

Spoken Word Poetry and the Academy:
Sincerity, Intimacy, and the Spoken/Written Binary

by

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Spoken Word Poetry and the Academy: A Conflicted Relationship

Virtually any study of spoken word poetry begins with a glaring contradiction. The most convenient point of access to these poems is on the page, in collected anthologies or self-published chapbooks. But the very existence of these works, published as they are in static textual form, seems to undermine the free-flowing, improvisational air surrounding spoken word poetry. Moreover, they reign in the poets' dynamic, physical voices in favor of a textuality that gives the appearance of stillness. It is these very voices—at different times hopeful, angry, or sorrowful—that grant spoken word poetry its uniqueness. Most important, then, in this contradiction is the question of the spoken versus written word. What reinforces the spoken/written binary? Does spoken word poetry attempt to resolve or collapse that binary? Or do the separate instances of performed and written poetry serve only to further polarize this distinction? How does the poet's physical voice interact with the poetic voice, and what implications might this have for non-performed poetry?

In addition to the myriad questions proliferated by the very production of these anthologies, the publication of these poems in books grants both the poets and editors of the collections an opportunity to sound off on spoken word poetry's place in culture. In the biographies of the poets, the forewords and afterwords, introductions and epilogues, a plethora of pseudo-manifestos and broadsides reveal precisely what is at stake in the ongoing debates on contemporary poetry. What emerges at the forefront of these pronouncements is a particularly antagonistic relationship to the academy and the elitism that spoken word poets attach to it¹. In a

¹ These monolithic notions of “the academy” and “elitism,” as propounded by spoken word poets, are inherently problematic. Established in this way, the concepts are totalizing; they

way, this anti-academic stance makes perfect sense given the near absence of critical attention focused on spoken word poetry. Maria Damon notes that, to poetry critics such as Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler, spoken word poetry lies far “beyond the purview of what is considered appropriate matter for serious academic analysis” (326). But the actual anti-academic stance put forth by these poets suggests that there is a much larger project at work.

Though each anthology is organized around a different unifying principle, this strong aversion to the academy remains a reliable point of contact between the various collections. In some, the sentiment is relatively subtle. For example, in his foreword to *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Café*, Bob Holman writes, “Poetry has found a way to drill through the wax that had been collecting for decades! Poetry is no longer an exhibit in a Dust Museum. Poetry is alive; poetry is allowed” (2). That is to say, instead of the printed poem exalted by many in the academy (and elsewhere), Holman celebrates the resurgence of orality in the world of poetry. Spoken word has resurrected the “dusty” world of poetry, made it brimming with life again. Indeed, he begins his foreword with an unusual clarion call: “DO NOT READ THIS BOOK! You don’t have to. *This book reads to you*” (1, emphasis original).

In *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop, and the Poetry of a New Generation*, frustration with the academy is presented in a much more blunt fashion.

are constructed in a general fashion without any specific referents. The terms are never actually defined, and therefore, they cannot effectively be challenged. Moreover, recent interpretations of power and knowledge (i.e.: Foucault) make these kinds of terms no longer useful for analysis. As we will see, “the academy” in spoken word poetry becomes automatically prefigured as white, upper-class, and elitist, a configuration that ignores the wealth of diversity that is apparent at many universities and colleges. I do not wish to disregard claims of discriminatory practices in academia, or claim academia as an egalitarian, utopian space. Instead, I merely wish to note the problematic usage of the phrase “the academy,” the troubles of which will be taken up in this study’s conclusion.

In an unattributed prologue, we read of a poetry panel moderated by John Callaway, in which Marc Smith, the creator of the poetry slam, participated. On the dais with him were “the learned and poetic, some with their credentials resting high upon their shoulders” (Eleveld 1). The unknown author, whom we can safely assume to be Marc Smith himself, continues: “Together, this group of poets [...] who sounded as if they had just gotten off the Concorde from Paris, began name-dropping Ivy League pretensions and Nobel Prize winner mentorships” (1). The anti-academic sentiment here is palpable, but the text contains a deeper ideology, one that is strongly intimated when the author writes off the other poets’ comments as “aristocratic bullshit” (1).

This ideology reaches its most specific enunciation in *Bullets and Butterflies*, a collection of queer spoken word poetry edited by Emanuel Xavier. In the introduction to the collection, he joins the chorus of anti-academic voices we have already heard: “As spoken word artists, we have little interest in pretending to come across as academics” (Xavier 15). But it is his later comments that illuminate what is at stake in spoken word poetry, something that was only hinted at in *The Spoken Word Revolution*: “We do not write simply for the applause of an audience but for the belief that poetry, like all art, is not just for the elite. It is something to be shared and appreciated by everyone, regardless of age, education, class, sexual preference” (15).

What happens here is a subtle rhetorical shift that moves through three stages. The first is the kind of anti-academic posturing that seems common to many spoken word poets. In the second stage, however, this anti-academic stance shifts to an anti-elitist stance, a move, that, I would argue, greatly expands the realm of the opposition and is highly politicizing. Finally, to counter the elitism plaguing the world of poetry,

Xavier proposes a democratized, egalitarian notion of poetry and art, one that unites people in the sharing of a common experience.

Xavier is not alone in this proposal. Jessica Care Moore, in the anthology *Listen Up!*, echoes his thoughts: “I wanted to perform for regular folks, and I didn’t necessarily care if academia accepted me or not” (Anglesey 54). Miguel Algarín, co-founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café and editor of the collection *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, states the political issues in clear language: “The new poetry [...] seeks to promote a tolerance and understanding between people. The aim is to dissolve the social, cultural, and political boundaries that generalize the human experience and make it meaningless” (Algarín 9). He later writes, “[t]here need be no separation between politics and poetry” (10).

In many ways, this political proclamation forces a reconsideration of the terms “poet” and “poetry.” If poetry used to be a site of a powerful elitism that has now been challenged by a democratizing spoken word poetry—a claim with which most of its practitioners would likely agree—then it should be more freely accessible to all, at every level. Can everybody enjoy and understand a performance of a spoken word poem? Perhaps. Can everybody produce their own spoken word poetry? Maybe, but most spoken word poets are quick to institute a hierarchy of quality, presumably with themselves near the top. Ishle Park, a spoken word poet herself, says, “to most people in the literary world ‘spoken word poet’ or ‘slam poet’ discredits one from being a real poet. They have reason, because some spoken word poets suck. Because of the performative aspect of the medium, they suck visibly” (Yun 39). The

underlying assumption here is that, first and foremost, Park does not suck, and secondly, that those spoken word poets who do give the art form a bad name.

The poets of *Bullets and Butterflies* serve to dramatize this ambivalence toward the democratization of poetry, and its conflicts with notions of prestige. Some of these queer poets urge a proliferation of poetry, written or spoken: “I want you to write poems that you will never read [...] Read it in front of the audience / with hidden messages just for me”; “give me a / fucking break trade your wings / for ink and write for once / something true / and bloody” (Xavier 146, 170). Others contrarily attempt to establish “poet” as a privileged position: “and it really, really makes me crazy / when somebody everybody anybody / say [sic], I’m a poet / no...you’re not / you read aloud trash!”; “but you would not know these things / because you are not a poet” (126, 196).² Striving to distance themselves from the “aristocratic” elitism of academic poetry, these spoken word poets nevertheless institute a system of judgment, struggling to carve out a new position of popular—as opposed to academic or literary—prestige, one which we might call “street cred.”

The egalitarian/elitist binary, then, runs almost directly parallel to the spoken/written binary. Billy Collins, former poet laureate of the United States, makes this connection explicit in his introduction to *The Spoken Word Revolution*: “To hear a poem is to experience its momentary escape from the *prison cell* of the page, where silence is enforced, to a *freedom* dependent only on the ability to open the mouth—that most *democratic* of instruments—and speak” (3, emphasis added). Here, Collins

² Obviously, these quotes have been taken out of their original poetic contexts. While they may not have originally referred to the notion that anybody can write spoken word poetry, nonetheless, I feel that their appearance suggests a certain preoccupation among spoken word poets with who can and cannot be considered a poet.

introduces the additional parallel binary of freedom/imprisonment, and it is not long before he adds another when discussing “the warmth of voice” versus “the chilliness of text” (4).

The proliferation of these binaries serves only to further separate spoken and non-performed works, which urges the question: can these two polarized forms really coexist in the greater category of poetry? Some, like poet Marvin Bell, celebrate the development of these new forms of poetry, arguing against a monolithic idea of “a” or “the” poetry: “There is no one way to write and no right way to write. If the poets of academic achievement and the poets of the poetry slam still largely dismiss one another, well, poetry is a big tree and not all the branches can be expected to touch” (132). Urging a multiplicity of what we might now call poeties, Bell continues, “Poetry is a great big Yes. Yes to formalists, yes to free verse writers, yes to surrealists, yes to political poets, yes to the poets of wordplay and slippery self-consciousness, yes to the Dadaists, yes to the mystics, yes to the scholar-poets, yes to the punsters, yes to the anti-poetic poets...” (132).

But many spoken word poets and enthusiasts, however, try to lay claim to a greater authority, to a more “real” poetry, by harkening back to poetry’s spoken roots. In *The Spoken Word Revolution*, the publishers offer their comments at the outset of the book: “Poetry was originally an oral art form—and a popular one. Spoken word returns to poetry’s roots” (Eleveld xiii). Marc Smith, commenting shortly after this introduction from the publishers, privileges the spoken word poem as poetry’s primary form: “I think when poetry went from the oral tradition to the page, someone should’ve asked, is that really poetry? I think slam gets poetry back to its roots,

breathing life into the words” (2). This claim of spoken word poetry operating within the authentic, original form of all poetry provides spoken word poets with substantial leverage in their attempt to earn recognition and legitimacy; it functions as part of the larger struggle to elevate their poetry above that which is produced and studied within the elitist world of academia.

Again, this series of issues devolves upon the question of voice and the spoken/written binary. It is important to examine, then, how voice operates within spoken word poetry. But given its unusual performative nature, the question of voice is not a simple one. As Charles Bernstein writes, “[t]o speak of the poem in performance is [...] to overthrow the idea of the poem as a fixed, stable, finite linguistic object; it is to deny the poem its self-presence and unity” (9). I would argue that such a forced fracturing in performance is brought to bear upon voice as well, rending it in two: the poetic voice, and the physical voice of the performer.

Central to spoken word poetry, then, is this strange relationship between the physical and poetic voices. As Cecily Berry, voice director for the Royal Shakespeare Company, writes, “our voice has evolved with us, and is therefore a complex mix of background, physical make-up and personality, and the interactions of one upon the other. And because of this we quite involuntarily make a statement with our voice. This statement has a great deal to do with class, education and cultural background” (16). In this way, the physical voice seems to be intimately bound with one’s own subjectivity; it is one of the strongest ways in which we represent ourselves to the world.

Perhaps it is this implicit connection of voice and subjectivity that grants spoken word poetry its political, democratizing edge. If our voices involuntarily speak to our “class, education and cultural background,” as Berry suggests, then it is unsurprising that spoken word poetry seems to deal with issues of race, class, sexuality, and others, in a way that is more explosively productive than written poetry of a certain kind.

Indeed, the power of the use of the physical voice may be due to an increasing frustration among marginalized writers and scholars with the world of academia. Regie Cabico, in an interview with Lisa Yun, expresses this frustration: “there are some poets who write for White People because they want to fit in academia. Look who controls the Academy—it’s not people of colour” (40). The use of physical voice to perform poetry in public spaces such as bars, cafes, and clubs, circumvents the more strictly controlled channels of publication that would likely deny a great deal of this poetry from ever reaching a receptive audience. For most spoken word poets, the model seems to function something like this: write for yourself, then attempt to win over the audience through the poem’s performance.

While the question of the political power of the physical voice is a compelling one, the present discussion of voice begs the introduction of two related terms found in much poetic theory: sincerity and intimacy. In written poetry, these terms direct themselves exclusively to the poetic voice. But in spoken word poetry, the physical voice often complicates issues of sincerity and intimacy. Namely, how do spoken word poets project sincerity to their listening audiences? Is it purely achieved via the physical, vocal performance of the poem, a performance that, as Cecily Berry

reminds us, would be inherently tinged with autobiography? If this truly is the case, then what happens when the poem's speaker—the poetic voice—is not the (sincere or otherwise) poet themselves? The profound polyvalence in such a poem would inherently problematize the physical voice's link to subjectivity. How might this disjunct between poetic voice and physical voice be resolved? Or, if such a task is impossible, what productive conflicts might it engender?

Another curious shift brought on by the physical voice is visible in the way self-referential moments in the poems are both conceived and received. The Modernist poets of the early 20th century made powerful use of these self-referential moments by intentionally drawing attention to the constructed nature of poetry, to its great artifice. In spoken word poetry, I am given to wondering if lines such as “I want him to hear this poem / to understand the bliss,” or “This poem was born / the night we rode / the Tube to Brixton / somewhere between / laughing and crying,” are meant not to indicate a certain artificiality of affect, but instead to conjure an image of the poem as a refuge in a cold world, as the only place in which people can still access real, true, deep emotions (Xavier 103, 109). If poetry has indeed been reconfigured by younger generations to be a more “real” expression of emotion and personal experience regardless of its mediation through a sort of artifice, it seems almost undeniable that the personal, vocal performances of poetry are essential to the experience of these “real,” “true” emotions.

This “real”-ness, this perceived authenticity, does a great deal towards producing effects of intimacy and sincerity in performance. Comparing spoken word poetry to that great performance art, theater, Charles Bernstein writes, “[i]n contrast

to theater, where the visual spectacle creates a perceived distance separating viewers from viewed, the emphasis on sound in the poetry reading has the opposite effect—it physically connects the speaker and listener, moving to overcome the self-consciousness of the performance context” (10-11). While it could easily be argued that a great deal of modern theater directs itself towards the very ends Bernstein ascribes to spoken word poetry, his thoughts are echoed by both spoken word poets and their audiences who claim to share a powerful physical and intellectual bond in spoken word cafés.

In light of this personal connection, especially when considered alongside a great deal of spoken word poetry’s content, it is tempting to view much of this new performed poetry as an extension or evolution of the confessional poetry of the 1950s and 60s. In many ways, this is not an unreasonable assumption. Spoken word poets frequently explore profoundly personal issues in their work, and they address these explorations directly to their listeners in a form that we might characterize as confessional.

But if we are to consider spoken word poetry as a modern reconfiguration of the confessional poetry of the 50s and 60s, it will have to be a radical one. Maria Damon notes,

Though the content of poems read at slams and open-mike readings can be just as privatistic as poems primarily produced for consumption through silent, individual readings-on-the-page, the fact of their public declamation in relatively democratized spaces—bars, clubs, etc.—suggests that they participate in poetic activity with roots in a collectivity not conventionally recognized as a prime origin of literary—particularly poetic—production. (332)

If, indeed, spoken word poetry is something like the modern incarnation of confessional poetry, its highly public positioning forces us to reconsider the nature of these confessions. Unlike the written “performance” of a poem, the spoken performance allows the poet-performer an opportunity to physically (that is, aurally, visually, and perhaps bodily) connect with the members of the audience. When such a performance is committed to a static textual form to be published, this connection is ostensibly lost. The bond experienced through confessional poetry cannot be classified as a physical one, but instead one of affect, of personal experience, a link that spoken word poetry builds upon through the use of the physical voice.

Clearly, this perceived personal connection between poet and audience, with its insinuations of sincerity and intimacy, is nothing new for poetry. What spoken word poetry does, then, is change the nature of this connection. Of course, generally we can always imagine this bond as one between poet and audience. But before the performance of poetry began to be popular, it might be more accurately termed a bond between poet and *reader*. Spoken word poetry transforms this connection to be one between *performer* and audience, or perhaps even *performer* and *listeners*.

It is this final instance, which may ultimately prove most interesting in considering the role of intimacy in spoken word and confessional poetry. After all, if we sit down with John Berryman’s *Love & Fame*, we might imagine ourselves in a one-on-one relationship with the poet as he reveals various, presumably autobiographical moments of sexual conquest and despair. This same type of one-on-one relationship, I would argue, simply cannot exist in the realm of performed poetry. One might feel particularly rapt by a poet’s performance so that the rest of the world

seems to drop away, but it would be virtually impossible to ignore the presence of the rest of the audience—the poet is performing for them, as well. If there were a way to quantitatively measure intimacy, we might ask the question, “Which is more intimate: sitting alone in a room reading a poem by a particular artist?; or having that artist physically present before you, performing that poem for a greater collective of which you are only a part?” Because this gesture at objective, scientific measurement seems misguided, we must forego this question in favor of one that is perhaps more productive: how does performed poetry change the concept of intimacy, and what implications might this have for the way we read non-performed poetry?

Before continuing further, it becomes crucial to delimit some of the theoretical terminology applied here. As has already become apparent, the concepts of sincerity, intimacy, persona, and the confessional are strongly linked yet highly contested sites, and any one static definition for any of them is immediately subjected to a certain slipperiness of use. It will be useful to trace a brief history of sorts for each of these terms, to provide a context for the ways in which their meanings have been introduced, disavowed, or reconfigured over time, and to establish working definitions for the study at hand.

We begin with perhaps the most straightforward term, intimacy. The Oxford English Dictionary notes the first usage of “intimacy” in 1641 with a meaning of “[t]he state of being personally intimate; intimate friendship or acquaintance; familiar intercourse; close familiarity; an instance of this” (“Intimacy”). When used in poetry criticism, the term remains relatively consistent, typically referring to a certain closeness in the relationship of poet to reader. Whitman is often cited as a master of

so-called “intimacy effects,” of aesthetic and rhetorical tricks which construct a fiction of a close personal friendship (or perhaps an erotic relationship) between poet and reader through which the poem is read and interpreted. Such intimacy effects also seem to arise almost automatically in the lines of confessional poetry, often characterized by a direct address to the reader in simple vernacular. These stylistic choices help to construct the notion of this poetry as “confessional,” as an “unmediated” expression that flows directly from its source to its receptacle, the reader.

In confessional poetry, then, intimacy is often directly tied to the much more contestatory term of sincerity. Sincerity, usually meaning some form of pureness of affect, or lack of dissembling or deceit, began its ascent in the 17th century, and the period of its strongest influence is undeniably the Romantic. The term holds an incredibly tenuous place in the vocabulary of literary critics; it has been celebrated, derided, deconstructed, and reinstated throughout the past few centuries. While some critics have argued for its utter destruction and removal from the semantic domain of literary criticism, others (correctly, I would argue) urge the former to consider the tremendous impact of sincerity and its legacy, which, even if one disagrees with the concept itself, cannot be effaced.

Lionel Trilling, whose 1971 book *Sincerity and Authenticity* is one of the major works on the subject, casually defines the term by writing that it “refers primarily to a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (4). Donald Davie subtly alters this definition when he acknowledges that a poet is sincere if “the ‘I’ in his poems is always directly and immediately himself” (4). Sincerity, then, allows the

reader access to the poet's mind and soul through their words. We experience their emotions and thoughts as true, real, or genuine—a powerful quality for any art form to possess.

Yet this quality is inherently problematic, as many critics have demonstrated.

Herbert Read, in *The Cult of Sincerity*, provides a beautiful elucidation of this point:

All art is artifice, and therefore no work of art is sincere. Once we become conscious of a feeling and attempt to make a corresponding form, we are engaged in an activity which, far from being sincere, is prepared (as any artist if he is 'sincere' will tell you) to moderate the feeling to fit the form. The artist's feeling for form is stronger than a formless feeling. Art is the definition, the delimitation, of feeling. (18)

The formal nature of poetry—that is, poetry as artifice—instantly problematizes any coherent notion of sincerity. Even the most formless poetry is still mediated through a series of constructs—figurative language, grammar, poetic tradition—that, as Read explains, profoundly shape any work of art, and deal a harsh blow to proponents of sincerity.

Trilling proclaims the poetry of the American modernists to be a sharp diversion from that of the Romantics, who idealized and strived for sincerity in their work. He argues that the modernists “took the position that, in relation to their work and their audience, they were not persons or selves, they were artists, by which they meant that they were exactly not, in the phrase with which Wordsworth began his definition of the poet, men speaking to men” (8). This elevated position of artist—one that appears notably elitist, as some spoken word poets might claim—ostensibly does away with any possibility for sincerity, and by the same token, intimacy.

Trilling, Davie, and Read all present compelling arguments concerning the place of sincerity in poetry, but it is Deborah Forbes' recent work, entitled *Sincerity's*

Shadow, to which my understanding of the concept is most indebted. She openly acknowledges the incredibly troubled position that sincerity occupies in the academy and succinctly summarizes the ways in which critics have been able to argue against it:

Ever since sincerity was claimed as a possible aesthetic goal, critics have been adept at listing all the reasons that statements insisting upon their own honesty must be treated with suspicion: no statement is made without at least an implied listener, a social context that influences its making; human feelings and perceptions are so fluid and fleeting that it is impossible to give any true static account of them; [...] and in literary works an author who wishes to be sincere has to contend not only with the distorting properties of language, but also with a potentially distorting imperative to make or discover beauty, coherence, or meaning. (4)

Rather than using these failures as a point of entrée for a diatribe on sincerity's uselessness as a concept for the study of poetry, Forbes urges us to look to these shortcomings as productive loci, sites that are made increasingly complex when we bring the concept of sincerity to bear upon spoken word poetry. Maintaining this somewhat negative perception of sincerity—that is, attempting to read into its gaps or, perhaps, gaping holes—she marks it “as a destabilizing, rather than stabilizing, factor in our reading of poetry, a concept more likely to cast shadows than to illuminate” (5).³ Although Forbes focuses her study on British Romantic and mid-twentieth century American poetry, this notion of sincerity is well suited to the spoken word poetry produced within the last twenty years.

Pushing against a wave of anti-confessional sentiment, Forbes writes, “poetry is primarily an act of self-expression, and [...] this idea should not, as it sometimes is,

³ As may already be apparent in this brief introduction to my study, these notions proliferate an astonishing wealth of questions and considerations, many of which are beyond the scope of this project, but all of which deserve detailed and passionate examination.

be associated with poetic weakness but instead be understood as a source of formal innovation and strength” (10). Because much of spoken word poetry operates, as we will see, in the confessional mode, Forbes’ words seemingly fight back against attempts to delegitimize spoken word poetry as merely personal rants, or disheveled lines taken from a diary or journal. The tremendous self-expression and, as Forbes dubs them, “sincerity-effects” present throughout much spoken word poetry begs us to consider the power such effects have and the ways in which the performed word radically alters our notion of the concepts of sincerity and intimacy.

Since this study will make repeated reference to the confessional mode, I would like to detail something of the history of this term, and the various ways that it has been used by critics. Though the world’s best-known confessor is perhaps St. Augustine, its foremost theorist on the confession is Foucault. Succinctly put, Foucault argues that there is a perceptible shift in the history of the confession whereby it changed from being a punishment, a means of extracting information from unwilling victims—a la the confession of the criminal on trial in *Discipline and Punish*—to a mode of self-expression, a liberating free-giving of information from one individual to another. It is this latter notion that has most readily persisted into the 21st century, and it is this same idea of the confession that drives confessional poetry.

The poetry most immediately thought of as confessional first arises in the 1950s. Including celebrated authors Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, among others, the confessional poets represent a stark change from the modernist poets of the 1920s and the tenets of New Criticism. In an chapter of his

Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry entitled “The confessional moment,” Christopher Beach writes that confessional poems were often “presented in the first-person voice with little apparent distance between the speaker and the poet; they were highly emotional in tone, autobiographical in content, and narrative in structure” (154-5). He continues, “[t]he mode of confessionalism [...] served as a model for poets who chose to reject modernist difficulty and New Critical complexity in favor of a more [...] personal voice. It also allowed poets to articulate feelings, thoughts, and emotions that challenged the decorum of an era marked by its containment of psychic needs and desires” (155). It is clear from Beach’s description that the proliferation of intimacy- and sincerity-effects is palpable in these texts, and it is likely these effects that most contributed to confessional poetry’s longevity. Indeed, Thomas Travisano, whom Beach quotes, writes that “[p]oems involving daring self-revelation could be assumed to be bold and sincere” (154).⁴

As popular as confessional poetry was and is, these presumed autobiographical works have been met with a great deal of criticism over the past fifty years. Instead of viewing the collected works of the aforementioned authors as a movement in the world of poetry, some critics opted to deploy the adjective “confessional” as something of a pejorative term, denoting a simplistic, unskilled, even plebeian effort. Donald Davie, in his essay “Sincerity and Poetry,” puts forth a harsh critique of the confessional poem:

⁴ However strongly the moniker “confessional” has come to adhere to these poets, it is important to note that none of them would have originally applied it to themselves. M.L Rosenthal claims to have coined the usage in a 1959 review of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*, a work that we will examine later. This usage designates the various elements of style and structure which Beach outlines and has continued to be used as a category ever since.

[C]onfessional poems have been the order of the day, with the predictable consequences—the poem has lost all its hard-won autonomy, its independence in its own right, and has once again become merely the vehicle by which the writer acts out before his public the agony or the discomfort [...] of being a writer, or of being alive in the twentieth century. (4-5)

In Davie's reasoning, the poem loses its exalted status as independent literary object when it becomes more intimately tied to its author. The autobiographical nature of the confession derails the poem from ever satisfying the demands of the complex, often impenetrable, modernist poem: "Now we have once again poems in which the public life of the author as author, and his private life, are messily compounded, so that one needs the adventitious information of the gossip columnist to take the force or even the literal meaning of what, since it is a work of literary art, is supposedly offered as public utterance" (5).

Perhaps Davie lashes out at this type of work because great emphasis is placed on the author, and not the writing itself. Producing most of his work in the 1960s and 70s, firmly within the era of postmodernist thought, Davie seems to be channeling Barthes' notion of the "dead" author: "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (142). We will return to postmodern theory—and theorists Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida—later when discussing the spoken/written binary and questions of voice, but for now, suffice it to say that Davie seems strongly influenced by these thinkers when he slams the confessional poets for a certain kind of egotism: "over this Byronic sort of poetry there necessarily falls the shadow of a divided purpose: the poet confesses to discreditable sentiments or

behavior, but in doing so he demands credit for having the courage or the honesty of his shamelessness” (7).

Such an attitude makes Davie wary toward some confessional poets, but perhaps more than any other facet of their work, it is the great sincerity they are attributed that propels him to criticize. He writes, “among the hoary fallacies which the new confessional poetry has brought to life among us is the notion that we know sincerity by its dishevelment; that to be elegant is to be insincere” (7). But, perhaps like Forbes, Davie urges us to consider the fact that even the most autobiographical poetry is always already delimited, that “the confessional poet [...] presents only a trimmed and slanted image of himself” (7). He argues against the linking of the confessional poem and sincerity by introducing the mediating factor of the persona—that is, the poet “may still be thought to be revealing to us not a personality but a persona” (7).

The notion of persona is an ancient one, originating in the ancient Greek theater tradition, and has been productively applied by critics to a great diversity of poetry. Modernist poets such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot frequently made use of personae to “[enforce] a division between writer and work. The original motive for such objectivity seems genuine enough: to rid poetry of biographical excesses and the residue of the Romantics’ preoccupation with personality which had seduced attention from the true object of interest, the poem itself” (Mills, qtd in Maio 7). Perhaps part of Davie’s effort is a wish to revert so-called confessional poetry back to the impersonal, persona-based poetry of someone like Pound.

Toward this end, he introduces the concept of persona to confessional poetry, severing the direct link from author to reader. In Davie's re-configuration, I understand the "persona" of the confessional poet to be the elusive "sincere poet" that readers expect to find in such works. That is, because it is impossible to fully achieve sincerity due to the many mediating factors of the form of the poem, poets must attempt to construct a sincere persona that effaces sincerity's failures while constructing a seductively, yet falsely, intimate relationship to the author. After this brief critical and theoretical detour, we must re-engage the body of work in question, whose practitioners, I will argue, develop alternate forms of this "sincere poet" persona in performance.

If the poet that works purely in texts develops these sincerity-effects through words only, then spoken word poets are seemingly given an advantage, with two sites within which to demonstrate sincerity: the performance of the poem both on the page and on the stage. While many spoken word poets pride themselves on their ability to create work that "can stand on its own" on the page (a phrase which Maria Damon derides as "fetishized" and "reliquary"), it is undeniable that most spoken word poems are given real life only when performed (338). The performers themselves freely use this configuration; all we have to do is recall Marc Smith's claim that the performance of poetry "breath[es] life into the words" to see how this claim is elaborated (Eleveld 2).

Unquestionably, the use of the physical voice in these performances is central to the production of sincerity-effects. Again, I find it illuminating to quote Forbes at length, as her study implicitly marks for us the ways in which the concept of "voice"

in spoken word poetry has so dramatically altered our conception of both intimacy and sincerity:

When we encounter a poem for the first time, we confront a voice unmoored from its context, isolated as if it has suffered some disaster or has risen for some special purpose of celebration. This voice may alert us to its gender, historical period, or situation, but our sense of its circumstances remains fragmented; it addresses us apart from the interpersonal relationships that ordinarily call forth speech. The voice is intimate [...] but also public, immediately raising questions of authorial intention and collective meanings. Human and artificially constructed, tangible and disembodied, personal and anonymous, the voice opens the question of what can be transacted between it and us.
(1)

The first distinctions that Forbes makes here seemingly apply only to poetry as expressed through the technology of writing. On the page, that is, a poem (and its voice, its speaker) truly is both isolated and contained by the physical confines of the paper. As such, the poetic voice presents itself only in that short flash of lines and stanzas, “fragmented” and “disembodied.”

It might be argued that spoken word poetry has developed its own set of frameworks (physical and otherwise) that structure the reception of voice. The stage, the microphone, and the spotlight—all of these elements serve to sever the performer from their listeners, to neatly excise them from the context of the social world and reestablish them as artists ready to deliver their latest work. And yet, somehow, spoken word performers seemingly manage to overcome these gestures toward separation and present themselves as “real,” that vague and elusive modifier that serves as a badge of honor in spoken word circles.

The reason for this felt authenticity proceeds from the physical performance of the poems. Unlike the poetic voice that Forbes reminds us is “artificially

constructed,” “disembodied,” and “anonymous,” the physical voice commands a powerfully personal presence, one that constructs a direct link between performer and audience. Furthermore, listeners are within close physical proximity to the living body, the poem’s source in at least two ways: the original creative drive that created it, and also the vocal center from which it issues in performance. Furthering this perspective, Anne MacNaughton claims that “[t]o experience a poem ‘spoken’ by the poet is to be present at the moment of creation, for once a poem has been composed, ‘written,’ the energy of its creation is accessible anew each time it’s spoken aloud” (101).

Contrary to Barthes’ notion of the absent author, the performance of spoken word poetry enforces the very real, breathing presence of the author with a certain level of perceived intimacy that is simply impossible to achieve via poetry’s textual form. While there are, of course, questions of how intimate an author’s performance to a large crowd can really be, the unique form of spoken word poetry allows it methods of achieving intimacy that are unavailable to the written word. The quintessential example here is the fact that anyone in the audience can close their eyes and still engage in an aural experience of the poem, perhaps imagining themselves in direct conversation with their friend, the poet-performer.

But can this presumed direct link between poet and audience truly hold up? Are not these sincerity- and intimacy-effects mere illusions that crumble when subjected to greater scrutiny? The present study examines these effects in spoken word poetry in a variety of contexts in order to observe how they might manifest

themselves differently from those in other works. But first, it is important to examine what sincerity and intimacy look and feel like in these non-performed works.

The first chapter of this study attempts to provide a sense of the ways in which sincerity and intimacy appear in instances of American poetry in the last hundred years or so, tracing the various ways that such effects can be produced. The second chapter turns to spoken word poetry itself, noting how it draws on these earlier instances of intimacy and sincerity to produce a powerful sense of authenticity. But the study of spoken word poetry *in performance* tremendously complicates these notions, destabilizing spoken word poets' claim to "realness" and direct accessibility, two of their most potent claims over so-called academic poetry. I use this instability of sincerity and intimacy as a means of prying open the binary oppositions continually employed in the debate over spoken word poetry. As we will see, spoken word and academic communities have a great deal to gain from one another if only they would attempt to come together in a meaningful way. This task may seem daunting at first, but ultimately, the two communities will be shown to be much more alike than either would readily admit, and their joining to be a very real, exciting possibility.

The Poetics of Personality: Sincerity and Intimacy in Whitman and After

While the preceding theoretical descriptions of intimacy and sincerity demonstrate the critical fracas over the terms' precise definitions and usages, it is important to examine specific poetic instances that invoke or, alternatively, deny the sense of closeness and rapport that these concepts suggest. For our starting point, it may be that there is no finer, more crystallized instance of sincerity and intimacy in all of Anglophone literature than in the works of Walt Whitman.

Widely celebrated and studied, Whitman is considered by some to be America's most influential poet. Certainly his legacy becomes clear as poet after poet in the 20th century defines his or her work in relation to Whitman's. Some, like T.S. Eliot and other modernists, whom we will examine later, sought to distance themselves from the strong emphasis on personality in Whitman's work. Others strive toward a Whitmanian poetics, one that utilizes intimacy- and sincerity-effects to such a powerful degree that one feels almost as though the poet is communicating with them from beyond the grave.

Perhaps the most obvious instance of such effects can be found in Whitman's life work, *Leaves of Grass*. In a short poem entitled "Full of Life Now," the speaker of the poem, whom one cannot help but identify as Whitman himself, directly communes with his future reader:

Full of life now, compact, visible,
I, forty years old the eighty-third year of the States,
To one a century hence or any number of centuries hence,
To you yet unborn these, seeking you.

When you read these I that was visible am become invisible,
Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me,

Fancying how happy you were if I could be with you and become your
comrade;
Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with
you.) (287)

The poem feels wholly permeated by Whitman's being. We are immediately presented with autobiographical details from Whitman's life: in "the eighty-third year of the States," 1859, Whitman was indeed forty years old. Furthermore, in the context of *Leaves of Grass*, the reference to "my poems" inevitably becomes configured as "this book of poetry that I, Walt Whitman, have written and you, my future reader, are consuming." Whitman's mastery of sincerity-effects ensures that the seams between speaker and poet are sealed shut—Whitman, it seems, has always already posited himself as the speaker of this poem, and the poem itself provides virtually no leverage with which to argue otherwise. The poem, that is, provides us with direct, seemingly unmediated access to the historical, "compact, visible" Whitman.

But perhaps the line of the poem that should give us the most pause is its last few parenthetical words, "Be not too certain but I am now with you." These lines powerfully evoke Whitman's ghost, whom we can imagine standing behind us and announcing his presence with a soft whisper in the ear. It is an effect that eerily builds upon the psychic intimacy suggested by the poet's insinuation that the reader wishes that Whitman "could be" a "comrade." These are both intensely personal and unsettling moments in the poem that Freud might (rightfully) dub uncanny, and they serve to strengthen the imagined bond between reader and poet, which Whitman so tirelessly cultivates throughout his work.

Helen Vendler, discussing “Full of Life Now” in her work *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman and Ashbery*, relates the three “unmistakable marks of Whitmanian intimacy” in the poem: “the poet’s direct remarks to an invisible addressee of future time [...]; the poet’s capacity to intuit his invisible listener’s thoughts [...]; and a faith in the mysterious power of poetry to convey presence” (34). Indeed, these intimacy-effects appear in much of Whitman’s work, intentionally deployed to create a warmth and sense of closeness, however uncanny or phantasmagoric.

It makes sense, then, that “Full of Life Now” is not the only instance of “supernatural” intimacy in *Leaves of Grass*. Another curious example can be found in “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand.” The poem’s first lines seem to position the speaker addressing a potential suitor: “Whoever you are holding me now in hand, / Without one thing all will be useless, / I give you fair warning before you attempt me further, / I am not what you supposed, but far different” (Whitman 270). Indeed, much of the poem can be read this way, as the speaker delicately pushes away what he calls “a candidate for my affections”: “Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further, let go your hand from my shoulders, / Put me down and depart on your way” (270).

But, as many commentators have aptly noted, the poem can easily be read as a direct address from Whitman to his future readers, as in “Full of Life Now.” By means of a strange transmogrification, it seems, Whitman has transformed himself into the material, physical incarnation of his body of work, a metamorphosis that allows the reader direct access to the poet. For instance, take this stanza: “Or if you

will, thrusting me beneath your clothing, / Where I may feel the throbs of your heart
 or rest upon your hip, / Carry me when you go forth over land or sea; / For thus
 merely touching you is enough, is best, / And thus touching you would I silently sleep
 and be carried eternally” (271). Whitman implores the reader to take him along “over
 land or sea,” perhaps carried in a jacket (“Where I may feel the throbs of your heart”)
 or pants pocket (“rest upon your hip”). And again, as Vendler highlights, there is an
 emphasis on the poet’s ability to read minds as, presumably, he knows what his
 addressee “supposed” he was. Indeed, one cannot help but feel Whitman’s presence
 and hear his voice in this poem, an achievement made possible by his adept weaving
 of intimacy- and sincerity-effects into his work.

Another moment of Whitman *as* book can be found in the oft-discussed poem
 “Song of Myself.” While many critics focus on the question of the self within the
 poem, I wish to highlight a passage in which Whitman’s efforts to personally connect
 to his reader become the focus of the poem. Bearing in mind the metaphor at work in
 “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” when we encounter these words near
 the poem’s conclusion, we inevitably imagine Whitman himself as their speaker:
 “Listener up there! what have you to confide to me? / Look in my face while I snuff
 the sidle of evening, / (Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute
 longer.) / [...] Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?”
 (246-7)

Again, this shift of address begs us to feel the presence of the historical
 Whitman within the pages of the book, on its black-and-white surfaces. The
 conversation he attempts to initiate remains markedly one-sided, as any attempt to

establish a real dialogue is foreclosed by the text in stasis on the page. But nonetheless, there is a felt closeness with the poet in these words, especially the line within the parenthesis, which parallels the final “whispered” line of “Full of Life Now.” After imploring the reader to “[l]ook in [his] face”—that is, down at the pages of the book—he asks them to “[t]alk honestly,” under the premise that they are alone together but for a little longer. Indeed, the poem ends not long after this address, and Whitman’s presence evaporates in the blankness of the page.

Despite his masterly deployment of intimacy- and sincerity-effects, Whitman’s poetry unwittingly exposes the cracks and imperfections of these terms, showing them to be highly problematic. In this same portion of “Song of Myself,” Whitman writes, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (246). Though it is suggested throughout the poem, it is only at this moment where Whitman’s sincerity becomes truly questionable. These lines plant a seed of doubt in the mind of the reader, who is forced to consider the possibility that the speaker might, in fact, be more appropriately called the *speakers*. The speaker’s insistence that he “contain[s] multitudes” troubles the illusion of sincerity—and consequently, of intimacy—by prying apart the seams between poet and speaker, thereby flooding the notion of “speaker” with a bevy of potential selves.

These doubts appear even in the most intimate of Whitman’s works. In “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” for example, the speaker says, “I will certainly elude you, / Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold! / Already you see I have escaped from you” (271). This escape

effectively dismantles the sense of closeness felt throughout the poem as the speaker informs his audience that he has slipped away, thus begging the question: who, then, is speaking? In “Full of Life Now,” too, the intimacy and sincerity projected by the speaker becomes questionable. In the final line in which Whitman announces his presence to us, we must be careful not to ignore the important qualifier that he includes: “*Be not too certain* but I am now with you.”

In the early part of the 20th century, a handful of poets who would later be included as part of the modernist movement transformed this doubting of the concepts of intimacy and sincerity into a full-blown reproach. My goal here is to provide a sense of the reactionary way in which some later poets responded to Whitman. Simultaneously acknowledging his greatness while criticizing some of his poetic methods, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound developed a poetics that orbits around the notion of impersonality and its rejection of sincerity and intimacy as ideals.

One of the most famous elaborations of this impersonal poetics can be found in Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” First published in 1919, the essay details Eliot’s configuration of the relationship between the poet and his literary forebears. The argument ultimately devolves into an enunciation of the poetics of impersonality, including the oft-quoted line, “[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 204). For Eliot, then, the poet’s presence within a poem and the sense of closeness that it brings must be expelled from the work of art. Those

poets who fail to extricate their personalities from the work they produce, Eliot implies, have failed as artists. This theory of impersonality can be seen in practice in Eliot's greatest and perhaps most challenging work, *The Waste Land*.

First published in 1922, *The Waste Land* has been tirelessly researched and written about to the present day. The poem is known for its intensely complicated thread of erudite literary allusions and high level of difficulty for first-, and even second- or third-time readers. Part of this difficulty derives from questions of voice within the poem. Like Whitman's "Song of Myself," *The Waste Land* contains multitudes: different locations, different characters, different voices. It is this polyvalence that forecloses the possibility for sincerity and intimacy within the poem, a denial that is reinforced throughout the work by Eliot's esoteric allusions.

The clearest instance of Eliot's rejection of sincerity and intimacy can be found in the second part of the poem, entitled "A Game of Chess." In the first part of this section, Eliot depicts a husband and wife sitting together in their lavish mausoleum of a living room. As the wife struggles to begin a conversation with her husband, Eliot rapidly cycles between voices, delivering both her spoken words and the husband's interior thoughts:

"What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
"I never know what you are thinking. Think."

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

"What is that noise?"
The wind under the door.
"What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"
Nothing again nothing.

"Do
You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

“Nothing?”
 I remember
 Those are pearls that were his eyes.
 “Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” (*Collected Poems* 74-5)

As Eliot shifts back and forth between perspectives, the reader is left to wonder: who, exactly, is the speaker of this poem? In contrast to the instances of remarkable intimacy found in Whitman, the polyvalence of the poem makes locating Eliot within the work virtually impossible. Indeed, the wife’s insistence that “I never know what you are thinking,” as well as her wondering “Are you alive,” points to a coldness and distance in her relationship with her husband after which Eliot seems to model his connection with the reader.

The second portion of this section of the poem, which begins with an abrupt change of location, serves only to heighten this confusion around voice. In the scene presented here, a presumably lower-class woman gossips about a friend of hers: “Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart. / He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you / To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there. / You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set, / He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you. / And no more can’t I, I said, and think of poor Albert” (76). Though it is clear that there is but one woman speaking these lines, the rapid repetition of pronouns, especially when we consider the multiple levels of ventriloquizing, throws into question the stability of the “I” of the poem.

Discussing *The Waste Land*, Maud Ellmann writes that “the speaker cannot be identified with his creator, not because he has a *different* personality, like Pruffrock, but because he has no stable identity at all. The disembodied ‘I’ glides in and out of

stolen texts, as if the speaking subject were merely the quotation of its antecedents. Indeed, this subject is the victim of a general collapse of boundaries” (92, emphasis original). This collapse is readily seen in the latter portion of “A Game of Chess” as, throughout the speaker’s fast-paced relation of gossip, another voice, its difference clearly marked by all capital letters, repeatedly proclaims “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME” (*Collected Poems* 76). These interjections, coupled with the “stolen texts” to which Maud Ellmann refers—for example, those familiar with Shakespeare will recognize “those were pearls that were his eyes” from *The Tempest*—further disrupt the stability of the speaker, and help keep the historical Eliot at a distance.

If there is any hope of locating Eliot within the work, it seems to reside, not in the actual poetic material of the poem, but in its footnotes. There, if we had been consistently frustrated by Eliot’s absence in the poem, we might hope to uncover some insight into the complicated web of allusions he weaves, a brief parley, however secondary, with the mind behind the work. But, of course, given Eliot’s vehement denunciation of personality in poetry, the footnotes prove perhaps even more frustrating than the poem itself.

For every footnote that illuminates Eliot’s inspiration and thought processes there is another that serves only to further confuse the reader about its meaning and organization. For the line which reads, “Flowed up the hill and down King William Street, / To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours / With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine,” Eliot includes the note, “A phenomenon which I have often noticed” (*Collected Poems* 71, 92). Or there is the note to the line “O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter” in which Eliot “explains” that “I do not know the origin of the

ballad from which these lines are taken: it was reported to me from Sydney, Australia” (79, 93). These bizarre remarks hardly deserve the title of footnote, explaining little and further shrouding an already enigmatic Eliot while serving to cast doubts upon the authority of the poet.

If *The Waste Land* eschews intimacy and sincerity by destroying the conceptual unity of the speaker, then Ezra Pound, a friend of Eliot’s, often achieves such an effect through the use of a coherent persona that is impossible to conflate with the poet. In one of his earlier poems, “Cino,” Pound constructs the persona of an Italian troubadour, Cino Polnesi, who wanders “the open road” in “Italian Campagna 1309” (*Personae* 6). This first real line which establishes the setting immediately forecloses any possibility of locating Pound within the poem. He has already placed some three hundreds years of distance between speaker and poet, and the poem itself only lengthens this distance.

For example, at one moment, Cino sighs, “I have sung women in three cities. / But it is all one. / I will sing of the sun. / ...eh?...they mostly had grey eyes, / But it is all one, I will sing of the sun” (*Personae* 7). In a strange way, the fourth line seems to parallel the Whitmanian speaker’s ability to intuit the thoughts of his reader. However, Pound’s version profoundly troubles the intimacy that Whitman strives to achieve. The line presents the illusion of the speaker, Cino, having an interaction with the reader, but Pound’s insistence on the specific setting makes such an interpretation impossible. Even if we were to ignore questions of setting, Cino, unlike Whitman’s speaker’s intuition in “Full of Life Now,” is incapable of perceiving the thoughts of his interlocutor; not only does the person who speaks with

him *directly* state his thoughts—presumably, “what color were their eyes?”—but Cino’s “eh?” implies that the interlocutor has had to repeat themselves. Thus, rather than drawing the reader into direct interaction with an already-removed persona, Pound alludes to a conversation that occurs partially outside the poem, creating another layer of distance with which to shut readers out.

Pound’s desire for impersonality is also visible in his Imagist poems. One of the original major proponents of the style, Pound wrote that “[a]n ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time [...] It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits” (“A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste”). I would argue that the imagist poem might also give a sense of freedom from the speaker himself.

The most famous Imagist poem is arguably Pound’s own “In a Station of the Metro,” first published in 1913. The work consists of two crisp lines: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough” (*Poems and Translations* 287). The poem is, indeed, a beautiful example of the concision Pound celebrated in Imagist poetry. But at what cost? Perhaps obviously, this poem lacks a verb. By a certain grammatical logic, then, one might argue that it also lacks a subject, making the poem pure object. I would posit that this lack of an active subject problematizes the notion that the poem has a definitive speaker, thereby eradicating any hope for sincerity and intimacy.

To put it another way: because we know the process of creation behind “In a Station of the Metro” from Pound’s essays and letters, it should be easy to recognize

that the absent subject of the poem is the historical Pound himself. One can imagine, however poetically inferior to the final work, the first line beginning “I saw the apparition...” However, given the problematic lack of a verb in either of the poem’s two lines, and the implied absence of the poet as active subject/speaker, Pound manages to preclude the possibility of a certain kind of sincerity in lieu of excising a frozen image from his mind and setting it adrift.

By the middle of the 20th century, some poets had grown tired of the relentless impersonality pursued by Pound, Eliot and other—though by no means, all—modernists who took up a similar style. Soon, a new mode began to emerge that welcomed and celebrated personality, and generated new possibilities for sincerity and intimacy in poetry: the confessional mode. Indeed, these poets, as Robert Phillips puts it, were “determined not to lie in verse” (1). Writing in everyday vernacular, the confessional poets’ “subjects are most often themselves and always the things they most intimately know. The emotions that they portray are always true to their own feelings” (1). By and large, these poets wedge open a tremendous space for the personal, and in doing so, revive many questions surrounding notions of sincerity and intimacy.

Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*, published in 1956, is considered to be one of the most influential works of the confessional mode. In part four of the work, subtitled “Life Studies,” the poet embarks on a notably autobiographic poetic project. The first poem in this section, “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” begins with a setting in much the same fashion as Pound’s “Cino,” only it is one that we might link directly to the poet’s life: “1922: the stone porch of my Grandfather’s

summer house” (59). In 1922, Lowell was but five years old, and the speaker confirms our biographical connection: “I was five and a half” (61). But it is not just these historical details that work to conflate poet and speaker; Lowell composed the poem in such a way that it produces a conversational effect, in which the speaker attempts to draw the reader back to his last day at his grandfather’s summer house in 1922.

Take, for example, the beginning of the second stanza:

One afternoon in 1922,
 I sat on the stone porch, looking through
 screens as black-grained as drifting coal.
Tockytock, tockytock
 clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock,
 slung with strangled, wooden game.
 Our farmer was cementing a root-house under the hill.
 One of my hands was cool on a pile
 of black earth, the other warm
 on a pile of lime. (59-60)

This direct, conversational tone—replete with a variety of sensual details—creates the illusion of Lowell’s presence, sadly recalling his last afternoon spent with his uncle. The “I” is unequivocally Lowell, and because the poem lacks a visible “you” whom the speaker engages the reader can be drawn further into this seemingly direct communion with the poet.

This connection is made possible, I would argue, by the past tense of the poem. One could easily imagine a more regressive version of this work in which the speaker attempts to re-embody his five year old self and describe the afternoon from that vantage point. Such a poem would complicate any potential connection with the speaker, even if on temporal issues alone: the speaker would, in fact, exist only in 1922. But because the speaker looks back to this afternoon from a future vantage

point, the speaker can then address all future readers. Additionally, it allows for a certain amount of mournful retrospection in the speaker's voice as he foreshadows his uncle's eventual death: "No one had died there [the summer house] in my lifetime... / Only Cinder, our Scottie puppy / paralysed from gobbling toads" (60). One cannot help but feel Lowell's presence within the poem, or imagine him to be near as he sadly relates his last hours spent with his uncle.

The narration of past events in a direct, conversational tone is a style that runs throughout this final section of *Life Studies*, which details some of the most important events in Lowell's life. The poem "Sailing Home from Rapallo," however, slightly disrupts the consistency of this style by incorporating a "you" that the speaker addresses at the poem's beginning, a "you" that we soon discover is Lowell's dead mother.

As if it were an epitaph inscribed on her tombstone, Lowell begins his address to his mother, "Your nurse could only speak Italian, / but after twenty minutes I could imagine your final week, / and tears ran down my cheeks..." (77). But this deviation in style is brief. The voice then immediately shifts its focus back to an anonymous listener, employing a style of address much like the one in "My Last Afternoon": "When I embarked from Italy with my Mother's body, / the whole shoreline of the *Golfo di Genova* / was breaking into fiery flower. / [...] Mother traveled first-class in the hold; / her *Risorgimento* black and gold casket / was like Napoleon's at the *Invalides*" (77, emphasis original). This tone thus reestablishes the connection between reader and poet following the unusual stylistic break at the poem's beginning.

Furthering this relationship are many of the autobiographical details we have come to expect from the “confessional” poets. Lowell’s references to his “family cemetery in Dunbarton,” his mother’s relatives, the “Winslows and Starks,” or the fact that on the coffin, “*Lowell* had been misspelled *LOVEL*” all function as sincerity-effects; we, as readers, feel that we are given access to the real, historical Lowell (77, 78). But these effects operate in tandem with a different kind of language that, I would argue, gives the poem an immediacy, a directness that most powerfully connects the reader to the poet in spite of the initial address to Lowell’s mother that initially disavows that connection.

When describing the family cemetery, Lowell makes a reference to his father’s grave: “The only ‘unhistoric’ soul to come here / was Father, now buried beneath his recent / unweathered pink-veined slice of marble” (78). It may seem foolish to attribute so much power to two small adverbs, but I would argue that the inclusion of “here” and “now” in these lines does much to connect reader and poet. The effect of their use is to transport the reader to the “here and now” of the poem, to the Lowell family cemetery in Dunbarton shortly after Lowell’s mother’s burial.

In this way, the address to Lowell’s mother at the poem’s beginning can still be integrated into the “confessional” style of the work. One can imagine Lowell kneeling at his mother’s grave speaking those lines before slowly standing and turning to address the reader, talking about the family cemetery as together they walk among the “fir trunks [...] as smooth as masts” (77). The deployment of “here” and “now” dissolves the temporal and geographic gap between present-day readers and

the historical Lowell, producing a powerful effect of presence that works to overcome the rupture of the reader-poet relationship at the poem's beginning.

As both "My Last Afternoon" and "Sailing Home from Rapallo" represent Lowell's attempts to deal with personal tragedy, it is important to note that these poems are not exceptions in *Life Studies*; in fact, many of the poems in this volume focus on devastating events in Lowell's life. This focus contextualizes a foreword that Lowell wrote in 1966 for a poet whose work is well known for its angst and sorrow. In his introduction to Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, Lowell writes, "[e]verything in these poems is personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever" (vii). Lowell's qualification here is particularly apt when we compare his straightforward, uncomplicated style to Plath's sometimes racing, chaotic, cryptic language. Indeed, much of her work can feel strange, disconnected, or hallucinatory in a way that would seem to foreclose the possibility for the kind of intimacy and sincerity felt in Lowell's work. Yet there is a way in which even her occasional ambiguities allow for a strong sense of trust and connection between reader and poet.

In "Lady Lazarus," Plath draws upon the biblical figure in order to write about her repeated suicide attempts: "I am only thirty. / And like the cat I have nine times to die. // This is Number Three. / What a trash / To annihilate each decade. // What a million filaments. / The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see // Them unwrap me hand and foot-- / The big strip tease" (6-7). In a way, the reader is complicit with the "peanut-crunching crowd" anxious to see the speaker's "resurrected" body following her latest suicide attempt.

On the other hand, the speaker confides in the reader in a way that sets them apart from the medical voyeurs anxious for “the big strip tease”:

The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call. (7)

Indeed, the “you” of the reader is privy to information withheld from the others (the distant “them” of the poem) when the speaker reveals part of her motivation for the suicide attempts. The detached quality of the speaker’s voice belies the deeply personal nature of this moment in which she differentiates accidental from intentional suicide, and gives some deeper psychological insight into her intentions. In fact, this privileging of the poet-reader relationship via pronouns appears again in the next poem of the collection.

As in “Lady Lazarus,” there is a way in which Plath’s deployment of pronouns in “Tulips” helps to solidify the alliance, as it were, between poet and reader. Much like the preceding poem, “Tulips” portrays members of the medical establishment—the “nurses,” “anaesthetist,” and “surgeons” of the first stanza—as an unwelcome, almost menacing Other, a distinctly marked “they” distanced from the

speaker's "I" (10). The speaker notes, "They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff / [...] The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble, / They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps, / Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another, / So it is impossible to tell how many there are" (10). The persistent repetition of "they," "them," and "their" distances these other characters while implicitly aligning the "I" of the speaker and the reader against them.

The intimacy-effects present in the poem might also be attributed to the poem's content. The poem reads like a letter written by Plath, recovering in a hospital following one of her suicide attempts. The intended recipient of such a "letter" is unstated, but the tone is profoundly intimate: the poem is equal parts description of the hospital on one hand, and, on the other, the exteriorization of the speaker's personal thoughts and emotions, which have grown increasingly troubled by the arrival of a bouquet of red tulips:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
 Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
 Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
 Their redness talks to my wounds, it corresponds.
 They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
 Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,
 A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck. (11)

Thus, what would otherwise appear to be a kind, if trite, gesture becomes reconfigured as a disturbing, ponderous presence in the poem by means of the intimacy that Plath affords the reader.

And, it should be noted, this intimacy further unites the poet and speaker in the face of an oppressive other. By the middle of the poem, the "they" has shifted from medical personnel to the flowers themselves, but as Plath confesses her fears

about the tulips, the reader also comes to see their inherent danger: “The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals; / They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat” (12). The reader finds themselves drawn into the poetic reality created by Plath and ultimately aligns themselves with her, in opposition to “them.” This hallucinatory style present in Plath’s “Tulips” can readily be found in some of the poetry of a more iconoclastic coterie of poets: the Beats.

Beat poetry emerged in America in the late 1950s—more or less concurrently with the so-called confessional movement—and gradually began to develop into a full-fledged literary movement. “Like the confessionals,” Christopher Beach writes:

the Beats were responding to the alienating social and ideological structure of America during the Cold War, but their response was framed in very different terms: where the psychic violence of confessional poems was directly inward and largely contained by the use of traditional forms and language, the poetry of the Beats was more outwardly defiant and countercultural [...] and made no concession to traditional codes of language or social behavior. (“The New American Poetry and the postmodern avant-garde” 190-191)

Perhaps no one best represents this divide more so than one of the most famous Beat—and, some would argue, American—poets, Allen Ginsberg.

Ginsberg’s poetry has been described as “surrealist,” and “unpredictabl[e],” but it has also, importantly, been marked as “nakedly confessional” (“The New American Poetry” 190, Phillips xiv). Indeed, much of his poetry developed directly out of his personal experiences, and the autobiography at work in his poems can often be profoundly felt. However, as Beach suggests above, Ginsberg did not belong with the likes of Lowell or Plath because, as Robert Phillips put it, “the lack of form in his long-line narratives with their sloppy diction, syntax, and rhythms has been found unsatisfactory if not inferior” (xv). I would like to suggest that this “sloppiness”

ultimately engenders a somewhat unique problem with the question of intimacy in Ginsberg's work.

"Howl," Ginsberg's best-known poem and arguably the most famous work of the Beat movement, begins with the infamous lines: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix" (9). In reality, the entire first section of "Howl" is but a rambling continuation of this sentence until it concludes with a period several pages later, but not before detailing the activities of these "best minds of [Ginsberg's] generation." Ginsberg writes of the ones "who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull," or "who sank all night in submarine light of Bickford's floated out and sat through the stale beer afternoon in desolate Fugazzi's, listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox" (9, 11).

These lines suggest the problematizing of intimacy. I would argue that there are two approaches to evaluating the power of sincerity- and intimacy-effects in Ginsberg's work. Both rely on the model I have employed throughout this study: that is, sincerity- and intimacy-effects are strongest felt when a poem includes some autobiographical detail—a scaffolding of sorts—but this detail must also be accompanied by a certain style and usage of language that actively works to connect the reader to the poet. Interestingly enough, this model can be applied to "Howl" with two remarkably different results.

The tremendous cataloguing of the activities of the "angelheaded hipsters" whom Ginsberg writes of in Part I contains abundant references to personal events in

the life of the poet and his friends, including Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Neal Cassady. The allusions have been tirelessly documented by literary historians and biographers of Ginsberg, and this research has shown just how intimately personal so much of “Howl” really is. Yet, in a way, intimacy utterly fails here, as Ginsberg’s often confusing, meandering lines provide little space for the reader to cultivate a connection with the poet.

In this way, the poem lends itself to an unusual comparison with *The Waste Land*. As I have noted, Eliot’s poem is rife with a complicated network of literary and cultural allusions, many for which a first-time reader without a great deal of literary education would require some explanation from a knowledgeable source. Similarly, the allusions in “Howl,” though of a notably personal as opposed to literary strain, are often couched in vague language (“who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade”) and can be difficult to decipher without an intimate knowledge of the lives of Ginsberg and his associates (16). In this way, we are presented with a sort of “insider intimacy”: those readers in the know might be able to more readily locate Ginsberg within the poem than others who might be confused by the poet’s often vague, hallucinatory allusions.

On the other hand, an argument could be made for the unrelenting psychological intimacy of Ginsberg’s poem. That is, the personal allusions can be somewhat vague, the pace can be frenetic, and the language surrealist precisely because the poem represents a textual recording of Ginsberg’s own consciousness. Indeed, as Richard Howard notes in *Alone with America*, it seems as though Ginsberg

“is after the poem *discovered* in the mind and in the process of writing it out on the page as notes, transcriptions” (149). Such an approach creates the illusion of an intimate, honest exchange with the poet, a sort of direct mental communing. Thus, when Ginsberg embarks on his hallucinatory harangue against Moloch (read: industrial society) in Part II of “Howl,” the reader is able to visualize the poet’s alarming metaphorical leaps: “Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!” (21)

The problem presented by this kind of “stream-of-consciousness” writing appears frequently in an analysis of spoken word poetry. In fact, in many ways, Ginsberg stands out as an important predecessor of the spoken word movement of the 80s and 90s. It was his lively performance of “Howl” at the Six Gallery on October 7th, 1955—as well as the obscenity trial which followed the poem’s initial publication—that many critics argue kicked off the Beat movement and propelled Beat poets into the national spotlight.

More than garnering media attention, Ginsberg’s reading at the “Six Poets at the Six Gallery” event prefigures a great deal of more contemporary spoken word performances. Beach notes, “The gallery itself—a converted auto-repair shop which had been set up as a kind of informal theater—was hardly a traditional venue for poetry readings. While Ginsberg read ‘Howl,’ [...] Kerouac cheered him on by yelling ‘Go!’ at the end of each line” (“The New American Poetry” 190). A far cry from the more reserved formal academic readings of the day, to be sure; but perhaps not altogether dissimilar from the often raucous atmosphere of the Nuyorican Poets

Café, or other spoken word performance spaces. It is these spaces to which we turn now, to examine the ways in which spoken word poetry deploys intimacy and sincerity both on the page and in performance.

“Performing” Spoken Word Poetry: On the Page, On the Stage, and Elsewhere

The time has finally arrived when poetry as an interlacing art is being heard from again. It informs, it motivates, it challenges, it makes for pleasure. It is entertaining. It is a live form of recreation. It couldn't have been said twenty years ago; not even the Beats managed to take poetry out of the coffeehouses. Yet now it is on television, on radio, in the movie houses, and in numberless clubs around the country where live performances of the poem have taken root.

-Miguel Algarín, Introduction to *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, 18-9

Miguel Algarín's remarks on spoken word poetry privilege the performed instance of a poem over all others. Perhaps this should be obvious: the very qualification of poetry as “spoken word” directly implies the performance of such work. However, it is important here to recall Charles Bernstein's insightful remarks on the notion of a poem's performance:

Even leaving aside the status of the manuscript, there often exist various and discrepant printings—I should like to say textual performances—in magazines and books, with changes in wording but also in spacing, font, paper, and, moreover, contexts of readership; making for a plurality of versions, none of which can claim sole authority. I would call these multifoliate versions *performances* of the poem; and I would add the poet's own performance of the work in a poetry reading, or readings, to the list of variants that together, plurally, constitute and reconstitute the work. (8)

When considering spoken word poetry, it is especially important to bear in mind this possibility for multiple performances of a work, textual and otherwise.

For a long period of time, writing was the most widely available, accessible, and fastest technology of recording. In recent years, however, both audio and video recording have become more and more accessible to the public, and reproduction of these recordings is now remarkably quick and relatively inexpensive. The result is that spoken word poetry, as Algarín notes, has begun to appear everywhere: in live performances across the country, of course, but also in books, on CDs, and on DVDs.

Each of these various performances changes how we might think about the poem in question, and I would argue that each provides a different understanding of intimacy and sincerity.

If it is indeed the multiple “variants” of a poem that constitute a work, as Bernstein suggests, then the various performances of spoken word poems challenge the coherence of notions of intimacy and sincerity with their differences. In this chapter, I will attempt to show the ways in which intimacy and sincerity in spoken word poems can be radically altered when we consider performances on the page, on the stage, and in audio/video recordings. Taken together, these performances proliferate a variety of effects whose conflicts engender important questions for all poetry.

Spoken Word Poetry on the Page

Contradictory though it may seem, I wish to begin my analysis of spoken word poetry with the written, rather than performed, instances of poetry. After all, with the exception of those few performers who are capable of freestyling, all spoken word poems begin as words and phrases on the page. As such, the page becomes the primary site for the production of intimacy- and sincerity-effects, and many spoken word poets, as we will see, prove quite adept at creating this illusion of closeness and honesty.

In the previous chapter, I attempted to provide some sense of what intimacy and sincerity in poetry have looked like over the past hundred or so years. Spoken word poets often claim some of these earlier poets—Whitman, Lowell, Plath—as

influences and inspiration, both for their refusal to separate poetry and personality, and the style that emerged as a result. Indeed, perhaps the most widely cited influence on spoken word poets is Allen Ginsberg, whose performance of the powerful poem “Howl” not only garnered national attention for Beat poetry, but arguably revolutionized the modern poetry reading. Indeed, Beau Sia writes in his own “Howl” that “the ginz [...] set fire to one hundred and eighteen million minds / in this world, / becoming lou reed, bob dylan, billy burroughs, and my answer to the / question, / ‘who has influenced you in this life?’” (Eleveld 179)

Sia is somewhat representative of younger spoken word poets. Born in 1976 and raised in Oklahoma City, his first experience of spoken word poetry was on MTV in the early nineties. After arriving in New York City to attend New York University’s Dramatic Writing Program, Sia became a regular at the Nuyorican Poets Café and began to hone his writing and performing abilities, earning a great deal of attention as he won poetry slam after poetry slam. His poem “Howl” developed out of this time spent in New York, during which he forged a friendship with Allen Ginsberg shortly before the poet’s death in 1997.

Sia’s “Howl” moves with the kind of conversational ease we have experienced elsewhere with personal, “confessional” works. His sentences are grammatically uncomplicated—even if their structure is not—but they are charged with the emotional conflict of one attempting to mourn a friend: “sure, some days / he was an asshole, / [...] but for each of those asshole moments, / there is the simple beauty / of him cooking mushroom omelettes, / and / him exposing me to the ways of Buddhism (that which my ancestors taught / him)” (Eleveld 179). Here, as in

Whitman, we see the use of the parenthetical aside in which the speaker interjects an underlying thought into the body of the poem.

As suggested above, Sia's difficulty in mourning Ginsberg also manifests itself structurally, with longer, rambling lines of many syllables sharply juxtaposed with a few cropped lines. The shift between the two kinds of lines interrupts the natural flow of reading, and it is in this rhythmic disjunct that the speaker's grief and frustration can be most powerfully felt. Take, for example, this segment toward the poem's beginning:

the sum of experiences
between two people
is not a sum,
it's eating blintzes under trees
learning how cezanne liked to color,
and it's
sitting in bed,
debating the value of failure in one's life,
and it's seeing allen
read one last time
in front of 680 nyu kids that
had no idea
he would spend the next two weeks in boston,
starting his negotiations with death.

my friend is dead
and i don't know how
to approach the subject. (Eleveld 178)

As the lines of the first stanza oscillate between the clipped and the expansive, the poem moves through memorable experiences with Ginsberg until arriving at a break, after which the speaker confesses his uncertainty with dealing with Ginsberg's death in three lines of increasing feet consisting almost entirely of one syllable words. The result is a sense of naked exposure of the speaker's thoughts, of those moments of paralysis one might feel following the death of a loved one.

“Naked exposure” is an appropriate phrase with which to introduce the next poet in this discussion: Gregory Richard Taylor a.k.a. Horehound Stillpoint. Taylor is known for employing sexually explicit language in his poems, and in “in the church of the last three minutes, part II,” Taylor embarks upon a sex-filled confession of sorts to the reader, including lines like “in the church of the last three minutes / [...] I will know how jens felt when I told him about having sex with someone else the first weekend he spent away from me” (Xavier 21). But there is also an emphasis on more deep-seated emotional issues: “my sister will know how foreign I found her life / marrying for stability, then endless conversations about dinner / audiences will know how much I wanted one man to step / out of the crowd / pick me up and carry me off and never put me down again” (21).

These lines are notably confessional and intimate, and Taylor’s self-references—“my poems” or “hear me tell spoken word audiences all about it”—provide periodic sincerity-effects throughout the work (Xavier 21). But it is the poem’s conclusion that proves to be the most interesting moment in the piece: “there is no point in keeping anything secret / in the church of the last three minutes of the universe / it will all come out in the wash / you will know my everything / and I will know yours” (21-22). These lines, in a way, explain the impetus for the poem’s creation: if there will indeed come a day when everyone’s secrets become known to others, then, Taylor decides, why not begin to reveal those secrets on your own terms? Thus, while the majority of the poem focuses on Taylor’s various confessions, the final lines explain, in part, the creative drive behind the poem.

Jack McCarthy seems, perhaps, an unusual poet to choose to follow both Sia and Taylor. If the latter two might seem representative of an oversimplified category of spoken word poets and the work that they do, then McCarthy might be a surprise addition to that category. Born in 1939, McCarthy was only introduced to spoken word poetry in the mid-nineties, at an open mic night at the Cantab Lounge in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Unlike Sia, who grew up in a time when spoken word poetry was becoming ever-present and likely structured his writing process, McCarthy began to write poems in the 60s. It was not until he read one of his poems at the Cantab Lounge that he began to view the stage as an outlet for his work.

Perhaps because his aesthetic was less shaped in development by the spoken word movement than Sia's, McCarthy's poems feel utterly at home on the page. When looking at the straightforward, colloquial, grammatically impeccable lines, it makes sense why McCarthy refers to his work as "standup poetry." As Thomas Lux notes, "[y]ou'll hear a natural, unforced voice in his poems, like listening to your best friend talk to you—urgently, calmly—while looking you straight in the eye" (154). An analysis of McCarthy's "Careful What You Ask For" shows him to be utterly worthy of Lux's attributions of intimacy ("like listening to your best friend") and sincerity ("while looking you straight in the eye").

McCarthy's poem begins: "I was just old enough / to be out on the sidewalk by myself, / and every day I would come home crying, / beaten up by the same little girl" (Eleveld 155). He goes on to place this incidence of crying within a larger framework of a crying "problem": "I eventually learned to fight— / enough to protect myself— / from girls— / but the real issue was the crying, / and that hasn't gone

away. // Oh, I don't cry any more, / I don't sob, I don't make noise, / I just have hair trigger tearducts, and always / at all the wrong things: supermarket openings; / the mayor cutting the ribbon on the bridge" (155-6). The humor with which the speaker—whom we learn is "Jackie, the firstborn"—approaches the subject shows him to be a good-natured, self-effacing person, capable of revealing an embarrassing trait to strangers (the readers) with ease (155).

But the poem's power lies within an almost imperceptible shift near its end when this humor gives way to profoundly serious personal issues, opening a space in which the reader can explore McCarthy's psyche. After elaborating further on his crying, the speaker attempts to explain his preoccupation with this particular idiosyncrasy: "I think all this is why I never wanted a son. / I always supposed my son would be like me, / and that when he'd cry it would bring back / every indelible humiliation of my own life, / and in some word or gesture / I'd betray what I was feeling, / and he'd mistake, and think I was ashamed of him. / He'd carry that the rest of his life" (156). Here, the playful humor of the poem's beginning has vanished, and is replaced by serious contemplation.

The final lines of the poem, however, represent the completion of this shift, as the speaker allows the reader more information about his obsession with crying:

But for years my great fear was the moment
I might have to deal with a crying son.
But I don't have one.
We came close once, between Megan and Kathleen;
the doctors warned us there was something wrong,

and when Joan went into labor they said
the baby would be born dead.
But he wasn't: very briefly,
before he died, I heard him cry. (156)

This revelation—in conjunction with the poem’s title—casts a shadow of grief and guilt over the entire work. What we might mistake for intimacy and sincerity at the poem’s start—McCarthy’s conversational, frank tone; his self-deprecating humor—is proven to be, if not entirely false, a mask of sorts for the serious issues that lurk beneath it.

As such, the poem provides its own commentary on issues of intimacy and sincerity, showing how powerful those effects can be and how susceptible we, as readers, are to them. It is not so much that the poetic voice at the poem’s beginning is a different one from the voice we experience at the poem’s end. Instead, McCarthy manages to demonstrate how the speaker creates a mask, or persona, of humor that is easily accepted as the authentic poetic voice. The abrupt removal of this persona before the poem’s conclusion allows the speaker to express his “real” emotions and thoughts. But then again, how can we be sure this time if we were so readily fooled by the earlier humorous persona?

Through this subtle shift from humor to frank seriousness, McCarthy’s poem perhaps inadvertently sheds some light upon the problematic nature of intimacy and sincerity. These problems only become more complex when we begin to examine spoken word poetry in its intended frame: in performance. On the stage, as we will see, both concepts are exchanged for something else, and this swap has a powerful effect on a poem’s reception.

Spoken Word Poetry on the Stage

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida writes, “If, for Aristotle, for example, ‘spoken words (ta en te phone) are the symbols of mental experience (pathemata tes psyches) and written words are the symbols of spoken word’ (*De interpretatione*, 1, 16a, 3) it is because the voice, producer of *the first symbols*, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind” (11, emphasis original). That this sort of thinking, which suggests the “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, [and] of voice and the ideality of meaning,” has proven to be highly appealing to many people should not be surprising (11-12). After all, children typically learn to speak before they write, and it is not uncommon for us to experience a sense of unity that occurs when we actively listen to ourselves speak.

Spoken word poets are quick to tap into this presumed connection between physical voice and being, using it as a lever with which to elevate their work above “merely” written poetry. We have already heard Marc Smith’s claim that “slam,” a competitive form of spoken word poetry, “gets poetry back to its roots” (Eleveld 2). But it is important to recall how he goes on to express a certain distrust of writing, and suggests its subordination to speech: “I think when poetry went from the oral tradition to the page, someone should’ve asked, is that really poetry?” (2) These remarks echo Saussure’s fear of “the tyranny of writing,” “which ‘disguises’ language and even on occasion ‘usurps’ the role of speech” (Culler 141). While most spoken word poets arguably would not view “the written” with the same sense of alarm, Saussure’s subordination of writing to speech seems to have reemerged with a strong presence in the spoken word movement.

Jonathan Culler summarizes this argument beautifully:

If writing, which seems inescapably to involve impersonality, distance, the need for interpretation, and the possibility of misunderstanding, is treated as a mere technical device, secondary and derivative, irrelevant to the nature of language itself, then one can take as the essence of language an ideal associated with speech: in particular, the experience of hearing oneself speak, where hearing and understanding seem to be inseparable, where signifier and signified seem immediately joined in a sign, where the expression seems bound to the meaning it arises to express. (140)

In short: speech is primary, direct, sincere; writing is secondary, imitative, problematic. Perhaps this is why Billy Collins claims that a poem's performance gives it "an immediacy, a reality not found on the page where we must conjure up the ghost-form of the poet who wrote the poems" (4). With regards to this felt absence of the author on the page, Peter Middleton wonders if "the poetry reading [... is] a ritual to reestablish the authority of authorship in the face of its downsizing by the academic industry" (34). The performance of a spoken word poem, then, fully restores the presence of the author after having been "cut off" from its creator's mind with its textual inception. However appealing this perspective may be to spoken word poets in particular, it becomes utterly problematic when subjected to Derrida's critiques.

Frustrated with some of Saussure's assumptions in his model of structural linguistics—the opposition of speech and writing, in particular—Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, sets out to deconstruct this binary. Derrida argues against the privileging of speech over writing by showing the two forms to have more in common than previously thought—namely, that speech (and any other form of language) can be put *into* writing. For Derrida, as Middleton suggests:

Writing cannot be self-identical and produce fixed, clear meanings, but this must be true of all language because all forms of language can be

redescribed as writing, and hence the ‘différance’ of writing [...] must be generally true of speech as well as of writing. Therefore no language, not even the speech that hears itself, can be the matrix of transparent self-consciousness. (71)

Derrida collapses the rigid opposition between writing and speech by playing with notions of interiority and exteriority: “we must think that writing is at the same time more exterior to speech, not being its ‘image’ or its ‘symbol,’ and more interior to speech, which is already in itself a writing” (*Of Grammatology* 46).

Further linking speech, writing, and all forms of language is Derrida’s notion of citation. In his essay “Signature Event Context,” Derrida challenges the idea of context, positing the ability of all language to move in and out of different contexts by means of citation:

This is the possibility on which I wish to insist: the possibility of extraction and of citational grafting which belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written, and which constitutes every mark as writing even before and outside every horizon of semiolinguistic communication; as writing, that is, as a possibility of functioning cut off, at a certain point, from its ‘original’ meaning and from its belonging to a saturable and constraining context. Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or large unity, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. (97, emphasis original)

In Derrida’s argument, then, there is no such thing as self-evident meaning. No form of language is capable of directly conveying sense or intention as it is always already “cut off,” as it were, from its “original meaning” and context.

Derrida’s critiques of Saussure, then, present a wealth of problems for those spoken word poets who claim orality as a privileged mode of communication, one that allows for a sense of intimacy and sincerity that might be absent from written

communication. Apart from these problems caused by the destabilizing of the spoken/written binary, spoken word poetry in performance produces a variety of effects that ultimately work to undo coherent notions of intimacy and sincerity, revealing their intensely problematic nature.

As discussed in the introduction, Donald Davie, in his “Sincerity and Poetry,” attempted a critique of confessional poetry that sought to loosen this connection. Writing at a time when confessional poets were becoming seemingly irreversibly linked with sincerity, he argues, “insofar as the confessional poet [...] presents only a trimmed and slanted image of himself, he may still be thought to be revealing to us not a personality but a persona” (7). I would like to extend Davie’s suggestion to the world of spoken world poetry, arguing that in the performance of a poem, a spoken word poet often takes on a visible—or, perhaps, audible—persona which derails any sincerity-effects in the work. This persona can take several forms: the performer persona, the “past” persona, as well as the persona of a real-life figure.

Regie Cabico’s “Coming Out Duet,” anthologized in *Bullets and Butterflies*, troubles the notion of sincerity in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most obvious problem presented here is suggested by the title: how exactly does a poetic “duet” operate? It would be one thing if the duet were, in fact, an exchange between two separate people, but the poem makes it clear that both “voices” emanate from the same personage. The poem is organized on the page such that the left column consists of the speaker’s dialogue with his parents, while the right side expresses the speaker’s ongoing thought processes during the conversation:

HI MOM HOW YOU DOIN’?
I’m fine

I’VE MOVED TO BROOKLYN
The rent is cheaper

It’s pretty safe. There are cops
everywhere...

HI MOM HOW YOU DOING?

I feel like shit
I’VE MOVED TO BROOKLYN

My boyfriend lives there

Body parts found in the trash compactor (Xavier
47)

This strange polyvalence presents an interesting challenge to sincerity when examined on the page, but one might ultimately conclude that the inner monologue of the right-hand side is, in fact, the sincere, “true” thoughts of the speaker. In performance, however, any sense of sincerity is done away with in order for the poem to become a true “duet.”

The poem is typically performed with Cabico reading the left-hand side, and Taylor Mali, another noted spoken word poet, reading the “inner-thoughts” of the right-hand side. A second performer is, in fact, necessary for the performance of the poem as frequently the left- and right-hand sides overlap, the two voices clashing together. The result is a disarray of voices, poetic and physical, that force us to question the possibility for sincerity, and what it might look or feel like.

That is to say, there is a marked disjunct in performance as Mali reads the poem alongside Cabico. The sincerity-effects that we may experience on the page are undone here, as we know that Mali is not the creator of the poem and that the words he recites cannot be read as his authentic thoughts. Mali, then, must adopt a persona in this performance, perhaps attempting to read as a sort of alter-Cabico. While Cabico himself can easily be identified as both creator and speaker of the poem, his

presence next to Mali's theatrical airs throws the sincerity of his own performance—no matter how authentic or “real”—into question.

Time and time again in performance, spoken word poets adopt these performer personae. They are often highly visible, readable, but often the presumed linkage of speech and being combined with the author's physical presence work to maintain the illusion of sincerity. Occasionally, as in Alix Olson's poem “dorothea tanning,” a self-referential moment in the poem punctures this illusion and calls attention to the poet *as* performer.

“There's this Dorothea Tanning painting,” Olson begins, “and the arm of the artist is barely breaking through. / There's a gash in the canvas, and that's how I feel standing here in front of you” (Xavier 95). While the poem directly refers to one of the American surrealist's challenging paintings, its opening, which is repeated as its conclusion, recalls Davie's remark about the “trimmed image” which confessional poets present of themselves. Her lines imply that even in performance, Olson as a person is “barely breaking through” her stage persona. The poem, written in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001, is in many ways about Olson's inability to fully present her personal, emotional thoughts as herself. Instead, the performance of the poem allows her the use of a persona with which she can rail against “Donny and George,” or “liberty decivilized, freedom kept in Dow Jones check” (95).

Olson's poem, which recalls the aftermath of the attacks of September 11th largely in past tense, circumvents another problematic moment for sincerity in the performance of poetry. Beau Sia's “Howl,” you will recall, is written in the present

tense. Of course, there are moments in which the speaker reminisces about the past, but lines such as “my friend is dead / and i don’t know how / to approach the subject,” or “i don’t know if i’ll ever understand the scope of the words ‘death,’ / or ‘good-bye’” position him firmly in the present (Eleveld 178, 180).

It is this temporality of the poem that derails sincerity. Billy Collins, in his introduction to *The Spoken Word Revolution*, explains that “[w]hen oral delivery is at its best, time flows in reverse. All the books containing the poem are returned to the warehouse; the printing press runs backward; the manuscript is mailed back to the poet who stands before us now with a page in his hand—the original sheet, let’s say—and reads the poem as if for the very first time” (5). This imagined time-travel, one which allows an audience access to the moment of the poem’s first enunciation, is nothing more than an effect produced by a persona taken on by the performer: the persona of the past self.

Sia concludes “Howl” by writing “but i’m getting that little ache under the ribcage / from loss / and the need to finally / tell a friend, / ‘i love you’” (Eleveld 180). The present tense of the poem heightens the visibility of the persona: if Sia were to perform this in 2007, ten years following Ginsberg’s death, this temporal distance would reveal his chest pain to be nothing more than performance, perhaps cheapening whatever truth the words held in the poem’s creation. Peter Middleton observes this effect in poetry readings and comments, “[t]he unstable balance between the mimicry of expressive utterance that occurs when a poet reads a poem as if it were only then being spoken for the first time and the self-alienation of reading a text written at another time as if by another self offers a wide field of social and

semantic significance for active poetic construction” (103). The “wide field” opened here exists between poet and persona, and many of the poem’s intimacy- and sincerity-effects dull as a result.

Of all the poems we have analyzed so far, none of them urges the question that seems especially pertinent in performances of spoken word poems. For all the talk of spoken word poets being confessional and deeply personal, what happens when a poet writes a poem in a voice that is not their own? Frequently these types of works are political in nature, with poets often adopting the persona of real-life figures whose voices might be silenced or otherwise disenfranchised. The poems may be powerful and moving on the page, but what exactly happens when they are redirected towards performance on the stage?

In Shailja Patel’s “Eater of Death,” the speaker is the real-life “Bibi Sardar, whose husband and seven children were killed at breakfast by U.S. air strikes on Kabul in October 2001” (Xavier 65). The speaker describes everything from the moments just before the bombing (“They came as we ate breakfast, I remember the taste / of black market naan”) to the slow death of each of her children and the ravages of the aftermath, which she feels leaves her “no longer human” (65, 67).

If the poetic voice on the page feels haunting and wracked with grief, the performance of this voice on stage problematizes those feelings. Of course, the language does not change, but the context of the performance makes obvious the mask of the “character,” Bibi Sardar. I do not wish to suggest that the use of persona is not clear in the written form of the poem, but merely that performance, and the contexts and constructs within which it is contained, necessarily involves a fracturing

of subjectivity after which intimacy and sincerity are put out of reach. The conflict between poetic and physical voice in this instance further serves to highlight this division that occurs each time a poet reads their work aloud.

However problematic Patel's performance of "Eater of Death" may be, the poem serves a sociopolitical purpose: to raise the audience's awareness of those who suffer in the wake of U.S. military action. Other poems—some political, others not—serve a similar consciousness-raising purpose, working to educate an audience on a topic, or inspire listeners to action. It is this sense of community-formation and action that arises when the intimacy-effects of the page are subjugated to an emphasis on performer/audience relations.

Shane Luitjens' poem "Negative Sex" consists almost entirely of this play between the performer and the audience, and the power of suggestion that the former has over the latter. He begins the poem by announcing: "Just so you know, I am not going to talk about sex" (Xavier 83). Of course, the rest of the poem is wholly dedicated to sex, and all the sexual acts and thoughts that Luitjens will not be speaking about, in a move that seems to take Foucault's repressive hypothesis as its model. The poet-performer revels in his ability to plant thoughts in the minds of his listeners, and continues through his sex-filled oration in much the same fashion as it begins.

But there comes a moment near the poem's conclusion that produces an interesting effect on the audience. Luitjens writes, "and I won't let you think that the person you are next to / has ever had sex, will ever have sex, / or should ever have sex, / 'cause they shouldn't. / And I won't talk about it so that you don't think about

it” (84). Here, the poet forces a sense of self-awareness in the audience, by explicitly calling attention to their presence as a collected group of people gathered for a purpose: to hear poetry. It seems likely that more than a few members of the audience might look around and try to examine exactly who these other listeners are that, of course, have never had sex. Luitjens’ rhetorical move here—which resembles something like Brecht’s A-effect, or alienation-effect—does not represent the sort of calls for community formation and unity that might be apparent in other poems. However, “Negative Sex” opens up a space wherein we can analyze performer/audience relationships with regard to notions of intimacy in poetry.

As has been repeatedly demonstrated in this undertaking, intimacy-effects can be manifested in an extraordinarily powerful way on the page. Through a variety of textual effects in a poem, poets can create the illusion of a personal, one-on-one interaction with the reader, in which the reader is given the opportunity to directly connect with the work’s creator. As poetry comes to be increasingly performed on stage, the work begins to reflect the new structures that frame the “new medium” of speech. Thus, when Luitjens uses the pronoun “you” in his poem, the word automatically takes on a dual meaning: there is the individual “you,” interpreted by each member of the audience to unquestionably refer to themselves; but there is also the collective “you” that refers to the audience as a group, hailing them as an entity that might be subsumed under one pronoun. This latter notion of “you” infinitely defers the potential for intimacy: after all, if the poet’s utterance of “you” is not, in fact, addressing you, but another member of the audience (the “not-you”), how can we ever truly feel a connection with the poet?

A solution to this inevitable problem in performed poetry is the refocusing of energies directed towards producing intimacy-effects to what might be called “community-effects.” Joseph Harrington comments, “[i]t might be useful, in other words, to consider a poetry or art scene, in a metropolis especially, as a cultural space consisting of a variety of smaller public spheres within which communities may thrive and, just maybe, speak to one another in ways they wouldn’t otherwise” (185). Maria Damon, as well, argues for the importance of the “public sphere” and community: “The world of poetry slams and open-mike readings, while not directly politically interventionist, perhaps, creates a public sphere that is healthily contestatory” (327). Indeed, in spoken word poetry, poets often address the audience with a collective “you,” delivering poems which carry an important message, urging their listeners to take that message back to their individual worlds once the ephemeral community of the poetic audience disperses.

George David Miller’s poem “Before I Read This Poem” explicitly references this shift away from intimacy-effects and urges a coming together of his listeners.

The poem begins:

Before I read this poem, I want to tell you some things
About myself.

I know—I’m like you
I can’t stand this confessional poetry crap
The inner recesses of the soul and all that.
I think the more you say
The more you hide from others and from yourself.
Nietzsche said nobody ever wrote an authentic
Autobiography.

My life isn’t a poem (Eleveld 18)

Miller goes on to attempt to redescribe the banal events of everyday life as “[t]he big moments of life”—“[c]arving epic lives / From ordinary moments,” as he describes it (19). Making the poem less about his personal life and more about what could potentially be anyone’s life, Miller draws upon presumed similarities among his listeners to draw them together. His remarks that “This is my life—and it’s your life too / This is my poem—and it’s your poem too” dissolve the boundaries that separate “my” and “your,” suggesting the possibility for a powerful collectivity made possible through poetry (19).

“A Simple Poem,” by Emanuel Xavier, similarly engages the audience as a collective with tremendous potential. In a work most likely addressed to a former lover, Xavier writes “I want you to continue writing / because I will not always be around” (Xavier 146). The poem contains similar encouragements throughout as the speaker urges the lover “to write poems that you will never read / press hard on the paper so that the ink runs deep / hold the pen tight so that you control the details / prove to me that I inspire you / reveal yourself between the lines / hear my praise with each flicker of the candle / write a poem for me” (146). But here again it is important to remember the different possible forms of the pronoun “you” in performance.

Understanding the word “you” to refer to a collective, Xavier’s poem might also be read as an incitement to poetic production aimed at the audience. That is, because he knows he “will not always be around,” Xavier implores his listeners to take up poetry themselves as a means of furthering this poetic community. He encourages his audience to “[p]ound your fists in the air with passion / go off about politics, poverty, machismo, and hate,” but to do so on “paper that has been crumbled

and tossed” in order to “save a tree for future poets to write under” (147, 146). Thus, “Simple Poem” contains a great deal of foresight, with the poet enjoining his listeners to consider themselves as part of a poetic community that must be sustained well into the future.

Often, as is suggested in Xavier’s poem and elsewhere, poets fiercely take on political issues, attempting to spread their thoughts, their message to the audience. These poems often prove to be the most explosive in performance—an attempt, no doubt, to strongly push the issues to the forefront of the audience’s attention in the hopes that they will come away from the poem with a changed perspective. Alix Olson’s work often addresses important political issues, the already discussed “dorothea tanning” included. However, another of her works, “america’s on sale,” produces powerful community-effects through its sense of urgency as Olson effectively tells her audience that we, as a nation, must be called into immediate action.

In “america’s on sale,” Olson employs an infomercial salesperson-type persona and an economic register to simultaneously satirize American culture’s obsession with capitalism and the deleterious effects of said obsession. The sense of urgency is apparent from the poem’s opening: “ATTENTION SHOPPERS!!! / attention 9-to-5 folk, cellphone masses, / the up-and-coming classes / [...] attention walmart congregation, / ‘shop ‘til you drop’ generation, / ATTENTION NATION! / **AMERICA’S ON SALE!**” (Xavier 92). The poem continues in this fashion, bemoaning the loss of real ethics and values at the hands of a consumer-based society

in which “american dreams are on permanent layaway” even though “there was limited availability anyway” (92).

If the poem seems to have something of a judgmental, holier-than-thou tone, that is because it does. But at the same time, Olson makes it clear that she is not beyond the reproach expressed in the poem by frequently employing the pronoun “we,” as in “we’ve unstocked the welfare pantry / to restock the wall street gentry” (92). As in George David Miller’s poem, here the boundaries of “you” and “me” become joined in a collective “we”—a move that draws together both performer and audience. In the end, both Olson and her listeners are implicated—perhaps by not standing up to the forces that Olson claims are eroding true American values—in the poem’s final rebuke, which also serves as a call to political action: “but hurry shoppers! / because america’s being downsized, citizens, / and you’re all fired” (94).

Of course, as Maria Damon suggests, not all spoken word poetry is overtly political in this way. However, I would argue that the live performance of poetry almost always produces the community-effects seen in Olson’s and others’ work. But what happens when we remove these performances from their live settings and contain them on CDs or DVDs? If, through audio or video recordings, we can reconfigure the performer/audience relationship of the spoken word poem back to the one-on-one illusion of the written poem, what effect might this have for the contested notions of intimacy and sincerity in these poems?

Recorded Poetry: Audio and Video Recordings

In his essay, “Signature Event Context,” Derrida notes:

The range of the voice or of gesture certainly appears to encounter a factual limit [...], an empirical boundary in the form of space and time; and writing, within the same time, within the same space, manages to [...] open the *same field* to a much greater range. Meaning [...] is thus transmitted [...] by technically more powerful mediations, over a much greater distance. (85, emphasis original)

As Derrida suggests here, the performance of poetry used to be an evanescent event with a very finite temporality, but recent technology has begun to change performance's potential for longevity.

In recent years, more and more spoken word performances have begun to be preserved on audio CDs and digital audio files—some that include live performances, and others that are produced in a studio.⁵ Spoken word poems produced in the studio by a single artist closely resemble their written counterparts in many ways. Like the written work, these recordings are cut off from their original context of creation; they can exist through time and not be irrevocably bound to their moment and place of creation, something that cannot be said for live recordings of spoken word poems, as we will see. Additionally, as in writing, there is the felt absence of the author in these spoken word recordings. That is, even though we can experience the poet's physical voice, the performances may still lack an immediacy because the physical presence of the poet is unavailable to us; we therefore consider the poet's voice to be a mere trace—to borrow from Derrida—of his or her presence.

Nonetheless, these spoken performances are capable of overcoming these “setbacks” and commanding the same intimacy-effects as their written instantiations.

⁵ I would argue that this distinction between live and studio recordings must be preserved as it has an important impact on the questions of intimacy and sincerity. Video recordings of spoken word performances are almost always live recordings and therefore the live/studio distinction need not be made there.

Because a spoken word album is intended for individual consumption, the intimacy-effects can once again make believable their illusion of a direct connection with the poet. The poet's physical voice, cut off as it were from the physical presence of the poet—along with the framing mechanisms of the stage and the spotlight—further aids the illusion by providing a sense of sincerity that even the written cannot provide.

It is interesting, then, to note that live recordings of spoken word performances trouble intimacy- and sincerity-effects in a profound way. As has already been mentioned, live recordings are inevitably tied up with their context—that is, they are almost always tagged with the geographical location and date and time of the performance. As such, listeners of a live spoken word album must already experience the notion that the performances therein were not originally intended for them. The experience has been contained within an audio file and exported out of that particular context so that others may vicariously partake in it. Here, the “you” of any poem is not immediately the listener at home with the CD, but first and foremost, the live audience. This effect is magnified when the recording picks up audience reactions: applause, laughter, cheers.

The result is that it becomes increasingly difficult for a listener to experience intimacy-effects within a live recording. It is not that such recordings obliterate these effects per se, but instead complicates them by employing an extra layer of technology that must be overcome in order for the listener to imagine themselves as part of the original audience for whom the performance was intended. The experience of listening to a live recording does not necessarily foreclose the

possibility for intimacy, but makes such an experience inherently complicated, more difficult than in other modes that might be more hospitable for its communication.

As for sincerity in these live recordings, it, too, is most often problematized in performance. In some instances, the recording will include some banter with the poet as they talk about the poem, explaining its origins, meaning or importance to them. And then the poem begins. In the interim, that silence, the poet undergoes a rapid costume-change, as it were, into the guise of the poet-performer. Often, the difference between the two voices—the speaking voice and the performing voice—is so pronounced that the persona employed by the poet is readily exposed as such. Other times, this sort of preliminary banter is excluded, but the shift into the persona may be perceptible even in the tiny space between the announcement of the poem's title and its first line.

In video recordings of performances, challenges to intimacy and sincerity become even more apparent. There, the intimacy-denying presence of the audience is affirmed not only through the audio of their interactions with the performing poet, but they may also be visible in the video, included as part of the documenting of a specific event in time and space. In these recordings, intimacy is powerfully deferred due to the presence of the live, recorded audience that is always configured as the primary target of intimacy-effects.

Much like live audio recordings, video recordings of performances serve to make the personae adopted by performing poets highly visible. Rather than just hearing the shifts in their voices, viewers of recorded performances can witness sudden physical changes at the onset of a performance, variations in gestures, posture,

and expression. Furthermore, video recording, along with the recent development of video-sharing websites such as YouTube.com, allows for detailed scrutiny of an individual performance, or for a comparison of different performances.

Such a comparison can problematize sincerity in a profound way. Say, for example, we wish to watch Taylor Mali's performance of "What Teachers Make," a poem in which Mali expounds upon his belief in the important work that teachers do. A simple search on YouTube.com produces three separate performances of this work. What these recordings (and this website) make possible is a comparative analysis of these various performances. The result is a powerful blow to arguments put forth by spoken word poets that performed poetry is more immediate, honest, or real than written poetry.

What becomes apparent in this analysis is the intricately constructed performer-persona that Mali has created for himself. Each performance of the poem closely follows a specific score. Pauses, laughs, body positions, gestures—all of these seem to be carefully executed nearly identically in all three performances of the poem. Thus, any sincerity-effects present within the work are ultimately proven to be disingenuous in light of this highly constructed, artificial persona that attempts to win over the audience with its "realness."

The relationship of spoken word poetry to intimacy and sincerity is clearly a highly fraught one. What I hope this analysis has shown is that these concepts cannot be presumed to be utterly stable, but should instead be assumed to be problematic until proven otherwise. Importantly, however, this instability is not confined to the concepts of intimacy and sincerity, but circulates throughout much of the debate over

spoken word poetry. It is this volatility that will prove most important as we consider spoken word poetry in a larger literary context.

Breaking the Binaries: Bringing Together Spoken Word and Academic Communities

Poetic practice in this country has been defined almost exclusively as either “high” culture—the current academic split being between a mainstream lyric (official high culture) and an experimental poetry (avant-garde high art)—or as a kind of “folk” culture, often with local or regional affiliations (cowboy poetry, street poetry) [...] I would argue not only that slam poetry resists identification with either high or popular culture, but that it is a true hybrid of the two, inhabiting a cultural space that is simultaneously part of the aesthetic (literary) marketplace and part of a less aesthetically defined and more socially grounded popular marketplace.

-Christopher Beach, Poetic Culture, 127-8

What this study of spoken word poetry makes apparent is the tremendous proliferation of binary oppositions that work to maintain a strong distinction between spoken word and “academic” poetry. Spoken/written, egalitarian/elitist, freedom of the stage/confinement of the page—all of these hierarchized oppositions have been deployed as rhetorical devices in the debate over spoken word poetry. I would argue that spoken word poets wield these binaries in order to delegitimize undesirable academic poetry and reaffirm the superiority of the spoken, performed poem. However, it is important to recognize that they operate both ways and could be similarly utilized by academics to argue the opposite.

But can these binaries truly hold up, or will they ultimately be revealed as rhetorical props in a struggle to earn prestige and legitimacy within the larger literary world? Part of this work has already been performed by Derrida, who, in his criticism of Saussure, deconstructed the hierarchized opposition between speech and writing, showing the boundaries of these two concepts to be more fluid than originally thought. Though I have not embarked on a project of deconstruction, per se, I would like to extend Derrida’s work into the realm of spoken word poetry and the often troubled position it occupies in contemporary literary culture.

As Derrida has argued in *Of Grammatology*, the binary opposition of speech vs. writing is a false distinction, as all forms of language might be said to belong to the category of writing. If these categories had already been visibly problematized by theorists some thirty years ago, then why the need to reaffirm the separate poles of this troubled binary? The answer, I would argue, may ultimately revolve around notions of prestige.

As Maria Damon notes, a “performance-based poem-making process,” such as spoken word poetry, “characterize[s] oral cultures and demotic (vernacular) languages” (336). But, she continues, “as these cultures became print-based, the concept of a static text authored by one individual—text as private property for private consumption—came to have more prestige and to command more formal respect than the oral” (336). In some spoken word circles, then, poets are working against the assumption that the only way to garner attention is through the publication of a collection of poetry that is as powerful on the page as it is in performance.

As I have suggested, some see a solution to this issue in reversing the notion of what kinds of poems can earn prestige. Both Marc Smith’s and Billy Collins’ arguments represent only a portion of the variety of arguments valorizing spoken word poetry over “academic” poetry. A carefully selected register allows them to propound a powerful rhetoric of authenticity, and—if we recall Collins’ use of the phrase “the prison cell of the page”—freedom (3). Through these arguments, the performance of spoken word poetry is continually privileged as a site of true, free expression, in opposition to a stiflingly boring academic poetry.

Collins continually elevates the spoken over the printed word, claiming that it delivers a stronger sense of the poet to its listeners. He writes, “[t]he orally delivered poem brings to us the sound and idiolect of a person’s voice, a quality often muffled between the covers of a book or intentionally obliterated by poets who seek a purity of language rinsed of human speech” (5). The intense language employed here almost suggests a sort of genocide, with poets who produce their work primarily on the page seeking “purity” by “obliterating” the traces of speech. Collins seems to be responding to New Critical and Postmodern tenets, fighting against “the modernist sense of the author as a reclusive inscriber of verbal patterns or, more extremely, the postmodernist sense of the author as a false construction, the fond illusion of old-fashioned readers” (4). But, if nothing else, the present undertaking has shown readings of spoken word poems to be highly constructed, carefully choreographed performances.

In many ways, spoken word poets seem to be drawing upon a Whitmanian poetic tradition of sincerity and intimacy, taking as their influences Whitman himself, but also later poets such as Lowell and Ginsberg. Denying the demands of impersonality made by New Criticism, their work often produces a great wealth of sincerity- and intimacy-effects as a means of forging a direct link between author and reader/audience.

But much to Collins’ dismay, these connections are merely delicately constructed illusions, as they have been proven to be in essentially all art. Whitman himself, who is perhaps the greatest poet with regards to intimacy- and sincerity-effects, is not immune from their inherent problematics. As we have seen, even in

performance, where the author's presence is physically manifested, feelings of intimacy and sincerity are mere fantasy—spoken word artists must produce those effects in order to conceal their impersonalizing use of personae. The performance thus reaffirms and makes visible the impossibility of true intimacy and sincerity in art, an impossibility that has already been suggested by the concepts' failure in their written instances.

Those spoken word poets that actively work to valorize the spoken word poem as the primary form of poetry often attach their critiques of modernist or postmodern poetry to the academy. In fact, in the prose writings of many spoken word poets, a great deal of energy is expended on attacking the academy and its perceived monolithic celebration of formally challenging modernist or postmodern work: “while this writing [deconstructionist-inspired poetry] might be important for the professional reader, the university professor, the theorist, or graduate students seeking approval from old blue-hairs, this writing was exclusive and open to few. And, more importantly, it was boring” (Eleveld 62). This kind of ad hominem argument against the academy works to closely align the spoken/written and egalitarian/elitist binaries. But, because the former has already been shown to be dubious, this linkage prefiguratively dooms the latter.

Spoken word artists frequently reaffirm the binary polarization of “the academy” and “spoken word culture” as a means of distancing themselves from what they consider to be boring, overly technical poetry. This move attempts, yet again, to mobilize intimacy and sincerity in an attack on canonical “academic” poetry while simultaneously privileging spoken word poetry as a site of unmediated access to the

literal, historical poet. As John Guillory writes in his *Cultural Capital*, “[t]he typical valorization of the noncanonical author’s experience as a marginalized social identity necessarily reasserts the transparency of the text to the experience it represents” (10). The problems with this sort of argument are myriad and have already been discussed at length, yet the introduction to the struggle against “the canon” allows for an opportunity to further blur the boundaries between spoken word poets and the academy.

The only way for this distinction to be maintained is to obscure the numerous crossovers that exist between these two communities. Billy Collins, fervent supporter of spoken word poetry, is remarkably entrenched within the world of academic poetry, having served as a professor of English at Lehman College: CUNY since 1968. Furthermore, countless other spoken word poets have received Ivy League educations, or formal poetic training in graduate schools. But the crossover flows in both ways. Exceptional spoken word poets have been granted positions as part of the creative writing faculty at schools across the nation. Those poets who do not actively teach the subject of poetry are often taken up *as* the subject in college classes or workshops. Thus, the binary opposition of academic and spoken word cultures seems doubtful at best, disingenuous at worst.

Yet there is some recognition of the problematics of this opposition within spoken word circles. In her introduction to *Listen Up!*, Zoë Anglesey writes,

There is a trickster motif in *Listen Up!* Each poem negotiates at least two territories simultaneously. Like hip-hop, these voices want to *appear* untutored and, at times, they seem to exist at the nucleus of a class war with themselves. The language of this poetry is textured by popular-culture references and multiple levels of diction—erudite and street-smart. [...] In an era when it could be ‘unhealthy’ or ‘uncool’ to

appear as nerdy—the maker of poems—perhaps the poem’s attempted disguise is armor for the poet who speaks about things of the heart. Thus, the architecture or appearance fortifies and underlines the trickster-poet’s mask. (xii, emphasis original)

Here, Anglesey acknowledges the tricks of language employed by spoken word poets that are born out of a fear of coming across as too academic. In order to conceal their intellectualism, spoken word poets must consciously craft a persona—the literal translation of which, we know, is “mask”—which blends both high and popular culture.

Other spoken word poets defy the linkage of the spoken/written-egalitarian/elitist binaries by acknowledging their more literary publishing ambitions. For example, in his biography in *Listen Up!*, Willie Perdomo writes (in the third person), “at present, Perdomo still roams the spoken word circuit, but his literary aspirations steer him toward a resolve that he recognizes in his favorite writers. Perdomo crafts his poems for both performance and publishing. After all, by reading in public, Perdomo builds up a demand for his forthcoming books” (98). Here, spoken word is not irrevocably cut off from the written word and literary ambition, but rather functions directly with them, serving as a marketing strategy. Later in this anthology, Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie unabashedly proclaims, “I want people to know my name as an excellent writer” (139). Thus it seems that the spoken/written binary is continually dismantled even within spoken word culture, and furthermore, that attempts to shift prestige away from the academy have failed.

However, this is not to denigrate spoken word poetry, or establish yet another hierarchy with spoken word subjugated to “academic” poetry. Rather, I have argued for the deconstruction of these various binaries established by the spoken word

community because ultimately, both academics and spoken word poets are ill served by them. Instead, I wish to argue for a more open poetic culture in which the most high-minded literary critics might commingle with the grittiest spoken word poets. I grant that such a culture comes across as utopian, but I would posit that it is not wholly out of reach, and may prove beneficial for all parties involved.

I believe that both “sides”—though there is already much mixing of the two—would express some form of hesitancy towards this idea. Perhaps spoken word artists would fear that academic critics and scholars, if they analyzed their work, would attempt to make poetry too complicated or cerebral, while the poets themselves view it as something honest, sincere, and direct. And literary critics might be loath to embrace spoken word poets if they viewed their work as too simplistic, or too much a part of popular culture to be considered for serious literary analysis.

But this reluctance, orbiting as it does around the concepts of sincerity and intimacy, ultimately seems foolish. For spoken word poets, the rhetorical maintenance of a strict boundary between their community and the academic community is not only unhelpful, but, as has been shown here, utterly specious. Nonetheless, such poets attempt to reaffirm their difference from the academy by positing their authenticity, “realness,” or sincerity in the face of the formally difficult and “inaccessible” poetry that has become their classic counterexample.

This powerful insistence on the accessibility of spoken word poetry seems misguided. Of course, it does follow a certain Whitmanic tradition that has been picked up by a variety of poets over the years. Yet it ignores the fact that the sincerity-effects produced by those poems, even when shown to be problematic or

difficult in some way, are often not their most interesting elements, are not the reasons for their being celebrated and examined by literary scholars.

Those poems that have been repeatedly studied by critics, such as the work of Whitman or Plath, encourage other important questions that may deal with other elements of the work, such as structure, syntax, register, or questions of voice that go beyond the consideration of sincerity and intimacy. By moving away from this intense focus on sincerity, spoken word poets might be able to acknowledge the wealth of other issues that often play out in their work, many of which could prove highly interesting to poetry scholars. Thus, the best spoken word poets would receive some level of literary prestige and recognition in addition to their popular status in spoken word cafes; I maintain that the two need not be mutually exclusive, as some spoken word artists suggest.

However, movement towards this ideal cannot be unilateral. Part of the problem is the tendency for some poetry critics to view spoken word poetry as a popular art form produced almost exclusively for entertainment value, an assumption that might be furthered by spoken word poets' focus on accessibility and egalitarianism. Also, as Ishle Park reminds us, spoken word culture is often reduced to its less-skilled writers and performers; because of the public performance of spoken word poetry, those that are less talented "suck visibly," and often come to represent the spoken word community as a whole (Yun 39). Perhaps because of these assumptions, literary critics are often blind to the issues—whether literary, political, or otherwise—that spoken word poetry raises.

As has been suggested in this study, spoken word poetry's radical transformation of the concept of intimacy in performance is a powerful shift that has been largely ignored by scholars. As Maria Damon and Joseph Harrington have argued, this reconfiguration of intimacy has powerful social and political implications, and I would extend this argument to include a variety of literary implications as well. The tension between a poet's physical voice and poetic voice has potentially interesting reverberations in the world of non-performed poetry as well as spoken word. A deeper exploration of these topics is sadly beyond the scope of the current undertaking, but such questions represent only a fraction of the issues available for greater academic analysis in the world of spoken word poetry.

Given all that each community has to gain from greater cooperation with the other, the vigorous perpetuation of the boundaries that separate them seem unnecessary at best, and damaging at worst. Ultimately, it seems that the worlds of academic poetry and spoken word poetry—if we can still consider them to be discrete worlds—have a great deal to learn and gain from each other. Perhaps then it is only fitting to employ the words of Walt Whitman, a poet largely celebrated and revered by both the academy and spoken word artists, in enjoining both groups to do away with the rhetorical boundaries separating them, to “Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” (210)

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