some of the further consequences and implications of this type of work, "I am a sexual abuse survivor ... I feel like it's cheapened by anyone that would think that they can sit there in their sick heads and put together a story.... I'm not gonna be re-victimized by anyone else's work. " (Miranda, 2011). At its core, men using the stories of sexual abuse of women to score points seems antithetical to anti-sexist work as it recreates power dynamics as

to whose voices and versions of reality are heard. Even laced with the best intentions of illuminating pervasive violence, when men speak on behalf of women or as violated women it only reinforces masculinist power structures. Again, Wendy Brown's framework is instructive; I believe this can be understood as paternalistic violence. Under the veneer of caring or aid, male poets seize women's voices in two key ways. First, women are silenced through the appropriation of the story. Second, in a competitive form where success literally translates into more opportunities to speak, and failure translates into silence, this type of work silences female opponents. This can be categorized as paternalistic as it strips away agency in the guise of aid.

Further, even as Miranda listened to a male poet attempting to aid the struggle against sexual violence, she felt 're-victimized'. At best, this is a deeply ignorant attempt at speaking to sexual violence that accidentally triggers a survivor, and at worst it is an exploitation of a horrific story for material gain. In the often publicly professed struggle to build 'safe spaces' out of slam venues for survivors of many types of trauma, I believe it is important to think about the potential risk of triggering survivors. In some cases, such as that explored above, there is the possibly clear transgression and a poet is simply performing something inappropriately outside of their experience. However, it is conceivable that such a poem could be a necessary healing process after the rape of a loved one or in dealing with rape oneself (particularly acknowledging the often-ignored existence of male rape).

This becomes far more complicated when dealing with a range of poets who engage with traumatic material, many of whom are talking about their own experiences. This would seem to pit the two interests, of cultivating liberated poets and of building safe spaces, against each other. On the one hand, poets should be able to access a full range of artistic expression, particularly if a survivor is using poetry as a mechanism for healing. On the other hand, the barrage of traumatic imagery could potentially make spaces unsafe for survivors of a variety of types of trauma. This being said, the

psychological process of triggering is often obtuse and non-linear, and thus, trigger warnings are often ineffective. Therefore, attempts to regulate poetic content could potentially impede the healing process without cultivating safer spaces.

The appropriation of women's stories by men comes with material benefits for male poets. Michaela, a nationally accomplished poet and member of the 2010 Nuyorican Slam team, also spoke about men using women's stories to gain points and power in the slam community. "Poems about other women getting raped...that's not your fucking story. Men have been rewarded on a point level, and it's become a gimmick...to do a poem about female oppression to get points. And it's disgusting and offensive. There was a night that Nate counted how many times he (Sandor Anglesey) used the word vagina and it was 13 times. He was pointing to his crotch for vagina imagery." (Michaela 2011) She went on to describe a situation in which Sandor Anglesey's use of women's stories outscored her speaking about her own experiences,

"I slammed against him in a semi-final in 2010, and he was doing this (telling women's stories)... I had planned to do a poem about my eating disorder I had for 10 years and being recovered...a guy gets up before me and he does a poem about a girl who had anorexia... There are two ways to do a poem like that; one is to be telling a story of someone else's pain so that people can connect to you and hear that story through you and another to do it 'look at how good I am, I know this poem or I know this story, isn't this awful, award me for doing it'. I felt he was doing the former. He was just sharing the story that really upset him about someone he loved. Strategically, you don't do an eating disorder poem after an eating disorder poem unless you can do one better...and I knew I could do it better. So I step on stage crying...I cry through the poem,I got a standing ovation, high score of the night, and suddenly I have a shot of beating Sandor Anglesey. He gets up, does his poem (employing vagina imagery, about a woman's struggle). At the very end without missing a beat, he looks at me, puts his right hand on his chest, looks back at the audience -- and the judges rewarded him for acknowledging my poem and for being a good dude... He won the semi-final."

There are a few striking aspects of Michaela's anecdote. To begin, that Sandor Anglesey can outscore Michaela and go on to win the semi-final by leveraging his position as a 'sensitive, good guy' to the judges speaks to one of the ways the search for a progressive community can backfire. His sensitivity is rewarded because a man who is receptive to women's issues is so rare in larger society.

This perpetuates the larger power dynamics that continue to belittle women telling their own stories. Further, it is clear that Michaela is consciously operating within the competitive framework. In no way is this meant to undermine her interpretation of the misogyny at play. However, as per the rules of the game, she was also using her bid toward authenticity and emotional honesty for material gain. This anecdote is emblematic of the dilemma in a number of core ways; the novelty of a man speaking sensitively to a woman's struggle trumps the now 'cliché' image of a woman speaking about her own experience. Cognizant of the essentialist pitfalls of ascribing characteristics to gender, returning to Wendy Brown's analysis explains how society puts women in a position of "point-of-viewlessness". Male poets can exploit their male privilege, which enables them to speak 'authentically' about another's struggle, while simultaneously gaining public credit for subverting a hegemonic uncaring masculinity. Again, the practical result of this phenomenon is that it silences female poets within the form.

Further, the boundary that Michaela describes between 'so that people can connect to you and hear that pain through you' versus 'Look at how good I am' is porous and blurry. Many poets disagree among themselves about which poems are honest expressions and which are choreographed to appear as such. These constantly shifting lines of authenticity affect many aspects of the sport of self-expression.

A poem by Oveous Maximus offers a worthwhile case study to explore the issues of representation. His work, "Salcedos Breakdown" engages with issues of men catcalling women on the street.

True story:

Me and my mama was walking down the street
moving in rhythm through NYC concrete and
me and my mama
and we was happy
until this brother decide he could whistle at my mommy

So I turned to the brother and said

“yo son, we need to speak”
matter of fact you need to listen
and I need to speak
so let me break this shit down for you
My name is
oveos-O to the maximums breakdown
O to the v and e which basically means female god
and you know a brother with a name like female god ain't playing
i'm saying even god is a she
so let me break some shit down for you

a woman's cycle, lasts about six days
One for every day in the bible it took to create this earth
and that's why I can't stand these brothers who dis-respect the her and she in we
when we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for a woman who carried us

9 months In her womb and how easily we forget to bow to her
I'm just trying to break this shit down for you

I'm sick of these pussycats wearing their FUBU
no clue ever having standing on the corner of the block
whistling for catcalls that don't ever work, my brother.

Why don't you get some real work for a change,
music and video games have replaced your education
your playstation credits ain't gonna earn you no diploma.

Misleading are the images you fed your eyes
so go find her, find her a new light, breathe her a new hope, paint her a new eyes until you realize her
true worth

I'm saying I'm not the most perfect man on the planet earth
but I was raised by a woman who reminds me to keep trying
and I'd be lying if I said I never used the B word in vain

my momma always told me there is room for change to rearrange the frame
and keep the reputation in my goddamn name, oviveo, female god,

calling out any of these suckas,
who wanna whistle at girls on the corner,
when you need a personal lecture
come see me
I'll be more than happy
to break this shit down for you

(Maximus 2010)³

There are a number of problematic interlocked dynamics at play within this work. To begin, the poet begins the story walking with his mother but she remains a voiceless object throughout the work.

Rather than letting her speak, his intense defense of her implies that his defense is necessary for her protection. She is employed as a mechanism to justify his righteous indignation. His act of speaking for his mother, even in her defense against a male aggressor, cannot be understood as empowerment for women who remain dependent upon protection and objects for male use and consumption.

Indeed, he is engaging heavily with the archetype of “Woman as Madonna.” This can be clearly seen in his repetition of his belief in a female god. When he writes, “a woman's cycle, lasts about six days/One for every day in the bible it took to create this earth” he is clearly evoking women as divine. The conception of Woman as Madonna must be understood in connection with its converse, woman as whore. This harsh and fiercely enforced dichotomy only serves to restrict women's actions and bodies. Not only do his actions serve to 'protect' his mother from this man catcalling, but they also keep her from being sexual in anyway. In this way, he can maintain her 'Madonna' status which is framed as a defense of purity but actually is an act of control. Further, by using his name as proof of his belief in a female god, he is equating himself with that divine 'her.' It is worth noting that Oveous Maximus is not his given name but a stage name he adopted.

To the poet's credit, this work is directed at other men and could potentially be understood as an anti-sexist bystander intervention. The pitfall in this interpretation is revealed in the very cursory way in which he engages with his own potential for complicity in patriarchal power, “I'm saying I'm not the most perfect man on the planet earth/but I was raised by a woman who reminds me to keep trying/and I'd be lying if I said I never used the B word in vain.” This admission feels so minor that it is overshadowed by the larger functioning of the poem. Further, he almost immediately returns to the

³ Taken from video material. Line breaks and stanzas interpreted from vocal cues.

refrain of, “and keep the reputation in my goddamn name, oviveo, female god” again asserting his relation to the female god he claims to worship.

The centrality of men's power is made clear through the lines, “so go find her, find her a new light, breathe her a new hope, paint her a new eyes until you realize her true worth” That it would be within men's power to “breathe her a new hope, paint her a new eyes” undermines his claim to worshipping a female god. Indeed, that degree of power to grant breath and hope can only be conceived of as existential. That a woman's power would be found in a man “realizing her true worth” re-enforces male power.

Further, this poem relies on dangerous racially coded language to demonize the unseen man whistling. It is important to note that Oveous Maximus is Dominican and the refrain of “my brother” seems to imply that he is speaking to another man of color. The lines “Why don't you get some real work for a change/music and video games have replaced your education/your play station credits ain't gonna earn you no diploma” seem to dangerously reinforce white supremacist stereotypes of men of color as lazy. Further, this aids the dangerous narrative that sexual assault is primarily an issue among people of color and people of lower socio-economic status. This narrative serves to make invisible a wide range of sexual assault that happens across society as well as recapitulate the dangerous narrative of the 'black brute'. The image of the 'black brute', or the black man who is dangerous in both his physical presence and sexuality, is closely tied with a violent history of lynching and white supremacist violence. Overall, while potentially rooted in good intentions, this poem serves to recapitulate dangerous dynamics of power.

Oveous Maximus' poem is problematic as his voice eclipses that of his mother, the directly affected party. This raises the question: is there a way for a male poet to enable a woman's voice through his work? Jon Sands' popular poem *On the Bus in Queens* offers an insightful case:

On the Bus in Queens

She tells me, *The MTA is mafia. People don't keep their receipts on them metro cards. Stupids. Then the card don't work, and whadyou got? She's speaking my language right now. Mah card don't work, right? I just tell the booth lady or whatever, and each time they give you this envelope, right? "We're sorry your card don't work and shit; here's the form you got to mail." But I don't mail the form, right? 'Cause they let you go through! Tricky though, right? 'Cause you got to remember who you hit already. I'm not walkin' ten blocks to the next station. In this neighborhood? Ha! So I flip the game on 'em, right? I gotta pull my hair up like this, or buy some sunglasses, or tawk layeek thees. I tell 'em "Iyeem frum Eengland eynd mayh cawrd iss browkeen. Iyee juust 'ate Ahmeareekah."* And the booth lady's like, "Aww, I'm sorry you're having a bad visit." 'Cause I got my bag wit' me and shit, right? And I can't be like, "Don't feel bad booth lady. I'm just tryna get on the train." 'Cause I'm tryna get on the train, right? These cards here are just too expensive. I gotta ask my husband for money for more metros, but he don't do shit. He just smokes weed. Like, that's the only shit he do. He's Dominican. He tells me his parents are wiring him money, but then he just smokes weed! People think that's just some heroin shit. You can be addicted to weed. Like, I've never seen anyone have more reasons to smoke. He'll be like, "I gotta smoke," and I'm like, "Why?" and he's like, "'Cause you just woke me up!" "This dude just made me so mad, I gotta smoke." "That girl's wearin' jeans, I gotta smoke." "Spring Break, I gotta smoke." And he ain't even in school! It wasn't enough a while ago, he started fuckin' wit' cocaine. I said,

“You can’t do that in this house. Not around our beautiful daughter.” Her name is Jaquelah. He’s better on that shit now, and I love him. People tell me, “Why you ain’t leave him when you know he ain’t shit?” It ain’t that they wrong, it’s jus’ they don’t know. You can be right and not know at the same time, right? You see that dude screamin’ in the front up there? She whispers, It’s crack. He’s from my old neighborhood. Always in public decreein’ some shit. He needs to decree some shit on his time. Stop decreein’ shit on my time. It’s two o’clock, I got a place to be. My husband’s twenty-five and don’t do shit. I likes ‘em young though, right? I’m a cougar. Or like a cougarah. Can’t fuck with the old ones, smellin’ like Ben-Gay and shit. Ha! I needs ‘em with that stamina. You gettin’ on that train? That train ride so long you get off a year older than you got on. Better have four books or some shit. No train. Not for me. Not Thursdays. I’ll see you later though, baby. And I say, “Yo, you know you’re a poet, right?” I think she thought I said prophet. I know that’s true! I know that.

(Sands, *On The Bus in Queens* 2010)

To begin analysis of this poem, it is important to note that the performance employs the use of a stylized voice for all the italicized text. Read from a sympathetic point-of-view, this poem could function as a celebration of the mundane moments of wisdom from often-ignored sources. By taking this woman's moment of spoken word simply on a bus and positioning it as a poem, it seeks to value her perspective.

However, if this poem is understood within the context of white supremacy and patriarchy, the power dynamic at play is inescapable. While this poem does allow this woman to speak, she is given

value because her words are deemed worthy of poetry by Jon Sands, the white male poet, and because they are literally spoken from his mouth. This intensely echoes Spivak's warning against turning the subaltern into an object for mimicry (Spivak 1988). That Sands uses a stylized voice and depicts her in speaking in Ebonics evokes the representation of Black people within minstrelsy. While this work is explicitly intended to validate her words, it ends up reinforcing his power as final arbiter of value.

Further, this representation evokes the idea articulated by Spike Lee of “The Magical Negro” (Kempley 2003). Specifically referring to representations of black characters in film, Lee identifies the ways that black characters are given wisdom, often related to a closeness to nature or mystical power, so as to aid the white protagonists in their journey. This nameless woman speaking in Sands' poem fits the archetype well; she suddenly appears to offer wisdom while on a journey of some kind. Her value is primarily in relation to her usefulness to the poet. This is particularly true when considering the ways that Sands is using her story toward material gain within slam.

The problematic nature of these poems is made especially clear when juxtaposed against a poem by a woman representing herself and her struggle. Further, it would be ironic to not include any women speaking through their poetry in this work. Ashley's poem entitled Communion offers a beautiful example.

Communion

I know a boy who said his girlfriend's body
was a crime scene

Dad,
my body is a crime scene.

my body is lint and gasoline and matchstick
my body is a brush fire, it's ticking dad,
a slow alarm, I have rain boots, lots of them, it isn't raining anymore,
the words are coming back dad
the way they fit and jump in the mouth
I want ice cream and long letters
I wanna read long love letters
but I don't think he loves me

I think I'm used up
the grit under his nails
the girl who looks good in pictures
I don't think he loves me

I think he broke me dad
I think I drink too much and it's because they broke me
I heard about two girls recently
two women crushed like cherries in a boy's jaw

it opened me dad
my body is melted wax it is ripe and stink and bent it is a mistake
I walk like an apology

I don't hate men dad, I don't
I want a washing machine, I want someone else to do the dishes
someone to walk the dog

I have a hornet in my head dad
a hornet
she's an angry bitch
she hurls herself against my skull
she stings and stings
I know I don't make sense dad
I'm a sick girl
a crazy wishbone

I have razors under my tongue
I'm sorry I cut you dad
I am so, so sorry

I gave you a card for father's day once,
it said you were my hero
you are
your laugh is a thunderclap
you love like surgery dad
I think they broke me dad
I can't erase their faces

I want to swim dad
you remember when I used to play hopscotch
my feet are hot
the bottoms of my feet are scorched sand
my body is a slug, a mob of sticky wet rot no one touches me anymore because I'm rot because my
body is a spill
noone wants to clean up
They cracked me open dad
I know you don't want to hear about it

you don't want to hear how they scissored me
how they gnawed me like raw meat
no one wants to hear how they made me drink lemon juice
how they kicked the dog
how they upturned the furniture
no one wants to hear how my skin turned to a dark thick of purple and black and lead

I watch the homeless a lot dad
I watched a man with a cup of coins and chips of skin carved out of his face
he had freckles
he needs medicine dad
he needs to stop the hornet
my body is a hive

I am red ants and jelly fish a yellow sickness
my body is a used condom in an alley in Jersey city
I don't think he loves me dad

my body is a fetus in a bio-hazard tank
a Polaroid pinned to a corkboard in Brooklyn
I think I'm hurt dad,
I think I was the tough girl for too long

My body is a wafer
a thin soft melt
on a choir boy's tongue.
(Ashley 2009)⁴

Ashley's poem offers a visceral, revelatory and contradictory insight into herself. It does not rely on dangerous archetypes, as does Maximus' poem, nor appropriate another's voice for gain, as does Sands' poem. Rather, it offers a woman in contradiction as only personal experience could deliver. Her work engages with issues facing women from a variety of angles. It is able to do so gracefully because she is telling her own story.

This poem tells the story of conflict within one woman. The poem centers around relationships with men, both romantic relationships, and in the refrain, of her father as audience. The poem allows her the space to express vulnerability within her own terms. Allows her to speak the unspeakable, "I know you don't want to hear about it/you don't want to hear how they scissored me/how they gnawed

⁴ Transcribed from video material. Line breaks and stanzas interpreted from vocal cues.

me like raw meat/no one wants to hear how they made me drink lemon juice.” Ashley can speak openly about her trauma. However, being in the role of the speaker she is far from helpless. Rather, this poem seems to offer a reclaiming. This is most evident in the last line, “My body is a wafer/a slow melt/on a choir boy's tongue.” In this moment she positions her body, the central site of conflict for the whole poem, in the realm of the holy. Through the process of transubstantiation, she is finally comparing her body to that of Christ. This claim toward divinity is notably different from the one made in Maximus' work. Beyond that she is representing herself, she has already presented herself as a nuanced being rather than an object to be represented by others. Further, the imagery of “a slow melt, on a choir boy's tongue” enables her to simultaneously evoke the divine and sensual. She is not restricted into the Madonna/whore dichotomy, but rather, transcends it to become an individual.

These poems and the larger troubling dynamics at play evoke the larger questions: can men be allies to women's struggles? If so, then how? As should be clear, being an effective ally goes far beyond being cognizant of the subalterns' existence and being able to intellectually engage with their struggle.

Rather, I believe it must be an exercise in self-reflection and analysis of larger power dynamics. That understanding roots this auto-ethnography and is informed by the beliefs of some influential members of the community. In her Facebook note entitled, “The Male Slam Experience vs The Female Slam Experience,” Rachel McKibbens, a well-respected member of the slam community, writes

“These men (my mentors) have supported me since the first time I ever attended an open mic, back in 2001. And not once in the past eleven years have they ever attempted to credit themselves for my accomplishments. They have never asserted themselves as necessary for my continued success, or acted as my handler, nor have they made public wagers on my performances at national competitions. I have never been treated like a race horse. My accomplishments have always been mine” (McKibbens 2011)

McKibbens describes a mentoring relationship based on a power dynamic that was not paternalistic, but rather allowed for nurturing and growth outside of the ego of the mentor. These relationships did not treat her as an object, subsumed and bounded by paternalistic power, but rather as a subject asking for guidance but not domination. If we are ready to accept Wendy Brown's idea that

women can enact paternalistic power, is it then possible for men to enact a maternalistic, nurturing type of power? Despite the positive dynamics McKibbens describes, she goes on to say,

“They could not empower me with the commonality of the female experience like Mindy Nettifee. I am a woman and a mother first. Lucille Clifton does for me what Charles Bukowski cannot. Could never.”

McKibbens is writing from a visceral understanding that members of the dominate group do not have access to the same experiences and knowledge as subalterns do. It is this “commonality of the female experience” which is so essential to McKibbens.

Beyond roles of mentorship to female poets, there is the essential role of men engaging in self-awareness and working to subvert dominant and violent forms of masculinity. I have chosen to frame this chapter in terms of patriarchy rather than simply around misogyny as informed by a larger understanding of normative gender roles and patriarchal oppression. As bell hooks eloquently puts it,

“The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem” (hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* 1984, 79).

Resistance to hegemonic masculinity is the linchpin of action for male allies in the struggles for women's liberation. By looking inward, this move can avoid the pitfalls of paternalistic action seeking to save or direct women. Further, it can be motivated from a sustainable place of self-reflection and health rather than guilt. In the vast majority of contexts, this shift is difficult, as hooks discusses, 'he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem.' However, within slam poetry, this dynamic is inverted. Rather, men are often rewarded for their sensitivity, both vis-a-vis women's struggles as demonstrated earlier, and also for looking inward. While positive for men's internal development, this trend goes on to create a destructive double standard rewarding men for emotional content in their poems while attacking women for it. As McKibbens says, “Men are routinely rewarded for expressing vulnerability and are free to be angry in a way that women are not.

Men get extra points solely for having the emotional capacity to write a poem at all” (McKibbens 2011). This dynamic is particularly visible in its asymmetry. Male poets have access to a variety of poetic forms; they may write an angry political poem from a place of authority built upon their male privilege or they may write an emotionally vulnerable poem and be rewarded for subverting dominant masculinity. Conversely, women are often restricted in their writing as they are often penalized for appearing “too angry” on stage. They are expected to come from a place of emotional vulnerability and are often penalized for fulfilling that expectation.

Within the competitive and individualizing context of slam, attempts to cultivate alternative and resistant masculinities actually serve to silence women and reinforce patriarchal power. R.W. Connell's work on masculinities, gender and power offers an instructive theoretical frame to discuss this issue often discussed within slam circles. He discusses attempts at building alternative masculinities inspired out of the 'alternative' culture of Australia's environmental movement. This resistance to patriarchal roles born out of an 'alternative' culture offers insightful points of intersection with slam. Discussing one of the major pitfalls of rebelling against hegemonic masculinity, Connell writes, “There is something deeply problematic here, expressed in the ambiguities of the actions. Peter Geddes’ renunciation of his masculine career was a highly masculine act. Among other things, he did not tell his wife about it until after he had bought their farm. Renunciation can be conducted as an act of individual willpower, and this presupposes the masculine ego that the act is intended to deny” (Connell 2005, 132). Resistance to masculinity through masculinist means echoes loudly into the realm of slam. The rewards given to male poets who write about their feelings are presupposing the hegemonic masculine ego they conquered to be true to their emotional selves. The performance of a poem within a slam is a 'highly masculine act'. This categorization is influenced by bell hook's analysis of patriarchal power as “domination and control over people or things” ((hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* 1984, 84). Competing in the arena of slam, in which victory means more time to speak and failure

means silence, the type of power being sought and enacted is masculinist. In the same way that Geddes' act of renunciation against a masculine career silenced his wife, using slam as a mechanism to propagate alternative masculinities often results in the silencing of female poets.

On the whole, slam is an individualizing genre; poets usually compete as individuals and teams only exist for a few months before the poets are thrust back into the arena as competitors. Connell interrogates the contradictions of the individualized project of personal renunciation of masculinity as a response to a societal issue. “This accepts the individualizing logic that locates the source of oppression in men's personal sexism, and offers a moral rather than a practical reform...men's relationship to feminism is built on the moralizing (against other men) individualism”. (Connell 2005, 140) This type of moralizing feminism can be seen in Oveous Maximus' poem explored above. This creates divisions without requiring men to look at their own complicity with power structures. Within slam, there is some limited tension between men who take this position, but by and large they are accepted and celebrated in the scene. Partly their work subverts norms, but it also must be understood in their success within the patriarchal values of slam. The issue of individualization is messy and requires nuance. Further, while this is not universally true, it is common that a poet's attempt at vulnerability on stage is difficult to maintain outside of that liminal space. Within the larger community, larger patriarchal stresses remain. This creates a space in which resistance to hegemonic masculinity is twice ghettoized; once to the individual and secondly to the stage.

Connell explores the difference between an individualized political project and a communal one. “Collective projects of transformation operate at the level of the social. They address the institutional order of society as well as the social organization of personality... In these respects, the moment of contestation is very different from the project of reconstructing self” (Connell 2005, 141). The tension between the individual and the larger community is a pervasive and insidious one within slam. While the individualized space of the performance would seem to disrupt community, it is

actually common that communities form between poets of like mind and poetic style. Often, groups of men who are writing about hegemonic masculinity will form together. Indeed, there have been a few notably group pieces produced out of teams that deal with these issues. The ultimate irony, however, is that these groups of self-aware men coalesce in the upper echelons of slam after competing against and silencing women.

None of this is to condemn the worthwhile struggle against violent masculinity, nor is it to abridge the artistic and emotional expression of men seeking to transcend their prescribed roles. (It would be a moment of supreme irony if in the face of this critique, men felt they could not express their emotions on stage, as this could then constitute an "assault on self-esteem".) Rather, this critique should stand in support of feminist projects such as the Women of the World Poetry Slam (WOWPS) which, by many accounts, has built a slam poetry space which allows for a range of expression from women who are otherwise too often restricted and constrained. Further, following Connell's critique, it should stress the need for communal projects of resistance, those which may be sparked by poems but must go beyond the stage into each facet of the community.

These questions of men's role in struggles against patriarchy and in attempts to cultivate alternative forms of masculinity push me to self-reflection necessary in auto-ethnography. I have a poem that remains untitled, but to those that know it, it is referred to as 'the consent poem'. This is a poem that I originally wrote out of a desire to speak to issues of sexual violence as a man, without recapitulating these hierarchies. I had hoped to write a poem furthering the rhetoric that 'consent is sexy' as well as speaking to other men about the importance of communication. In my mind, this poem is a case study in the insidious power of male privilege.

Your Self-awareness is Sexy,
Self-Respect,
A turn on

Leave cleavage, high-heels, Make-up

Just speak,
and I will swoon.

Let me feel you wrap your tongue around,
Anecdote
Metaphor,
Battle Plans

Rising in Concussive Syllables,
Accidental Rhythm and Rhyme

Your words Hug the corner of truth,
skid across the surface of sanity,
to stumble through the shattered glass,
and still stand.

Your words Peak at Wisdom
leave no recourse but
daydream
Of passion erupted, lower lip bit to punctuate smile and invite inevitable kiss.
Of lips, barely brushing as stomach dedicate sanctuary to monarchs.
Flutter.
Of waking,
warm palm slip from home on belly just to pull the blinds and settle back into contented.

Daydream culminates in climax of,
“Hey, I’m Nick, would you like to have a conversation some time?”

You see, my mother broke me,
raised on Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan,
the flesh is nothing without curve of neuron,
flick of vocal chords,
with the dominate seventh to sing out the blues.

To explain:
Take the moment of masculine bonding deflated,
when my boy, seeing nothing but meat wrapped around bones,
asks, “what about her? Would you fuck her?”
And I,
like the asshole that I am,
say, “I dunno man, I’d need to talk to her first.”

This is not about the abstract right.
It is not about saying what I should,
Or playing the good guy.

It is about fantasy of dirty talk.
We, skin to soul in bed together,

when you lean over
to dance breath
across stretch of side
to say,
“I just think that'd be tactically unwise”

The truth is:
The women who have tackled my soul to the ground,
amid scraped knees and mud-pinned locked eyes,
have always been the ones that tell me when I'm wrong.

Who cut straight through whichever metaphor I spin in the last hour before dawn,

Who are smarter than I am.

And listen, The sound waves make everything better.
Let's be real, a question for the room. Which would you rather to hear?

Umm..blah...I guess so.

Or.

Baby. Make me your canvas. Illuminate my edges with your tongue.
Tattoo me with your maze, get lost in spirals of your own making,
send shivers through vertebrae I did not know existed.
Force me to freestyle a poem, unknown, twisted inside yearning to break free
in a symphony of guttural glory.

You see. Consent. That shit is sexy, right?

When did we decide that silence was attractive?

I say speak,
scream
use your diaphragm,

Wield Words marauding up your esophagus and lay siege to ear drums,

and if anyone ever tells you to sit down
and be quiet,
you strike back with a broadside and a bellow,

and as they quiver in the wake of your echo,
call me.

This poem strikes me as problematic on a number of levels. As it outlines the ways that I want to

conduct myself within intimate relationships on the basis of respect and mutual communication it becomes proscriptive and recapitulates power dynamics of male dominance. This veers dangerous close to using my male power to “dominate and control.” At its root, the poem is lauding an abstracted woman for speaking within my terms and for my sexual pleasure. This frames a woman's self expression not as valuable by her own power but as worthwhile for my sexual pleasure. This keeps me in the center and allows me the power to adjudicate value, much as Sands' poem enables him to remain in power. “Your self-awareness is sexy” sets a destructive tone.

The most glaring section, in my mind, is the end in which I take on the role of encouraging the abstracted woman to speak. The women's act of speaking becomes not about her agency but about my encouragement and permission. With the insidious skill of the 'new man' I appropriate even the mechanism of expression into a framework for my approval and pleasure. While this poem attempts to speak to a larger culture of misogyny and objectification, the section from 'take the moment of masculine bonding deflated' to 'I'd have to talk to her first' positions me as above or outside of that culture. Indeed, even as I chastise Oveous Maximus for not implicating himself within patriarchal violence, I make my position invisible within my own work. The more honest and self-reflective version of this poem would necessarily require me to acknowledge and substantively deal with the ways in which I am conditioned into and reinforce patriarchy. Now, a female team member and I are taking parts of this poem and using them within a group piece. The poem opens with the section starting with “a question for the room.” I am speaking while my teammate calls out the hypocrisy of talking over her while lauding women's speech. This section ends with her statement, “I don't speak because you think it's sexy/ I speak because I have shit to say.” This new poem is not meant to imply that I am now enlightened and free from patriarchal conditioning. Rather, it acknowledges my position more openly and how I am implicated in systems of violence.

This all being said, given the analysis above, slam may simply be the wrong medium. As

explored through the lens of Connell's work, anti-sexist work must happen through communal resistance which is mitigated and frustrated by slam poetry's restrictive form.

I'd like to close this chapter with another poem engaging with the poem above and my struggle with my role as a man within hook-up culture. This poem is appropriately titled, "auto-ethnography"

Auto-Ethnography

There comes a moment,
khaki armor shredded,
bounding stale words off shower tiles
to the rhythm of waterfall
when ethnography thrusts inward
as a sloppy pipe-bomb
my questions
lodged into my chest
leave block letter scars,
"What tension do you see between onstage identity and off-stage reality"
Or rather,
like a rope tying a pit bull to a stake,
how much tension
until the hard calcium of reality's teeth
dig into the calves that let me strut

I am speaking,
"The truth is, the women who have tackled my soul to the ground..."

as I soak my sponge in lye
to sear you off me

I am debating the image of my mother,
citing statistics on hook-ups
and female depression

I have always been an anachronism
in a world where trading orgasms is easier
than raw conversation

I think of Miriam
my first toe-dip into casual skin on skin
She says, "I have a lot of ground to cover
before I flee this bubbled world,
so thanks for the passing prayer,
but follow-up is not required"

Bleached white cinder block walls,

breathing confusion thick as coal-dust

So I took scalpel to lessons leavened,
tore bodies from bed-sheets
and copied story of stale smoke and morning after
of physics and poetry divorced

I draw fingerprints over the crescendo of a stomach
like rolling blunts
tender while mundane
enough to rely on muscle memory

I do not know if am broken
or realistic
if beneath my settled breath
is thunderous lung collapse

But I do step out this shower
sheltered only in this skin
and feel nothing
but sunlight

3.
Shouts and Silence:
Race In the NYC Slam Poetry Scene

Stepping out of the insistent swelter of July and the wafting scent of putrid garbage off Houston Street, I step into the Bowery Poetry Club. By now, I have become recognizable to many of the poets. My performances have lead to conversations and friendship. In the last few weeks, I had made the transition from onlooker to poet in a stark and unmistakable transformation. Stepping past the marble tables and worn wooden chairs of the lounge, I pass my 7 dollars for entry and push through the soft felt curtain and into the cool belly of Bowery.

Elliel is swilling whiskey and cheap(ish) beer. A poet himself, he passes shop talk over coasters with grace as the Bowery's weathered bartender. The poets are gathered by this bubbling altar, as both watering hole and water cooler, swapping stories and nostalgia while speculating on the night or even editing among the ruckus. Their banter is a low din, periodically pierced with laughter or the echoing clap of a hand clasped to the back of an old friend. It is upon this rumble that the arena is built.

Tonight is the third of the NYC regionals when all three of the New York venues throw down together. Technically, regionals are meaningless; they do not qualify a team to go to the National Poetry Slam, and different coaches and teams come with totally divergent priorities. Some, like Mahogany Brown coaching the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, come knowing full well they intend to flex their muscles and throw poems that will shake a room. Others, like Mark coaching The Urbana Team (based out of the Bowery Poetry Club) are testing new pieces, strange orders, and new strategies. Rebecca with the Louder Arts Project comes less concerned with scores and more to push the boundaries of Slam Poetry as a form.

The open mic, the stalwart beginning of every Urbana slam, grumbles against the background of clicked glasses and bombastic agreements. Anderson, a tall, white man who struts with an almost

mythical standing within the community, is behind the microphone to host. Anderson's status is multi-fold: he is probably the most famous slam poet still involved with the scene today, he is certainly the most numerically successful slam poet ever with four national poetry slam victories, an impressive record of bringing his teams to final stage, and he was instrumental in the founding and continued existence of the Bowery Poetry Club. Beyond his persona in the community, Anderson comes from a place of unabashed wealth. It is often-repeated fact that Anderson's family owns the regulation felt on pool tables. Anderson has been constructed, and has constructed himself, as a symbol that is antithetical to the idea of slam as a space for poetic hustle by underrepresented voices. Built upon his enduring legacy, Anderson remains in the slam community as a defining, and polarizing, patriarch.

Behind the mic, Anderson is effortless. The Bowery is his home venue, this stage his turf. He opens the night with a subtle jab revealing his comfort, "The thing I love about Urbana is that we always start on time. We say we'll start at seven and we do not lie, we start at seven." For those familiar with slam's geography in NYC, his target is clear; the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe is notorious for starting late at both its Wednesday and Friday night slams. Anderson then calls up Mahogany Brown to read a poem. Without missing a beat, Mahogany introduces herself, "I'm from the land of late starts." There is a hearty chuckle from the room as Mahogany quickly strikes back and begins her poem. This light sparring is the momentary bubbling over of long-simmering tensions rooted in the history between the venues and the racialized geography of the scene. For those of us in the room, no one thinks this momentary spark portends the fire to come.

As the open mic fades and Hatch, the host for the night, takes the stage with her bubbling enthusiasm and unstoppable dancing, the poets at the bar quiet down and turn their attention forward. Hatch explains, "Now, so that the judges may have a frame of reference to calibrate their scores, we bring you the sacrificial poet." As discussed before, there is no bureaucratic system through which poets gain access to sacrificial poet slots. Rather, these are distributed through informal networks of

influence. The position of sacrificial is an honorable one, free from the stresses of actual score keeping within the slam. Sacrificial poets are usually chosen on their reputation within the scene.

James, having only gained prominence since our time at the Nuyorican, steps up to the mic as the night's first sacrifice. He performs a poem entitled "What is Strength" which is an open letter to his unborn son. Speaking from the body of a physically small Black man, his poem challenges the conceptions of strength forced onto him from his home in East New York. He opens speaking to this physical body, "please know, I cannot carry a laundry bag more than two blocks without getting tired" and moves to warnings torn from the pages of his experiences, "there are many cracks in this sidewalk that will consume, the crack of a cops baton, the crack of the speeding shell... son, strength is the willingness to collapse" (James 2011). James' poem eloquently weaves together many themes lauded in slam. He is lodging a critique against a dominant masculinity, a masculinity that is inevitably informed by his race and roots. Speaking from a place of organic ghetto-centricity, his words bloom directly from his lived experience rather than an attempt at evocative subject matter. Given his position as a black man, James' critique accidentally and inevitably must be understood as an intervention coming from intersectional analysis engaging with both white supremacy and patriarchy. Ending his poem, he comes off stage, greeted by a barrage of dap from the poets clustered in the back. His scores come up, leading with a perfect ten, then to low 9s and high 8s.

Amid the clap of clasped hands at the bar, Anderson got up from behind the score keepers' table to command the attention of the room, "I'm sorry, but a 10 is for a perfect poem performed perfectly. I love James, but that poem was not perfect. That judge needs to recalibrate their idea of perfection." Directly speaking to James' work, and using his position and history within the community to move beyond the traditional role of the scorekeeper, Anderson publicly challenged the quality of James' work. Immediately, there is anger brewing in the room. James is visibly upset and moves swiftly down the stairs to the green room of the Bowery. Nate, a long-time member of the community and the host of

the Wednesday Night open slam at the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe, followed James downstairs, where by Nate's account, he comforted James after Anderson's comments had been deeply hurtful. By and large, the chatter among the poets and audience at the bar is confusion and disbelief. Anderson has built himself a reputation for insensitivity at best and unmitigated elitism at worst. Within the moment, the undertones of racial and class tensions are beginning to reveal themselves.

The bout begins and attention is pulled back to the stage. The three New York teams bounce sound-waves off the Bowery's brick walls, vying for command of the room. Later into the rotation, Michael and Xavier from the Urbana team performed their group piece, "Ridiculous Sex" which is a raucous, comedic piece drawing on pop culture references and their own unabashed ownership of a 'nerd' identity. This piece fits perfectly into the common perception of Urbana as the team from the 'quirky' venue. During the piece there is a section that is always improvised. Xavier will introduce Michael's line by saying, "My sex move will be called the dragon." Michael responds, "My sex move would be called the James, perfect in every way." Tapping into the established lineage of using the liminal space of the stage to call out a member or behavior in the community, Michael and Xavier had chosen to use their space to critique Anderson's actions. When I later talked to Michael and Xavier about it, they explained they had planned to do that both to support James, but also to make a clear distinction between the Urbana team and Anderson. The importance of this distinction harkens back to Wendy Brown's idea of the State, and within my extension of the analogy, venues, as multi-layered and often contradictory institutions. Anderson comes from a place of both historical and bureaucratic power within Bowery; as both a long-time slammer and member of the Bowery committee he is involved with many aspects. Michael and Xavier's actions serve to illuminate the internal contradictions within the many groups under the banner of the Bowery Poetry Club, as well as to distance themselves from Anderson's transgression. Their comment was met with hollers from those understanding the reference and a swell of support from Nate and James.

As the night wore on, the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe took the lead with their mix of bravura and evocative subject matter. After the bout ended, with the Nuyo team victorious and most poets and spectators exhausted, the crowd slowly dispersed onto the sidewalk and into subway cars. Lingered outside the Bowery and the bar next door, a few familiar faces remained as I wandered back to the 4 train.

The next morning I woke to an explosion across Facebook. Nate had posted, “[Nate](#) SAYS: Dear @James what [Anderson](#) did after your poem was disrespectful and unprofessional. Perhaps you didn't dance in a fashion that made him comfortable. Maybe your poem needed more watermelon, fried chicken and 40's. #insulted” (Bowery Poetry Club dispute 2011).

For those familiar with Facebook form, both James and Anderson were tagged, making the comment appear on their Facebook walls. Further, a series of poets 'liked' the status, effectively pledging their support behind Nate's comment. With the insinuation of racial bias, Facebook then became the battleground. This had reached a new level of exposure. Facebook moved the conversation from a local space to a national stage.

Since its rise in popularity over the last few years, Facebook, as well as other social networking sites (most notably Tumblr), has become a new and massively used arena for the social scape of the New York City slam poetry community. In a community in which status is so integrally tied with construction of public identity, Facebook now serves as the new commons. Like many innovations, its effects have been many and debated. Most centrally in this context, Facebook has become the vastly preferred medium, even beyond poems, in which to launch critiques of the community. Given that it enables dialogue across huge distances and in a public space, it allows a much broader array of voices to converse. This is not without its pitfalls and Facebook is often lamented for increasing the amount of 'drama' within the community as well as for enabling convoluted and vitriolic arguments. Virtual fieldwork offers an unparalleled space for insights into the community's conceptions of self and

acceptable boundaries of behavior. Beyond the conversation engaged in the comments, the 'like' feature of Facebook allows people to ally themselves with each others' statements and reveals the (often shifting) set of loyalties and alliances which display themselves in these moments of tension.

What followed was a multi-faceted debate about the function of race in the confrontation, James's poem, Anderson's personality (or perceived personality) and position within the community, and the role of scores and perfection within the art form. The response was telling of the many and often competing logics at play around race and difference within slam.

Upon first reading, Nate's wording seems designed to evoke a historically situated and (almost) universally reviled form of racism: essentialist racism. In his work, *Race in the 21st Century*, John Hartigen Junior describes that essentialist racism “for centuries was the dominant way of talking about race in this country. This discourse features explicit statements about racial superiority and inferiority” (Hartigen 2010, 94). There are a few central aspects of this definition that need to be unpacked. To begin, essentialist racism is still fundamentally rooted in an individual's aggression against another, rather than in taking a larger structural or systemic frame. Further, it is notable in its clarity, that the action examined is clearly marked as racially charged, rather than formed by and implicated in a larger system of power and privilege. Nate's words, “maybe you didn't dance in a fashion that made him comfortable” hearken directly to images of minstrelsy and paint a power dynamic between the black performer and the white audience member. Nate's use of symbols often employed in racist propaganda evokes an explicit and apparent anti-black racism. When Nate and I spoke about it afterwards, he always came back to a central question, “What was it about James? What was it that made Anderson feel he could do that?” The frame of Nate's question is telling: Anderson's position remains central and normalized while James' position is that of the marginal, rather than both being implicated in a system and field of power. Peggy McIntosh's seminal work, “Unpacking the Invisible Backpack of White Privilege” sums up this perspective well. “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism

as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege which puts me at an advantage ” (McIntosh 1988, 4). This asymmetry in analysis is common and often invisible. Further, it is not as if Nate is not aware of the functioning of white privilege; indeed, over the course of our interview he identified it and spoke about it often. The larger question is the system of value that Nate must function within. Would his concerns have been heard or responded to if he had framed his feelings in a larger, more nuanced way? By critiquing within the recognizable parameters, Nate made it at least possible for his grievance to be taken seriously.

The myriad Responses echoed this narrow frame. The initial responses to Nate's status are a mix of confusion and solidarity. Most notably, a black female teammate of James wrote, “Lol let’s slam against him. Bet it’ll be chop city. #isaidi.” This assertion of dominance within the arena of slam is one that would be echoed later by James himself. This response is illustrative for a few reasons. First, it immediately defers to the dominant value system at play, calling for adjudication. More essentially though, it strikes me that it is an attempt to shift arenas so that James may claim a position of power. While Anderson comes with power in the larger society, that given to him by his race and class status as well as his standing in the community, James could hope to leverage his sub-cultural capital and access to forms of authenticity and writing skills in the liminal space of the stage. When James did respond, after a few days of discussion without him, he wrote about his rationale for challenging Anderson to a slam-off, “Not to make a show of the situation, not to prove that Anderson isn’t a racist, or give Anderson an avenue to prove that he is not a racist. I challenged Anderson to a slam off because I felt my story was not being respected” (James, Note on confrontation with Anderson 2011). Victory in the competition as a means of winning respect is common. This moment would be sorely lacking without an analysis of the gender roles at play. There is a long history and an accessible narrative of white men denigrating black men's masculinity. After Anderson's entitlement-facilitated transgression, the challenge of a slam-off seems to echo intensely the need to reclaim a patriarchal power. This is

particularly ironic given the subject matter of James' poem. However, in his search for respect in the power systems of this world, he would seek patriarchal power, even if not a power dependent upon physical strength.

One poet responded in the Facebook thread to say, “Finally someone is not scared to speak on it in this community!” This is a sentiment echoed in my conversation with Nate, who felt that issues of race were rarely discussed candidly and honestly off stage.

Anderson joined the conversation with a long and revealing response,

“I wanted to do this privately, and I will. Here's what happened: James was the sac goat at the NYC Regionals last night, and he was great, which means he was under the time limit and got the audience psyched; I don't remember much more because I was working the bout. When the scores came in, they were all 6s and 7s except for one judge who put up a 10. On the first poem of the night. That's a red flag for me. So I said something then to the entire crowd. Something like this: "I'm sorry but a 10 is for a perfect poem performed perfectly. I love James, but that poem was not perfect so that judge needs to recalibrate their idea of perfection." I shouldn't have done it. It was rude and insulting to James. I was trying to dissuade that judge from giving out 10s for the rest of the night (which worked; there was only one other 10 in the last rotation). I would have said the same thing no matter who the poet was! But I was wrong to have done it, and I am deeply sorry. But I deeply resent the suggestion that this was a result of racism”
(Bowery Poetry Club dispute 2011).

Anderson is open that he had not been paying attention to the content of the poem. His lack of attention and respect paid to the poem was a major point of contention for both James and Nate. While Anderson explains this simply, “I was working the bout,” I think the content of the poem cannot be fully ignored. James' poem engaged with an alternative idea of black masculinity and used imagery from his experience to explore and define that masculinity. Both Anderson's class and race would obscure many of those images for him. It is possible, for example, that the idea of carrying laundry more than two blocks as a marker of physical strength would not ring true for someone who always lived with a washing machine in his home. As Hartigen writes, “Perhaps, whites – and maybe even all racially identified people the United States – are socialized, implicitly, to recognize people of their own color, first and foremost, as individuals, allotting everyone else to the crucial shadow category for the

individual – groups” (Hartigen 2010, 11). Given Anderson's time in the slam scene, it is possible that he engaged with only the beginning of James' poem, quickly categorized it into the larger subset of poems dealing with black alternative masculinity and quickly turned his attention to other things. While I cannot speak to Anderson's motivation or internal dialogue, I can say that these moments of oversimplification are not without precedence within the scene. Anderson's intentions are only relevant in so far as they became central to the debate if Anderson's actions were racist within the community. Nate's interpretation of the moment was clear, “Because he (James) didn't shock people into listening to him, because he didn't exploit himself so that people would listen to him, the bout manager didn't listen” (Nate 2011).

It is also noteworthy that Anderson misrepresents what the scores were to demonstrate that there was a bigger differential from the 10 in question to the other scores. Rather than the slew of 6s and 7s that Anderson remembers, James' lowest score was an 8.4. Anderson's memory adjusted itself to make his actions more logical, that calling out the 'outlier' ten was his responsibility. Within that frame, he presents himself as operating from a mindset focused on logistics and places himself in the position of objective operator.

Most striking, however, is Anderson's assertion, “I would have said the same thing no matter who the poet was! But I was wrong to have done it, and I am deeply sorry. But I deeply resent the suggestion that this was a result of racism” (Bowery Poetry Club dispute 2011). Anderson loudly echoes the central defense and values of 'colorblind ideology.' A clever and insidious appropriation of civil-rights-era rhetoric calling for equality, 'colorblind ideology' is posits that in the pursuit of a just society we must abolish race as a category altogether, and instead see all people outside of (or beyond) their racial categories (Omi and Winant 1994). While this is an admirable point abstractly, its application is deeply destructive. To be blind to color is to be blind to the effects of color (Omi and Winant 1994). The pitfall of color-blindness as a movement toward equality is that without the terms to

discuss racial inequality, there can be no movement to remedy racial inequality. Rather, race becomes invisible to those in power, though inevitably tangible to those oppressed, as systems of domination remain unchallenged. As Hartigen Explains, “The ability to 'see' race or to ignore it altogether rests on both the person's social position and his or her cultural conditioning with regard to beliefs about the significance of skin color and immediately assigned physical features.” (Hartigen 2010, 7) The inescapable reality of race in America is that it is a privilege to be able to ignore. What Hartigen's language does not make explicit is that while the ability to 'see' race is tied to beliefs about the significance of skin color, these beliefs are not a choice for people of color. They are imposed many times over from many angles. Hartigen goes on to write, “It matters also to understand that social conventions inform what we feel we can and cannot say about race. It is hard to recognize that speaking a "colorblind discourse" involves certain kinds of social boundary work that may or may not differ across racial lines” (Hartigen 2010, 7) Colorblind ideology requires rendering discussions of race to the space of taboo. In a moment of concrete eloquence, Raphael described how this boundary functions. “Race to middle-class white people is a dysfunctional family secret. Like you don't want to bring up in polite conversation that so-in-so's parents are divorced” (Raphael 2011). By placing race beyond the realm of the appropriate, color-blind ideology works to render it and its implications invisible.

These priorities are echoed in many of the comments which followed. James' coach offered his concise, “S*** was foul, but it wasn't racist” (Bowery Poetry Club dispute 2011). His brief words require the question, “how does one define racist?” If racism is to be defined as seemingly implied by Nate , as “explicit statements about racial superiority and inferiority” (Hardigan 94). If racism is to be the explicitly racially motivated, pre-meditated, action by a person of one race to hurt a person of another race simply and solely because they are of that different race, then the bounds are very narrow and therefore easy to fall outside. However, if taken in a larger frame, understanding racism as a system

which entitles white members of society while denigrating people of color, then Anderson's actions must in some way be understood through this lens (Omi and Winant 1994). The narrow frame which seems to define 'racism' within James' coach's comment could be in response to the frame created by Nate from his original post. This frame must also be understood in conversation with the dominant ethos and desire to swiftly and decisively remove racism from the discussion. Mark, a well established poet and coach of the Urbana team, weighed in to say, "I think this was an issue of phrasing, not reflection on James. Perhaps saying, 'although James is a truly brilliant poet and performer, I am leery of judges who give the calibration poet a 10 knowing they have no reference to what is a better or worse poem this evening'" (Bowery Poetry Club dispute 2011). Mark's focus seemed to be more on the logistical finesse of dealing with a very high score in the beginning of the round. Further, it is clear that he is attempting to DE-politicize the issue and return it to the comfortable realm of logistics. Ashley, the Slam Master of the Bowery, wrote, "Unprofessional, yes. Disrespectful, yes. It hurts that it happened at all – the hurt and shame that come from such a misstep. Anderson is shamed and taking full accountability for his mistake. James is standing strong behind his beautiful poem..., his hard-earned scores" (Bowery Poetry Club dispute 2011). True to form and position, she was working to defuse the tension between Nate and Anderson and, in a larger sense, the tension between the Bowery Poetry Club and the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe. In her attempts to mitigate tensions, her assertion that Anderson is "taking full accountability" fails to acknowledge that while admitting fault, Anderson remained staunchly ignorant to the potential for power-dynamics within his transgression. His ignorance can be understood as a luxury afforded him by his privilege. The comment thread quickly veered to larger philosophical discussions of perfection in art and the roles of poets, judges and slam masters in slams. While these are valuable conversations to have, they began to stray from the original point so dramatically that the conversations became unrecognizable as related to the original incident. While this is an occupational hazard with Facebook, it is also telling that people were eager to shift

away from conversations of race.

The policing of social boundaries that enables colorblindness goes beyond expectations of boundaries and can become a moral issue. As Hartigen writes, “Instead of linking racial thinking back to originary or core racist sensibilities... racial boundary work, for both whites and blacks, (is) related to larger processes of viewing the world in moral terms” (Hartigen 2010, 9). Beyond simply ignoring issues of race, when they are discussed or illuminated, the person that brings them up is often the target of backlash. In our interview, Nate discussed the reaction he got from many members of the community, “And people e-mail me saying, well, it’s Anderson, And became this you need to apologize to Anderson, people telling me I need to apologize and the bottom line is we are so busy trying to prove how racist we ain’t, we are not realizing that we are offending people. and that’s not good enough” (Nate 2010). Rather than pushing Anderson towards a place of self-reflection and reconciliation, Anderson's actions were relegated to an ‘appropriate’ sphere. He was allowed to ‘take responsibility’ in a limited way that did not fundamentally deal with the issue or potential power dynamics. Instead, the focus becomes an anger towards Nate for ‘making’ it an issue of race. In some instances, though none within the Facebook thread, some poets within the community commented that they believed Nate was being racist towards Anderson in his accusation. This decontextualized idea of racism, separated from an understanding of power, strikes me as a dangerous rhetorical strategy that silences anti-racist critique rather than one that enables a move toward a more egalitarian society. The focus of the conversation shifts away from the original act of racism and is re-focused on the act of illuminating racism. This demonizes dissent and makes dialogue impossible. Further, the focus on Anderson's feelings of being offended over the original issue betray an underlying set of priorities, more concerned with the white party’s perception and well-being than that of the person of color.

James's absence from the thread is notable. Indeed, the confrontation became re-framed between Nate and Anderson. In a few key ways, James became an object over which the confrontation

had taken place rather than the active subject. Indeed, in Raphael's thoughts after the confrontation, he said, "Anyones' half-ass conjecture about the racism of that moment does not beat Nate's real experience of watching someone who he cares very deeply for, and mentors... be subjected to a racist action." (Raphael 2011) Within this narrative of the events, even while privileging lived experience over conjecture, Raphael accidentally silences James' voice in the moment.

A few days later, James posted a note entitled, "My Take,":

"I don't believe Anderson Mali's remarks were racially driven. I believe Anderson Mali is insensitive, self-centered and assumed a hierarchy over me because I am a new poet. I believe he felt he could get away with the way he communicated his critique because I just got onto the scene, and because I am young. Of course there were racial undertones (he's obviously white and I'm obviously black lol) but to say this was an act of racism is a bit of a stretch for me. If I were gay, would he be homophobic? If I were a woman, would he be sexist? I don't think so. I feel like if I were a Meredith, a Nate, or any other experienced and tenured slam poet (white or black), Anderson Mali would not have been so vocal. And if he was, he would have been more careful in the way his voiced his opinion" (James, Note on interaction with anderson 2011).

James' response was wildly lauded as 'Mature and intelligent'. Anderson even went on to post "10!" on his note. By shifting the focus to 'ageism', a system of domination that is both surmountable (through time spent in the community) and does not come with the same historical resonance as racism, James returned the conversation to the realm of the acceptable. That James, the directly affected party, chose not to call the act a racist act seems to complicate the narrative of 'colorblind' white people silencing people of color who must see race. But, upon closer examination it is important to understand these logics as hegemonic. An understanding of hegemony is instructive. "It is through its production and its adherence to this 'common sense', this ideology, that a society gives its consent to the way in which it is ruled." (Omi and Winant 1994, 67) The value of avoiding race goes beyond the actions of the dominant group and then expands to be common sense. It is also important to note that James' response did not constitute an attempt to distance himself from Nate. Indeed, immediately after the incident he had posted a status simply saying, "Nate is my brother." Throughout this controversy, James' profile picture was him standing proudly next to Nate. Most central, however, is the consistent definition of 'racism' as

a narrowly defined act with clear and intentional race-based bias.

Nate went on to delete his status and the subsequent thread in his words, “The initial post regarding Anderson and James has been deleted. Not because of the aggressive email campaigns. Not because of how convoluted the thread had become. It was deleted because James made his statement and position clear. I respect James and will not continue something that he has made peace with” (Nate, The Anderson and James status has been deleted!, 2011). Nate's characterization of an 'aggressive e-mail campaign' indicated a degree of coordination and a tone that he found threatening. In the same note announcing the deletion of this thread, Nate went on to illuminate a persistent tension within the slam scene, “Poets spend way too much time on stage preaching against these social infections to not follow up when the mic is turned off. We have to hold each other accountable” (Nate, The Anderson and James status has been deleted!, 2011). In our conversation later, he echoed these sentiments. He expressed an overwhelming frustration with this tension, feeling that issues of race were shouted on stage during poems but were never actually discussed (Nate 2011). An overwhelming sense of 'color-blindness' and discomfort with race silenced any actual conversation. This sentiment was echoed through different interviews that I had with poets-of-color. The limits of the liminal space provided by the stage become clear when issues of race are not discussed off-stage but often discussed on-stage.

One revealing aspect of this confrontation was how the definitions and bounds of 'racism' functioned to narrow the dialogue within the community. Within these discussions, racism seemed to remain defined as the individualized acts of intentional aggression or violence. Further, even when racism could be discussed, the categorization of 'racist' as applied to Anderson operated in a space of essentialism; that Anderson as a person was either fully 'racist' or 'not racist'. Hartigen identifies this as a central pitfall of a 'race-cognizant' outlook which is attempting to counteract the dominance of color-blindness. As Hartigen writes, “these women 'continue to articulate their analyses of racism in dualistic

and moralistic terms'." (Hartigen 2010, 171). The dualism is in the belief that "either an individual is fully complicit with racism and imperialism or not complicit at all. Such belief posited the practical goal of being entirely free from racial forms of signification, which, not surprisingly, ended up generating a good deal of internal frustration for these women" (Hartigen 2010, 169). This dualist perspective is disconcertingly simplifying. Further, to believe that any person who had been raised in such a fundamentally racist and imperialist society could be free of that socialization is dangerously naive. To understand this situation, I believe we need a broader, more nuanced understanding of how race functions. If the frame is shifted from directly focused on the moment of the individual act and broadened to understanding positions of privilege as well as subordination, the power at play becomes clear. Anderson has grown up and lived in a world in which he is often dominant. Just as it would be naive to believe that people could escape racist and patriarchal condition, it is equally naive to think that Anderson's white, male and class privilege combined with (though not separable from) his position within the community would not leave him feeling entitled to intervene beyond his technical role. Miranda's description of working with Anderson is telling. "I do believe Anderson feels he is entitled to say some shit because Anderson has said some shit to me where I've been like, hold on old man, you will not speak to me like that. I am not a 5 year old... I don't think that Anderson means anything by it. But I think people forget that racism and ageism are a huge part of our community. People want to deny the fact that, whether or not he meant it that way, whether or not Anderson was or is racist, or has racist ideas, we are raised a certain way. We're all conditioned to a certain truth" (Miranda 2011). Miranda's quotes beg the question, what would qualify as a racist idea? If the question of the racism of the incident with James is re-framed as, did Anderson's actions reflect a sense of entitlement that is rooted in a racist, patriarchal system? Then the answer is, almost inevitably, yes.

Raphael's hypothetical situation viscerally reaffirms this understanding. "And even if it wasn't direct, antagonistic racism, Anderson wasn't trying to shit on James. That doesn't matter, because there

is so much about the situation that is so steeped in privilege. Imagine an alternate universe where we're at a black venue and the black scorekeeper gets up and tells the judge that the white poet on stage shouldn't be scored so high. Think about the community response" (Raphael 2011)

The response would be incredulous shock and anger. Beyond offering this broader perspective, Raphael's hypothetical reveals the racialized character of space and the spacial tensions at play within this confrontation. That Raphael implicitly defines The Bowery as 'a white venue' as opposed to the 'alternate universe' black venue shows how deeply embedded ideas of race are in place. This was not explicitly discussed but was an undercurrent of the confrontation as a whole.

It was this tension that bubbled over in Anderson's first comment, "The thing I love about Urbana is that we always start on time. We say we'll start at seven and we do not lie, we start at seven." There are few levels of codes at play within the brief confrontation. Beyond targeting the Nuyorican in coded terms, he is also subtly illuminating the racialized geography of the slam scene in New York. To interrogate this language, Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham's theoretical framework from her work "The Meta-Language of Race" is informative. "Race serves as a 'global sing,' 'metalanguage,' since it speaks about, it lends meaning to, a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race." (Higgenbotham 1992, 255). Higgenbotham's analysis is best understood in conversation with color-blind ideology. As explicit discussions of race become relegated to taboo, implicit forms reveal themselves. Race has become simultaneously ubiquitous and insidious; it is all-encompassing while remaining invisible. As Higgenbotham explores, "By continually expressing overt and covert analogic relationships, race impregnates the simplest meanings we take for granted. It makes hair "good" or "bad," speech patterns "correct" or "incorrect". (Higgenbotham 1992, 255) I would argue that this coded language goes beyond the value judgments of 'good' or 'bad' and creates a whole language which allows a silent discussion of race.

When Anderson says, "we always start on time" he is creating an implicit 'them.' He is tapping

into a lineage of racial projects that portray people of color as lazy, always late and not 'industrious.' As mentioned above, there is no mistaking his target; the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe. The venue was originally founded to provide artists of color a safe space to perform their work. In descriptions of the geography of New York City slam, many of the adjectives used are steeped in coded racial meaning. The Nuyorican was often described in terms of 'performance and volume.' In one interview, a poet simply said, "The Nuyorican is showtime." Conversely, The Bowery Poetry Club was most often described as "quirky, funny or as a safe space for poets who don't fit elsewhere." Ashley describes it as the venue which "was happy with, but didn't require political work". Even more starkly, Louder Arts was often described as the most "literary" of the venues. Often when phrases such as 'college-educated' or 'quirky' are used, poets mean to imply white. The imprecision of these monikers is obviously overwhelming. While each of these venues generally mimics its reputation in the demographics of its audiences and poets, these perceptions are often simply phantoms of expectations rather than harshly enforced rules. As Miranda describes it, "(Bowery is) a place where you can be loud and exaggerated and performance is important. It's also a different crowd, it tends to be a little older, it attracts more white folk, I think it attracts more white poets... and there are poets of color...I can't find my place at Urbana...sometimes I feel uncomfortable telling my stories because these are hard things to say" (Miranda 2011). What is most telling from Miranda's quote is the mechanism that regulates her. It is not through any formalized structure but rather through an amorphous feeling. Tim Cresswell's work "In Place/Out of Place"⁵ offers a useful theoretical framework for how places take on social meanings and can regulate conduct. "There is nothing logical about such observation; neither are they necessarily rules or laws. Rather they are expectations about behavior that relate a position in a social structure to actions in space" (Cresswell 1996, 3). In this moment Cresswell is describing the social codes in the explicitly

5 Cresswell's work engages with the maintenance of order in public spaces. He explores three case studies, the most illustrative of which is the use of "common Sense" in the rhetoric to ban homeless people from Grand Central Station in NYC.

hierarchical space of the office. These restrictions remain even in the implicitly hierarchical space of a slam. These behavioral norms are constantly shifting based on the space and the perception of that space by poets and audience members. These restrictions are not clearly codified but simply a feeling reflected by the space and the audience.

The split between the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe and the Bowery Poetry Club is inevitably rooted in their history. The Bowery was founded by Bob Holman after being expelled from his role as slam master at the Nuyorican. The confrontation between Migel Algarin, founder of the Nuyo, and Holman is one of slam legend. By the time of my field work this clash had, by and large, dimmed into a collective memory. While still informing the state of inter-venue relations now, many of these old conflicts have faded as their primary actors have slipped from roles of leadership and public view. Still, the still simmering tension must be understood within its historical context.

Holman started the slam at the Nuyorican and was instrumental in the re-opening of the Cafe after years of economic hardships. He was widely regarded as the vessel for slam into New York City and through his trademark combination of absurdity and bravura catapulted the Nuyorican to new heights of recognition. This new-found influence did not come without a cost. The Nuyorican, and Holman at the forefront, went on to eclipse others within the slam movement. Internally, slam seemed to redefine the image of the Nuyorican nationally, as Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz writes in her history, Words in Your Face. “For many outsiders, Holman—a white, half-Jewish guy from Kentucky—became the face of the Nuyorican, which had originally been imagined as a cultural center for New York Puerto Rican artists...People were under the impression that Holman was the sole founder of the Nuyorican” (Aptowicz 2007, 151). It was in the wake of this success that Holman's tension with Algarin grew. By 1996, the tension became insurmountable (Aptowicz 2007). To be fair, it would be a mischaracterization of their deteriorating relationship and falling-out to paint it solely in racial terms. That being said, race is an unmistakable undertone within their tension. Indeed, Aptowicz cites an

article published in the Village Voice about the Nuyorican, in which one of the major concerns raised was Holman's role in, “gentrifying the neighborhood as well as the poetry community” (Aptowitz 2007, 154). Holman's whiteness cannot be ignored in his ability to expand the appeal of the Nuyorican. While difficult to empirically prove retro-actively, it is possible with Holman at the forefront the Nuyorican appeared more palatable for white poets and, most centrally, for white dominated media. There are many variations on the story, but all end with a bitter split between Algarin and Holman resulting in Holman's expulsion from the Nuyorican. When asked about the fissure, Algarin said, “Everybody feels it's a personal drama between Bob and me. And it just isn't. It's a larger issue: that you cannot use people and their institutions to promote yourself” (Aptowitz 2007, 153) It is clear that Algarin has a vested interest in downplaying personal drama and painting the issue as one that is about larger dynamics of exploitation. The split shook the community which found itself divided into “Bob's people” and otherwise.

Holman went on to found the Mouth Almighty team which took nationals in 1997. Holman then turned his sights to a long-time goal of founding a poetry venue. The Urbana series started from humble beginnings; a black-box theatre's basement as their venue, a rack of Pabst Blue Ribbon as their bar. But, in 2002 Holman opened the Bowery Poetry Club, still home to the Urbana series (Aptowitz 2007).

The Nuyorican's early and sustained prominence has left a mark on slam. As was explored above, within slam's value system, which rewards emotionally evocative material and 'authentic' stories of oppression, it is a relatively widely held belief that coming from an oppressed group will help a poet get better scores. The inversion of the power dynamic created by a form which honors stories of personal struggle in conversation with narratives of systemic oppression is effectively undermined as those from the dominant group can effectively appropriate and re-use the stories of oppressed peoples. This dynamic rings as true across lines of racial hierarchy as it does across gender. While each

functions differently even as they intersect, there are some striking similarities in strategies of silencing marginalized voices.

The idea that people of color, specifically black people, have an advantage within slam is perpetuated through a variety of mediums. Informally, this idea ripples through the community constantly. Raphael's quote from chapter 2 remains telling, “ One of the most hilarious expressions of white privilege ... is a white (male) poet who doesn't feel they get good enough scores bitching that they wish they were black, or openly gay, or female because they feel like they'd be more successful in slam” (Raphael 2011). Without repeating my previous analysis, suffice it to say that this is a sentiment I encountered many times, in varying degrees of brashness, over the course of my field work. It is not, however, only white people who subscribe to this belief, as Kevin, a young black poet said in our interview. “There's not a favoritism, but a benefit, in being African-American in slam poetry and having a struggle. There's a benefit to being a woman with a dark story, but sometimes the story plays out that the women don't do as well as the men and that African-Americans do better than other races in poetry but that's sometimes the way it is” (Kevin 2011). While he sees the connections between the 'dark stories' that black poets and women have access to, he is quick to accept that 'women' would do worse while 'African-Americans' would do better. Further, his implicit dichotomy seems to create mutually exclusive categories or at least to conceive of 'women' as white women. To be fair, male dominance in the slam scene is abundantly clear to anyone observing a room of successful poets. White supremacy is decidedly more insidious as the upper echelons of slam are not overwhelmingly white poets. However, I would object to the idea that black poets have an advantage over white poets. There is still a larger color-blind ideology at play that can silence poets of color off stage. Given slam's unpredictability, much depends on the specific moment, the space and the demographics of the audience and judges. As explored earlier, with Anderson's potential inability to connect to James' poem because its subject matter would be deeply foreign to him, it would make sense than an audience would want to hear

experiences that resonate with them.

The idea that black poets, particularly black male poets, have an advantage in slam moves beyond internal murmurs and is the central argument of the best known scholarly work on slam, Susan B.A. Somers-Willett's The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry. Sommers-Willett argues that, “The preponderance of and anxieties over black expression in slam suggest a pattern of identity performance and reception -- especially as it occurs between African-American artists and white, middle-class audiences -- that is the foundation of American popular culture” (Sommers-Willett 2009, 12). Despite the potentially dangerous oversimplification of 'American popular culture', Sommers-Willett does evoke an important point about the politics of black performance to white audiences. Situating her analysis within the legacy of minstrelsy, she highlights the potential for tokenizing and minimizing power dynamics. In a moment of biting critique, she writes, “Because of slam's liberal leanings... poets condemning racism may be applauded for their writing, performance, and message, but they may also be rewarded in part because the audience does not want to appear racist.” (Sommers-Willett 2009, 80) By and large, her analysis is insightful; the very public system of affirmation in slam lends itself to peer pressure, both positive and negative. The trouble in this argument is that it makes invisible the members of the audience who are not white but rather who connect with the work simply because it speaks to their experiences. Sommers-Willett goes on to focus on the praise and power to be found in a ghetto-centric black male masculinity. She finds this performance of authenticity to be recapitulating dangerous power dynamics. That a black poet could only be deemed authentic within a narrow framework informed by constrictive conceptions of blackness is disconcerting.

However, I am wary of the over-simplification within Sommers-Willett's work. Indeed, within the New York scene, the priorities seem to have shifted. While stories of oppression from black men are deemed authentic, they are also often quickly categorized as cliché and ignored. For black female poets this is often even more the case, as they are constrained by the expectations of femininity that

unabashed anger would be off-putting to audience members, as well as the constraints of their race.

Often I saw the work of poets of color being obscured by stereotypes. In much the same way that female poets are silenced, being punished for being angry as well as being punished for being sensitive, poets of color often face oversimplification by other poets and audiences as “an angry black man or woman” as they express anger at a racist system. In one particularly glaring instance among many, a white poet said to me of Angel Nafis' work, “If you want a repetitive race poem, she's good for it. But otherwise, she doesn't have a lot of range.”

An analysis of a poem by Angel Nafis entitled “Black Girl Plays the Dozens with Doctor Seuss” After Terrance Hayes reveals how absurd and problematic this oversimplification is.

Black girl can jump two ropes at one time
Black girl day is everyday
Black girl day is not today
Black girl don't get sun burn
Black girl is ashy
Black girl, no she didn't
Black girl name her sons after her boyfriend
Black girl cocoa butter
Black girl grease and Black girl pick
Black girl white pearl
Black girl hate Black girl
Black girl juice
Black girl perm
Black girl at the ocean floor
Black girl but never black woman
Black girl with no shoes
Black girl in heels
Black girl in kicks Black girl gets kicked
Black girl beast
Black girl manifest O

Black girl bessie and billie too oo
Black girl can drink flask like a man
Black girl is mixed girl
Black girl other breast
Black girl exotic
Black girl other
Black girl thinks he cute
Black girl thinks she bad
Black girl jada janet anna mae than tina turner Beyonce
Black girl twelve shadows
Black girl has one door, it is locked, the key is white
Black girl has no windows
Black girl can't vote
Black girl/ my black ass
Black girl shuck
Black girl Tick
Black girl lip gloss
Black girl third world
Black girl, Birth world
Black girl eyes
Black girl heart
Black girl pregnant
Black girl one choice
Black girl, Black voice
Black girl too dark
Black girl superimpose
Black girl mansion
Black girl college
Black girl lunch table
Black girl hips
Black girl in heat
Black girl hot comb
Black girl no home
Black girl ack white

Black girl white flight
Black girl promotion
Black girl token
Black girl rap
Black girl on black back
Black girl scholarship
Black girl stank
Black girl white deodorant
Black girl clear deodorant that turns white
Black girl white teeth
Black girl white bones
Black girl white noise
Black girl white politics
Black girl black history from White ass pen
Black girl white teachers
Black girl dad work for white boss
Black girl mom clean white ass
Black girl grave
Black girl still jumping two ropes, at once
tryin not
to get hung.
(Nafis 2011).

Angel Nafis' poem offers biting and necessary commentary. Through the lens of racial and gender politics, Nafis explores the myriad manifestation of individuals constrained within a patriarchal and white supremacist system. At best it is deeply ironic, at worst deeply disturbing, that someone could hear this work and only glean “repetitive race poem” from it. Indeed, it seems as if the words 'Black girl’ were the only ones heard.

Rather, through this poem Nafis engages with the many contradictions of her existence. She approaches this from many different angles, dealing with racial violence, perceptions of gender and

economic realities. The most jarring juxtaposition is the one which bookends the poem, the transition from, “Black girl can jump two ropes at one time” to “Black girl still jumping two ropes, at once/ tryin not/to get hung.” Moving from the image of a childhood game to a brutal and recognizable image of lynching demonstrates the possible levity pressed against the constant threat of danger present in her life. When Nafis writes, “Black girl but never black woman” She concisely criticizes the gender politics which minimize and silence black women.

Nafis engages with the absurdity of essentializing black women with close and contradictory lines. “Black girl with no shoes/Black girl in heels” challenges the equation of race with class and allows for conceptions of black women beyond poverty stricken victims. When Nafis writes “Black girl promotion/Black girl token” she can illuminate the false promises of assimilation as even limited economic success does not lead to acceptance as an individual and as a human.

Since many of Nafis' poems engage with the issues of race, they become oversimplified and categorized as 'race poems.' However, this poem is far more nuance and complex, dealing the intersections of race, gender and class. In a noteworthy connection to dynamics of heterosexism, I observed the same process of brute categorization in reference to a queer poet's work. He often wrote love poems to other men, but rather than being referred to as a prolific writer of love poems I often heard members of the community complain that he was writing 'gay poems'. Again, his difference in perspective from the straight, white male norm came to eclipse the actual breadth in his body of work. This same phenomenon is prevalent in poetry outside of Slam in the larger spoken word circles as well as in academic poetry.

This asymmetry is also evident in the comments I have received on my own work. I refer to my whiteness in many pieces. However, I have never been accused of writing exclusively 'white' poems. Rather, my work is differentiated by other white poets because, even as I seek to illuminate it, my whiteness remains normalized and obscured. This can be understood through the lens explored earlier

around Anderson's lack of focus towards James' poem. "Perhaps, whites – and maybe even all racially identified people the United States – are socialized, implicitly, to recognize people of their own color, first and foremost, as individuals, allotting everyone else to the crucial shadow category for the individual – groups" (Hartigen 2010, 11). As Hartigen illuminates, it is possible that in sharing a racial background with white poets, my work can be understood as nuanced and complex while poets not writing from a male, white, heterosexual perspective would be categorized and viewed as cliché.

In slam's beginning, stories of oppression from people of color were traded at a premium. Indeed, for many the function of slam was to allow marginalized voices an arena to speak. However, slam has evolved aesthetically while white supremacy has remained firmly entrenched. One of the many pitfalls of slam as a social justice project, a way it is often conceived and promoted, is that long-term work toward a more just society does not always fall into consistently new and evocative stories for consumption. A black male poet Robert described it as such, "We've developed a racial tolerance, this insensitivity to certain issues. A poem about race that would have been a 30 in '06 ain't a 30 now because we've heard that story before" (Robert 2011). Within this context, tolerance seems not to refer to a type of cross-cultural understanding but rather to bewilderment with the subject matter.

This premium for innovation has opened the door for a new type of poem that engages with narratives of oppression: the self-aware anti-racist poem from a white poet. Through a similar, though not identical, mechanism through which constructions of alternative masculinity are rewarded, the self-aware anti-racist poem allows for white poets to access the cultural capital gleaned from 'understanding' or even being aware of struggles of people of color. Now, the white poet can access this cultural capital without the pitfalls of stereotypes imposed upon poets of color. In a moment of succinct insight, white poet Adam Falkner said, "As I write more and more about privilege I realize it is a privilege to write about privilege. I will never be written off as an angry person of color. Rather I am held up as an enlightened white person" (Falkner 2011). Like the image of the sensitive new man,

within the dominant narrative of colorblindness the white person aware of structural violence is such a novelty and a rarity that simply the identification and critique of white power is awarded. My poem entitled “1034 Lincoln Pl”, which attempts to deal with the issue of gentrification from a self-aware anti-racist perspective, offers an example:

1034 Lincoln Pl

On a rooftop in Brooklyn,
Like sentries spotting land off the Santa Maria,
We fry flesh to exalt our imperial founding fathers.

To honor their legacy
we are monochromatic,
or rather,
ranging from beige to lilly white.

Against the soundscape of fat sizzle
begins the barrage of irony,
A friend says,
“Fuck these hipsters.
You know when we moved in
we were the only white people on the whole block.
Now they're putting in a wine bar in across the street.”
Another responds
“Yeah, it's bullshit man.
Now it's all skinny jeans and piercings.”
Caught in the shine off his earring, I wonder:

Did Columbus ever complain about the biters?
Did Cortez drop that he hit Mexico before it was cool?
Or did Pizzaro claim he knew the “Real Peru”?

And me,
as I pen this poem
I am melting into the polyester seats
in the laundromat
of the neighborhood
I am currently stealing.

I know this block
only from the safety of my rooftop,
hidden behind the harmonica rollick

of someone else's blues

I drop the word Brooklyn
too often into conversation
as a concussive badge of authenticity,
like it could wash
the blood from out
this skin,
unhinge me from the history
that gave me this quiet penchant
for decimation

Nine blocks west,
the barbarians
who coined "Civilization"
are massing

masked only to myself,
Shrouded in artist,
radical,
Self-aware.

I am their scout.
These boot prints plough concrete
upturn corner conventions to plant coffee shops and "culture",

This skin claims territory with the insidious ferocity of a missionary whisper,
traded the
crackle of gun powder for the dull roar of bulldozer,
armor for Armani
bullets for budget lines

leave,
or we will develop you.

I sit on my front stoop like a flagstaff punctured into dirt,
Slouch like the stockade at Jamestown,
hair flutter like banner over the border check point

I pick groceries like corn for the first thanksgiving.

Please know
that this is not about guilt.
Guilt does not resurrect projects from the dust
settled into condo welcome mats.
Does not sprout tomatoes in the Whole Foods parking lot.
Alone it paralyzes and does nothing.

This is about context,
about my reflection vibrating in that washing machine,
about where?

Can I put this body,
scraggly and still sputtering,
without leveling livelihoods in my wake

But I shop local
 And the rent goes up
I am finding myself
 And the rent goes up
I study sociology
 And the rent Goes up
I speak this poem
 and the rent goes up.

So I sit in this laundromat and
load my blankets
in the vain hope
of washing out the small pox.

Taken out of the context of slam, I do believe this poem does some worthwhile anti-racist work. Using the framework proposed in George Lipsitz' work, The Possessive Investment in Whiteness, there are a few aspects of this poem that would qualify it as anti-racist. Lipsitz writes about shifting the frame of analysis away from the problems of black people in the United States to the ways in which white people's behavior reinforces racist systems. After being asked about "the Negro Problem in America", Richard Wright replied, "There isn't any Negro Problem; there is only the white problem" (Lipsitz 1998,1). Lipsitz applauds Wright's answer: "Wright called attention to its hidden assumptions - that racial polarization comes from the existence of blacks rather than from the behavior of whites, that black people are a "problem" for whites rather than fellow citizens entitled to justice" (Lipsitz 1998, 1). Ideally, this poem would re-center the focus around my actions other white people rather than continuing to focus on "the Negro Problem." Further, Lipsitz discusses one of the dominate modes of thinking about racial inequality among white youth. "The belief among young whites that racist things happened in the distant past and this it is unfair to hold contemporary whites accountable for them

illuminates broader currents...these young people associate black grievances solely with slavery” (Lipstiz 1998, 22). By placing injustice against black people in the distant past, these white youth can maintain the invisibility of current injustice. My intention with this poem was to use the recognizable, and almost-universally condemned, imagery of settler-colonialism to describe the current process of displacing people of color through gentrification, ideally so that current dynamics of oppression could be placed in a historical lineage as well as made recognizable. Further, I hope to actively position myself within the work as complicit in systems of violence, rather than hiding from that reality.

However, this poem is inextricable from the context of slam and its anti-racist value must be analyzed contextually. Here, my perception of the essential contradiction of slam as a tool for anti-racist work reveals itself. Much the same way as attempts to construct alternative masculinities actually serve to silence women's voices, anti-racist work within slam can silence the voices of poets of color. As explored in chapter 2, within the zero-sum competitive framework of slam, one poet's victory means the ability to speak further at the expense of another's silence. Again, bell hook's definition of power as 'commonly equated with domination and control over people or things' (hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* 1984, 84) is instructive. This type of power must be understood as both patriarchal and white supremacist.

Understanding this pitfall, Cheryl Harris' framework of *Whiteness as Property* illuminates the ways my whiteness operates when I perform this poem. Harris identifies the ways in which whiteness has functioned as legal property within the United States, first by broadening the idea of property beyond tangible objects to be “a right, not a thing, characterized as metaphysical, not physical.” (Harris 1993, 103) Of the property functions Harris outlines, *The Right to Use and Enjoyment* and *The Absolute Right to Exclude* are most applicable. Harris describes The Right to Use and Enjoyment of whiteness as, “whenever she took advantage of the privileges accorded white people simply by virtue of their whiteness” (Harris 1993, 110). My whiteness is at play in a few key ways when I perform this

poem. It disqualifies me from the stereotype of 'angry person of color' so even as I am angry while I perform a poem about an issue primarily affecting people of color I will be considered 'insightful' rather than angry. Further, my whiteness allows me to be defined as the 'center' rather than the margin, which allows me to 'use and enjoy' an issue which does not negatively directly affect me, for benefit (hence enjoyment) within the realm of slam. Harris defines The Absolute Right to Exclude as central to property and whiteness, "For manly whiteness has been characterized, not by any inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be 'not white' (Harris 1993, 112). This power of exclusion goes beyond racial identity to encompass many institutions and spaces. If I perform this poem and silence a poet-of-color through my victory, I am accessing my absolute right to exclude. This deeply, and potentially irrevocably, undermines my work's anti-racist value.

As Lipsitz envisions effective anti-racist action, he notes that, "An explicitly anti-racist inter-ethnic movement, however -- one that acknowledges the existence and power of whiteness -- might make some important changes" (Lipsitz 1998, 22). Beyond breaking down color-blind ideology, what is most essential in his description is that it is an 'inter-ethnic movement'. It is not solely in the individual actions of a white poet that valuable anti-racist gains can be made. Rather, much as in effective movements against patriarchy, these gains require communal action and respectful, self-aware alliances.

In the most tangible sense, the poem cannot stand as action on its own. In Sommers-Willett's exploration of white consumption of a poem by black poet Rodger Bonair-Agard, entitled 'How Do We Spell Freedom', she writes, "White audiences, in this case, can reward construction of marginalized identity without having to recognize their own complicity in that construction" (Sommers-Willett 2009, 84). The core function of my poem is to shake the audience members (and myself) to 'recognize their own complicity.' However, I believe that without the follow-up of concrete action, this poem allows for white members of the audience (and myself) to feel good because they critically engaged with the

issue, but not take tangible steps to change their behavior. The poem seeks to openly acknowledge this: “I speak this poem/and the rent goes up.” Shifting paradigms and frames of reference is often an essential first step to effective campaigns toward social justice. But awareness alone does not a campaign make. Indeed, no amount of self-awareness without action can mitigate the displacement my body can accidentally bring. Instead, this work should be a catalyst which propels the type of explicitly anti-racist organizing work Lipsitz imagines off the stage and into the community.

If I and the community surrounding slam poetry are to engage in effective anti-racist work, we must first illuminate the still-insidious ways white supremacy functions in our everyday lives. For a community so bold and unabashed in our proclamations of self and resistance on stage, we must move past our fear to discuss the taboo openly and honestly. It is only through collective action that the New York City poetry slam community can become the truly anti-racist space so many poets dream of from behind the mic.

Conclusion

What preceded was the longest slam poem I have ever written. What follows is the hope of conversation to be continued. As many slam poems are, this is inevitably incomplete. The scene is vast and constantly shifting. I have no doubt that if I could spend more time leaning off barstools at the Bowery or curled into leather couches at Louder Arts I would gleefully re-write this project many times over with many more insights.

Just as a slam poem, this work has been a personal narrative inextricable from my perspective engaged with larger political themes. Just as a slam poem, this work is bound on countless sides by the restrictions of time, theory and most notably my positionality. Just as a slam poem, there is a premium on critical analysis. What this mix of personal revelation and academic inquiry does reveal is my story of entry into the community facilitated by insidious privilege and power. This work has been an exploration of the ways in which privilege functions in the logics which govern the community and the mechanisms of response and repair the community employs.

This work demonstrates the limits of liminal space; even as systemic critique is lodged from the stage, these systems are not simple to detect, dislodge or dismantle. Even if a poem is ached from the stage, if it is instantly forgotten, it cannot shift this world. I would consider this thesis a success if it sparks a response, a critique and a slew of questions. This thesis was written for the community that birthed it. It was written so that we may start a conversation about power and voice in a space so dedicated to a sustained scream.

The New York City slam scene is inevitably a study in contradiction. It is a space of shouts and silence, a space of raucous challenge and invisible domination. Central to this work is the question of slam poetry's viability as a mechanism for social justice. At the end of a year-long exploration, I feel confident to respond with a resounding, "Maybe, but with limits". Raphael said it well, "Poetry can affect an individually profoundly, poetry can bring together people who had never engaged before but

Poetry cannot make your landlord turn the heat on, Poetry cannot get your dentist bill square, Poetry cannot stop a bullet” (Raphael 2011).

Slam poetry unequivocally allows voices to seep through the cracks. Many poets, particularly female poets and poets of color spoke of the empowerment they felt by commanding a room's attention with their words. With systems of domination so effective at producing colonized subjects steeped in internalized racism and sexism, this process of personal empowerment cannot be ignored. The liminal space provided by slam poems does allow for broad social critique.

But, as has been explored, giving voice to injustice within a slam is not without its pitfalls. Slam's premium on stories of personal experience and oppression is often subsumed within successful appropriation of others' stories by those in the dominant group. Self-awareness of privilege is often valued over the lived experiences of the oppressed, effectively reinforcing societal systems of power. As slam poetry's competitive form requires that some voices dominate others, marginalized people may find themselves marginalized again even within slam. Further, slam can only be understood as the seeds of social movement. So often, these seeds are haphazardly thrown without concrete plans to water or care for them. Without concerted follow-through, many of the social critiques lodged in slam become nothing but words. While awareness is an essential part of social justice, it is deeply inadequate without action. Often, these conversations are difficult to have within the scene and even more difficult to move into the larger society.

Outside of the direct competition of the adult slam scene, slam poetry can be used for deeply effective social justice work. Urban Word, the youth slam scene in New York City, which was only briefly mentioned in this work, offers a promising model. Working primarily with youth of color, slam has been employed as an effective way to nurture young poets' and activists' voices. As academic study of slam continues, inquiry of slam poetry youth programs is essential.

Looking back over the expanse of a year of work, I think of the spaces I did not have time to

explore. Although I engage in some intersectional analysis, much more is required. One question woven through this work remains unasked: is the competition necessary? This is particularly germane in light of issues discussed in chapters 2 and 3, that the competitive framework often makes anti-sexist and anti-racist action deeply difficult. If I could continue this project, the next area of study to explore would be the roots of competition as the mortar of the slam scene and its intersections with issues of classism. Classism is particularly difficult to identify as often a poet's physical presentation does not reveal his or her class status in any meaningful way. There are the obvious issues such as the money to enter venues and the ability to take a week off from work to attend the national poetry slam. But, just as other systems of oppression are far more complicated than their immediate manifestation, an interrogation of classism within the scene would require more in-depth analysis.

The issue of competition raises many possibilities for further study. Does the centrality of competition within the NYC poetry scene mimic neoliberal ideology? Does the NYC scene constitute a space of resistance in which poets without class privilege built a system which allows them validation in a world that has marginalized them but values competitive gain? I am afraid the former question is a classic example of a problematic application of theory; pushing that theory onto the scene from the perspective of an academic with class privilege rather than letting the scene speak for itself. The second would require extensive fieldwork as well as historical study. For a holistic understanding, both the historical roots and present-day conception of slam poetry must be explored. These are questions and contradictions that must be considered for a fuller understanding of the NYC slam scene.

While the focus on critical analysis has been essential, it should not obscure the beauty of the scene. As our larger world is most vividly defined by individuals disconnected from each other, unable to traverse the massive gulfs of personal and social barriers that stop honest communication, slam is an arena in which honesty is honored. The slam world offers a necessary respite and outlet for so many

struggling to speak. Slam poetry has built a network of mutual aid, both emotional and material, that allows individuals who could be so easily subsumed in the endless minutia of daily life to develop a community. When a fire damaged Mahogany Brown's apartment, a call went out through the community to support her. Many poets I spoke with talked about a sense of abiding camaraderie, of the many warm couches open to them across the country, of the supportive friendships they had built on a foundation of revealing and guttural honesty.

Prose Poem for Goodbye

There comes a moment, when the academic withered inside me finally sleeps, when the activist's boots against my diaphragm go silent, when I am just here that I must let a single ray of gratitude speak. The New York City slam community is beautiful and breaking. I doubt any poet could disagree. But, for all the grime it has swept off Houston, the reality that the world 'outside' gurgles from our stomachs, the inescapable history of who stole, built and shined the island of Manhattan, there is a reason these poets return. Even laced in the soot of efficient, industrialized oppression, this still-standing sliver of voice offers a gasp of air.

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